

Colombia Free Trade Agreement: A Bad Deal for Everyone Involved

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If we had been born in Colombia, we would probably be dead.

That's right. As members of our respective labor unions, the fight for higher wages, better working conditions, and a secure pension could have cost us our lives.

Thirty nine trade unionists were murdered in Colombia in 2007, and they are being killed at a rate of over one per week this year.

Of the more than 2,500 murders in that nation since 1986, only 68 cases -- around 3 percent -- have resulted in convictions. However, many of these criminals were convicted in absentia -- meaning they may still be at large and continuing to terrorize workers.

Yet inexplicably, President Bush and some Members of Congress want to reward Colombia with a free trade agreement.

Not on our watch. The right to organize and bargain collectively is essential to human freedom. We believe passage of the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) would greatly diminish our nation's reputation as a leader in the fight to end human rights abuses worldwide.

Despite President Alvaro Uribe's claim that the Colombian government has cleaned up its act, signs of trouble continue to persist.

Colombia's chief federal prosecutor's office has a backlog of over 1,300 cases of murders, threats, and intimidation involving trade unionists.

Last month, the Colombian government removed a highly respected member of a three-judge panel tasked with reducing this backlog.

And Colombian intelligence officials have been linked to the paramilitaries known for carrying out these assassinations.

Are these the actions of a 'courageous ally in South America' or of a government that has something to hide?

Historic violence against trade unionists is just one of many problems with the Colombia FTA. Like the Peru FTA, an agreement we strongly opposed, the Colombia proposal is

based on the flawed NAFTA-CAFTA model which led to the outsourcing of millions of high-paying American jobs and virtually eliminated the U.S. manufacturing industry.

This comes at a time when we are in recession. The economy lost 80,000 jobs in March, the third consecutive month of rising unemployment. And the Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) program -- a safety net for displaced workers -- remains essentially dysfunctional. Passage of the Colombia FTA would add insult to injury for American workers.

President Bush and his allies in Congress have also been claiming that the Colombia FTA is a matter of national security. We couldn't agree more.

Let's review the facts. It has already been established that Colombia is the most dangerous place in the world to be a union member. But that is just the tip of the iceberg. Violence against Afro-Colombians is rampant. *The Washington Post* recently reported that Colombian troops are killing farmers and passing their bodies off as rebels. And three of our nation's military contractors remain hostage there.

We believe defeating the Colombia FTA, not passing it, is in the best interest of our national security.

We commend both major Democratic presidential candidates for opposing this agreement -- a testament to the will of the American people. Their interests -- not business groups or conservative think tanks -- should dictate our trade agenda.

President Bush's unprecedented decision to unilaterally submit the Colombia FTA is a slap in the face to Democratic leaders and constitutes a retreat from the bipartisan pact on trade agreed to last year -- something we were skeptical of from the outset given the President's record.

We urge House leadership to use all the tools in its arsenal to ensure this agreement's demise.

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