

Colombian Unions to Seek Investigation of Anti-Labor Activity

By Mark Drajem
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Leaders of some of the largest Colombian labor groups say they plan to petition the International Labor Organization to launch a new investigation of anti-union activities and violence against union members in their country.

Luis Alfonso Velásquez Rico, an executive with the Unitary Workers Center, said union leaders are targeted with death threats, beatings and murders, and unions are being driven out of specific industries, such as textiles. He and other union leaders said they will make that case to the members of the ILO at that group's annual summit in Geneva this month.

“In Colombia, in practice, it has become a crime to form a union,” Velasquez said at an event in Washington with U.S. labor leaders and American lawmakers critical of a free-trade agreement with Colombia.

The complaint is a blow to supporters of the trade pact, who say that Colombian President Alvaro Uribe has made historic strides to reduce violence against labor organizers and ensure law and order throughout the nation.

Sandra Ocampo, a spokeswoman for the Colombian Embassy in Washington, declined to comment. She e-mailed a speech by Uribe on May 1, in which he pledged to crack down on those who terrorize union leaders and said he was studying legislation to increase the punishment for murderers of trade unionists.

The embassy has also organized the visit to Washington of union leaders who support the free-trade deal, including unions in the sugar, flower and mining sectors.

Three Largest Confederations

Representatives of three of the largest Colombian union confederations, which say they represent more than nine in 10 unionized workers in Colombia, are bolstering the arguments of American unions who say the trade agreement would encourage companies to move operations to Colombia, undercutting wages in the U.S., and benefit a government hostile to workers.

Last month, the Democratic House of Representatives voted to remove a deadline for consideration of the Colombian pact. House leaders said they would consider the trade agreement only if President George W. Bush came through with new aid for the U.S.

economy and Colombia addresses workers' issues there.

The Bush administration and Republicans said the delay was a snub to Colombia, a U.S. ally, and Democrats had killed the pact. U.S. unions say their counterparts in Colombia are subject to an unacceptable level of violence.

“This is the last round of defense,” Larry Cohen, president of the Communication Workers of America, said today, referring to unions' campaigns against trade pacts with Mexico, Central America and China. “It's our time to talk about a new kind of trade policy that works for working families in the U.S. and in Colombia.”

The labor groups said today that 27 union organizers have been killed in Colombia so far this year compared with 26 for all of last year. Such killings reached a peak of 196 in 2002, according to the Colombian government. More union organizers are killed in Colombia than any other nation, according to the AFL- CIO.

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