

# INTERNATIONAL BROTHERHOOD OF TEAMSTERS

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April 29, 2008

## *VIA FACSIMILE*

Dear Representative:

As you are well aware, the Bush Administration has made passage of the Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) one of its top priorities for this Congress. Several weeks ago, the President took unprecedented action and sent the Colombia FTA to Congress, without following established protocols of Congressional consultation. Speaker Pelosi then took control of the debate on the Colombia FTA by having Congress vote on a rule that removed the protections of Fast Track for the Agreement, thereby giving her the complete authority to decide whether or not to bring the Colombia FTA to the House floor for consideration. On behalf of the 1.4 million members of the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, I would like to thank those Members of Congress who joined Speaker Pelosi in supporting the rule and in so doing stood up for workers and trade unionists everywhere.

The Teamsters strongly believe, just as the Congressional Democratic Leadership has stated, that the Colombia FTA should not even be considered until there is a sustained ending to the trade union killings and culture of impunity that has existed in Colombia for decades. Colombia is years, not months, away from being a country that trade unionists can freely exercise their basic labor rights without fearing for their lives. Since the United States (U.S.) government is so eager to enter into a trade agreement with Colombia, then I can't help but ask what country are they willing not to enter into a trade agreement with based on labor and human rights?

Colombia is the most dangerous country in the world to be a trade unionist. More than 2,500 trade unionists have been murdered since 1986. Last year, 39 union workers were killed in Colombia. Union workers received more than 200 death threats last year in Colombia. This year alone there have been 17 trade unionists killed. Not one person should ever lose their life fighting for their right to organize.

While the Colombian government is taking steps to address the violence and impunity that exists in Colombia, their efforts are not sufficient to ensure the end to the violence until perpetrators of the violence are found and punished. Judges assigned to hear cases of union workers are not free from outside influence and hold only temporary appointments. There is also no real plan to address the backlog of cases of violence against union workers.

Also deeply troubling are the links between trade union murders and Colombian government officials, which are still not being fully investigated. In 2006, a member of the Department of Security in Colombia, Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad, testified that the Department had provided a list of labor leaders to the paramilitaries. Many of the labor leaders on the list were killed. The International Labor Organization (ILO) has raised this issue of the government needing to investigate possible ties between government officials and paramilitaries as recently as last October. Just last week the Colombian government arrested Mario Uribe, a family member and political ally of President Uribe for paramilitary involvement. More than 60 members of Colombia's Congress have been arrested or are under investigation for ties with the paramilitaries. These investigations and arrests demonstrate the severity of the crisis that exists in Colombia because of the decades of violence, corruption, and impunity that has plagued and continues to plague Colombia. Again, this will take years, not months to truly resolve this issue.

The Labor Chapter in the Colombia FTA contains the requirement that the FTA partners adopt and effectively enforce internationally recognized basic labor rights. The Colombian government falls significantly short on this point. At least 20 areas of deficiencies have been identified including the blacklisting of union leaders; prohibitions on strikes in non-essential public services; wrongful denials and delays of union registrations, thereby preventing workers from engaging in union activity; and, use of "workers' cooperatives" which deems employees as self-employed and therefore not entitled to unionize or bargain collectively. We urge Congress to continue to work with Colombia in order to address these and other critical labor rights issues, but we strongly believe that passage of an ill-timed and badly negotiated FTA will not be good for U.S. workers nor for the people of Colombia just as similar FTAs have not fared well for workers in Mexico, Guatemala, and workers in other trading partner countries.

The Colombia FTA also contains many of the same provisions that the Teamsters have previously opposed. The investor chapter continues to create incentives for U.S. firms to move offshore. The Colombia FTA contains the same procurement chapter as in past FTAs that we believe threatens many anti-offshoring and Buy America policies. Trade agreements need to be about trade, not intervene in our domestic laws, investment policies, and food safety and health laws. Unfortunately, the Colombia FTA continues down this same precarious path.

The Teamsters believe that Congress needs to put the Colombia FTA and all of the pending FTAs aside. The Bush Administration's trade policies have only hurt working-class families and have further decimated the U.S. manufacturing base. Workers everywhere have had enough of these trade deals. Therefore, none of the President's pending FTAs should be considered this year. We look forward to working with a new Administration to implement a trade model that will create U.S. jobs and not send them overseas, and a new Administration who will know the importance of working closely with governments through diplomatic means rather than just passing more bad trade deals. The fact that the Bush Administration ever thought it was a good idea to negotiate an FTA with Colombia is another example of the little respect they have for labor rights and labor unions.

Also, workers and families across the U.S. are struggling. Wages are declining; jobs are being lost; food and gas prices are skyrocketing; there is a housing crisis; and a whole lot of uncertainty for workers and families everywhere. It is important that Congress and this Administration take action to provide relief to working families. In addition, while it is important to enact Trade Adjustment Assistance reform and provide families with more relief through an economic stimulus package, such priorities should never be tied to the consideration of the Colombia FTA.

In the event that the Colombia FTA is considered this year, I would like to once again urge you to strongly oppose the FTA and make your opposition to the Colombia FTA loud and clear. If the U.S. government passes an FTA with Colombia, it is sending a message across the world that we will trade with any country no matter what their human rights and labor records are. U.S. workers and people across the globe expect more from our great nation.

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Please feel free to contact Yvette Pena Lopes (my point person on trade issues at 202-624-6805), if you have any questions, or wish to discuss this issue further.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "James P. Hoffa". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "J".

James P. Hoffa  
General President

JPH/cwl