

# Colombia Trade Fight is a Human Rights Test

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The Colombia Free Trade Agreement is best summed up as a proposal to formalize U.S. support for the assassination of labor union organizers by death squads, impoverishment of workers and the undermining of farming operations that will leave more landless peasants with no alternative but to immigrate to the United States seeking work.

The Wisconsin-based Colombia Support Network, which has led the campaigning by U.S. activists to support human rights in that South American country, says without equivocation that the Colombia FTA “would solely benefit US transnational companies.”

The Colombia Support Network is highlighting opposition on the part of labor, farm and human activists in Colombia to the trade deal now being promoted by the Bush administration. That opposition is echoed by U.S. labor, farm and human rights groups, which have united in their efforts to block congressional approval of the pact.

Colombian union federations say they opposed the pact not just because it would weaken domestic industries and jeopardize employment but because it would make it harder to advance the cause of human rights in a country where more than 2,500 trade unionists have been murdered over the past two decades.

While President Bush and his allies attempt to suggest that Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Velez has made progress in promoting human rights, honest political players in that country say the opposite. “(Uribe) has not responded adequately to the violence that plagues Colombians and particularly union leaders and human rights activists, as is demonstrated by the alarming figures from last month, in which four union leaders were murdered,” explains Carlos Gaviria Diaz, the Harvard-educated constitutional lawyer who serves as president of Colombia’s Polo Democrático Alternativo political party.

The former president of Colombia’s Constitutional Court has deep concerns about the treaty because of the threat it poses to human rights campaigning in his country, but Gaviria’s worries do not stop there.

“The fundamental problem with the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the United States and Colombia is that it has been reduced to an agreement between winners and losers,” he says. “Unfortunately, we Colombians are the losers, because we lose any possibility of achieving prosperous development. Likewise, many have also indicated correctly that this FTA benefits only a select minority in the United States, not the general population. For example, the destruction of Colombian agriculture caused by the FTA will stimulate the planting of coca in Colombia and more drug dealing in the streets of American cities.”

Can the Colombia FTA be blocked in Congress? Absolutely. Though Arizona Senator John McCain is a strong backer of the deal, a number of key Republicans have come out in opposition to it. Maine Senator Olympia Snowe says, “I will not support the FTA with Colombia due to ongoing concerns about Bogota’s failure to prosecute individuals, including some close to its government and military, who have murdered and otherwise oppressed union leaders in that country.” Former Senate Foreign Relations Committee chair Richard Lugar, R-Indiana, is also opposed because he says the Colombian government has failed to adequately address “still unconscionable levels of violence against trade unionists.”

With the Republicans divided on this issue, a solid Democratic front in the House and Senate will stop the Colombia FTA. Most Democrats — including presidential contenders Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton — oppose this dramatically-flawed trade deal. But the Bush administration is focusing its lobbying energy on Democrats, especially those with ties to the radically pro-free trade Democratic Leadership Council.

The Colombia fight represents a critical test for Democrats in Congress. Most of the Democratic candidates who beat Republican members of the House and Senate in 2006 did so as outspoken critics of U.S. trade policies. Now, the party controls the Congress. By blocking this deal, they will keep an essential promise made to the American people — and they will, at the same time, display the sort of concern the people Colombia that might finally pressure that country’s oppressive government to begin respecting human rights.

*John Nichols is a co-founder of Free Press and the co-author with Robert W. McChesney of [TRAGEDY & FARCE: How the American Media Sell Wars, Spin Elections, and Destroy Democracy](#) — The New Press.*