

Colombia: No Rights, No Trade

By John Sweeney
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Last Sept. 27, 16-year-old Andres Damian Florez Rodriguez was on his way home from school when he was forced into a van by three armed men. Andres is the son of Jose Domingo Florez, a leader of the Coca-Cola bottling union in [Santander](#). The assailants drove along, beating the boy while they received radio instructions. Then they gave him a message to convey: "Tell your papa that we won't rest until we see [the union leaders] quartered in pieces."

On March 22, Adolfo Gonzalez Montes, a member of the Barrancas local Union of Coal Miners, was found dead in his home, tortured and shot, after his union received death threats during a union conflict.

On March 9, Carlos Burbano, vice president of the National Hospital Workers' Union in [Colombia](#), was murdered in San Vicente del Caguán after leading a local peace march. His corpse was found in the city dump, his face disfigured with acid. He was one of four Colombian trade unionists killed in a single week. Their deaths were not random crimes in a dangerous country. Rather, the Colombian government has falsely denounced union activists as guerrilla sympathizers, opening the door for paramilitary groups' death threats.

And these assassinations are not anomalies. Seventeen unionists have been murdered since Jan. 1 -- up 70 percent over last year at this time -- according to the National Labor School, a respected nongovernmental organization.

Against this backdrop, [President Bush](#) has sent the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement to Congress for ratification, over the opposition of the Democratic congressional leadership. What, then, is the fundamental test of globalization? Is it corporate profits alone?

Globalization and trade should lift up and promote democratic societies. They should empower the many and lift the poor. They should create a fundamentally better world.

That is at the heart of an emerging and hopeful new consensus on trade.

For decades trade rules have protected business interests but offered few enforceable protections for workers' rights and human rights. Millions of good jobs have been shipped away from the United States, while living and environmental standards have been eroded in our trading partner countries. That is why we have fought to guarantee labor and environmental standards in our trade agreements.

But now the Bush administration's determination to ram through this agreement with Colombia before it has the capacity to uphold the rule of law threatens all the progress that has been made.

It's of little use to include a paper commitment to respect "freedom of association" when workers who organize and speak out for economic freedom -- and their families -- face an implicit death sentence. That is why working people in Colombian and American unions are united in opposition to ratification of this agreement.

President Bush and Colombian President [Alvaro Uribe](#) are pulling out all the stops to persuade Congress to approve the trade deal in this session. The Bush administration has mobilized its Cabinet to lead congressional delegations on sanitized field trips to Colombia. The Colombian government is reportedly spending more than \$100,000 a month to lobby for the agreement.

The editorial pages of virtually every major American newspaper have weighed in with unusual intensity. They have heaped praise on the Uribe administration's self-described successes and vigorously excoriated "bogus" claims about violence against unionists.

In fact, human rights groups say extrajudicial murders of civilians by the Colombian armed forces on Uribe's watch are increasing. Growing evidence ties high-level members of the Colombian government to violent right-wing paramilitary groups. And, as noted above, Uribe administration officials have repeatedly -- and falsely -- labeled union leaders and human rights activists as guerrilla sympathizers, endangering their lives.

Supporters of the Colombia agreement have mocked statistics published by leading international human rights organizations, which show that more than 400 Colombian unionists have been murdered during Uribe's tenure. The rate of impunity remains at roughly 97 percent, even taking government statistics at face value, and nearly half of the convicted assassins are not even in custody.

Colombia claims to be taking steps to reduce the violence. That's good. But so far, it has done too little. And it has failed to bring its labor laws into compliance with international labor standards or enforce them effectively.

How many murders are "acceptable"? How many is too many? I can't answer those questions with a number other than zero.

And I know this: Unless working people can exercise their right to lift their families out of poverty and exploitation, trade cannot strengthen democracy or advance a better world. And until they can exercise their fundamental human rights without fear that they will end up in a garbage dump, or their teenage son will be picked up at gunpoint, there should be no trade agreement with Colombia.

The writer is president of the AFL-CIO.

