

Colombian Unionists In All Sectors Oppose the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement

There are three national union confederations in Colombia. All of them oppose the pending U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement.¹ The Central Unitaria de Trabajadores -CUT-(Unitary Workers' Central) is the largest, representing roughly 550,000 members in 710 unions. The Confederación General de Trabajadores -CGT- (General Workers' Confederation) represents nearly 115,000 workers in 495 unions. Finally, the Confederación de Trabajadores de Colombia -CTC- (Confederation of Colombian Workers), represents about 47,000 members in 169 unions. Together, these confederations represent **86 percent** of the organized workforce, in both the *public* and *private* sectors – including teachers, construction workers, transportation workers, telecom workers, banana plantation workers, flower workers and coal miners, to name just a few. Moreover, these unions represent workers in important export sectors including oil, mining, food and beverage processing and agriculture.

There is simply no public-private split on the issue of the trade agreement in the Colombian labor movement.

Overview of affiliate unions and members by National Center - 2005

Confederation	Number of Unions	Number of Members	Percentage of organized workers
CGT	495	114,068	13,54%
CTC	169	46,695	5,54%
CUT	710	547,538	66,6%
UNAFFILIATED	1394	122,746	14,32%
Total	2768	831,047	100%

Who Are the Pro-FTA Unions?

In the past year, the Colombian government has sponsored delegations of trade unionists to visit the United States and lobby for passage of the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement. The government has repeatedly used these unions to create the illusion that the majority of private sector unions support the trade agreement, which is not true. Many private sector unions have made public statements, adopted resolutions, and held internal votes that demonstrate their opposition to the trade agreement. In some cases, these handpicked unions or union representatives do not speak for workers generally, or even for the members of their own unions.

1. Management-Dominated Union

Ana Lucia Rojas, Sinaltraflor: Employers, such as the Dole Food Company, have long used Sinaltraflor to impede independent union organizing in the Colombian flower industry. In 2005, for example, workers began to organize a union at Dole's Fragancia plantation.

¹ The Colombian Confederation of Pensioners, which represents roughly 3 million retired Colombian workers, has also announced its opposition to the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement.

Immediately, Sinaltraflor appeared at the plantation and “negotiated” a two-year contract with the company that included virtually no new benefits for the workers. Although the workers were ultimately successful in forming an independent union – Untrafragancia – the company has refused to negotiate with them. In 2007, Sinaltraflor distributed personalized disaffiliation forms to all members of the Untrafragancia union. As union membership lists are not publicly available, the personalized paperwork suggests that Sinaltraflor acquired a list from the company or the government.

Sinaltraflor is a member of Utracun (Unión de Trabajadores de Cudinamarca), a regional structure comprised of unions in the department of Cudinamarca. Mr. Velazco, who has been described in the press as the leader of the non-existent new labor center (see below), is the Secretary General of Utracun.

Independent unions in the export flower sector oppose the Colombia FTA.

2. Rogue Locals

Gustavo Palacios, Sintraminergetica – Segovia Sectional (Frontino Gold): This is a local section, 1 of 14, which belongs to the national mining union, Sintraminergetica. The national union, which sets the policy for its affiliated locals through its national general assembly and executive board, strongly opposes the Colombia FTA.

3. Union Does Not Support FTA, though Government Hand-Picked Representative Does

Oswaldo Cuadrado, Sintrainagro: Mr. Cuadrado is a former leader of Sintrainagro, though he identifies himself as a current leader of the union. He is now the mayor of Apartado and has no authorization from the union executive board or the membership to speak on behalf of the union. Sintrainagro has never supported the trade agreement, nor has it held an assembly in which support for the trade agreement was approved. The union is also affiliated to CUT, which opposes the trade agreement.

Fernando Alfonso Bayona Rincon, Sindicato de Trabajadores de Siderúrgica Paz del Río. Mr. Bayona was a member of the executive committee of the union and is now a rank and file member. The union as an institution does not support FTA. This union has held no assembly or congress in which institutional support for FTA has been approved, and supports the CUT position against FTA.

A New Pro-FTA Labor Center?

In late February, the Colombian media announced the formation of a new labor confederation, which purportedly supports the trade agreement. However, when we recently asked the self-appointed “leader” of this new labor center, Cesar Velazco, about the organization, we were informed that there was in fact no new labor center. Instead, there had been only preliminary discussions. Mr. Velazco was also unable to provide us with a list of affiliates (as no labor center yet exists), or potential affiliates, or identify the economic sectors represented. Consequently, he could not estimate how many members they have or would have. Even if this new center were to register with the government, which it has not done, and if it actually represented the 45,000 workers that Mr. Velazco has claimed in the media, this new center would represent a mere 5% of the total of all organized workers in Colombia.

For more information, please contact the AFL-CIO at (202) 637-3904