

# **Bush and Harper Ignore Colombia's Labor Rights Reality**

By Garry Leech  
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In the past year, there have been ongoing debates in both Washington and Ottawa about potential free trade agreements with Colombia. The failure to implement a hemisphere-wide agreement has led the governments of both President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Stephen Harper to push for bilateral pacts with their ideologically-aligned ally in Colombia, President Alvaro Uribe. Both Bush and Harper are facing domestic opposition that seeks to thwart the signing and ratification of the agreements due to ongoing human rights abuses in Colombia, particularly against unionists. The US and Canadian governments repeatedly point to a recent reduction in the number of Colombian labor leaders killed as justification for a free trade agreement. However, in actuality, the intensity of attacks against Colombian workers has increased, not decreased, under the Uribe government—and state security forces are directly responsible for an increasing number of the abuses.

The Bush administration signed a free trade pact with Colombia in November 2006, but congressional Democrats have stalled its ratification on human rights grounds. For its part, the Harper government is currently negotiating its own bilateral deal with the Uribe administration, but it is also facing increasing opposition at home as critics point to the severity of continuing abuses against Colombian workers.

Both governments have responded to critics by pointing out that there has been a significant decrease in the number of unionists killed since Uribe came to power. In October, US State Department spokesperson, R. Nicholas Burns, declared, “Homicides of trade unionists have shown a steep decline. . . . Rather than condemning as insufficient the considerable progress already made by the Colombian people, we should help them consolidate that progress through expanded trade.” Echoing the Bush administration’s argument in defense of a free trade agreement, Canada’s Trade Minister David Emerson recently stated, “We recognize there have been some terrible violations, but you would have to admit the level of those incidents have been declining.”

In the past 20 years, more than 3,000 Colombian unionists have been assassinated. And of the 144 unionists killed worldwide last year, 78 were Colombian — eight more than the previous year. According to the International Confederation of Trade Unions (ICFTU), there were 1,165 documented murders of Colombian trade union members between 1994 and 2006. However, the state has convicted the perpetrators in only 14 of these cases — an impunity rate of over 95 percent.

This dirty war against workers, in conjunction with the implementation of neoliberal economic reforms, has devastated union organizations and their membership. More than 195 trade union organizations were dissolved between 1991 and 2001, with union membership declining by more than 100,000 workers during that period. In fact, with only four percent of the workforce unionized — compared to 15 percent 20 years ago — Colombia now has the lowest unionization rate in Latin America.

While the US and Canadian governments focus on the significant decline in the number of Colombian unionists killed in recent years, they ignore both the principal reason for this decline and the escalation in other forms of human rights abuses against workers. The decrease in the number of unionists killed is more a product of a war of attrition against organized labor than of any policies implemented by the Uribe administration. In other words, more than 20 years of a dirty war waged against Colombia's unions has meant that there are fewer labor leaders left to kill. Consequently, while the total number of unionists killed has declined in recent years, the intensity of the slaughter has not diminished.

A review of the numbers shows that the ratio of labor leaders killed relative to the number of unionized workers in Colombia is higher under the Uribe government than it was during the 1990s. Last year, one out of every 6,800 union members was assassinated. This rate of extermination is significantly higher than during the mid-1990s when an average of one out of every 8,100 unionists was killed. Because the level of unionization in Colombia has declined to only four percent of the workforce, the percentage of unionists being killed today is markedly higher than a decade ago.

Furthermore, other forms of human rights abuses against unionists have increased under the Uribe administration when compared to previous governments. There was a 62 percent increase in the number of threats against unionists in 2005 when compared to four years earlier — the final year of the Pastrana administration. There was also a 57 percent increase in arbitrary arrests and a 38 percent increase in harassment.

Not only have there been increases in the intensity of the killing of unionists and the number of threats, arbitrary arrests and serious incidents of harassment—along with the maintenance of a 95 percent impunity rate — there has also been a dramatic escalation of the state's direct role in these abuses. According to the ICFTU, paramilitaries were responsible for 89 percent of the human rights abuses perpetrated against Colombian unionists in 2001, while the state and leftist guerrillas accounted for the remaining 11 percent. Four years later, state security forces were directly responsible for 41 percent of the violations — and paramilitaries for a further 50 percent.

In actuality, the Colombian government should be held responsible for human rights abuses perpetrated against unionists by both the state's security forces and the paramilitaries since the two frequently collude in the country's dirty war. Colombia's ongoing para-politics scandal has confirmed links between the government and right-wing paramilitary death squads. In fact, more than 40 Colombian legislators are currently

being investigated or have already been imprisoned as a result of the scandal — the overwhelming majority of them are political allies of President Uribe.

Earlier this year, long-standing accusations of collusion between the paramilitaries and multinational corporations — who stand to be the principal beneficiaries of a free trade agreement - were also confirmed. In March, Chiquita Brands International pled guilty in US federal court to funding Colombian paramilitaries on the US State Department's list of terrorist organizations to the tune of \$1.7 million between 1997 and 2004. Those paramilitaries killed thousands of civilians, including unionists, in the banana-growing region during the years they were on Chiquita's payroll.

The United States and Canada should not “reward” the Colombian government with a free trade agreement while it continues to violate the human rights of unionists. After all, it is primarily the Colombian government and certain political and economic elites in the country, rather than the Colombian people, that want the free trade agreement. Polls show that more Colombians are opposed to a free trade agreement with the United States than support it. While no similar poll has been conducted on an agreement with Canada, there is little reason to believe that the attitude of the Colombian people is any different with regards to that free trade pact.

Furthermore, in a July 2007 poll, 73 percent of Canadians said that their federal government should not negotiate free trade agreements with countries that have dubious human rights records. That same month, Harper illustrated just how out of step he is with the Canadian people when he responded to criticism of his free trade negotiations with Colombia by declaring, “We’re not going to say fix all your social, political and human-rights problems, and only then will we engage in trade relations with you. That’s a ridiculous position.”

There is no moral justification for the United States and Canada negotiating free trade agreements with Colombia when the foundation of these pacts is the slaughter of Colombian unionists. The perpetrators of these crimes should not be rewarded with agreements that most Colombians do not want.

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