

COLOMBIAN OIL WORKERS UNION (USO)
NATIONAL EXECUTIVE BOARD

February 17, 2007

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THE SENATE AND
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE UNITED STATES

Our organization, the Colombian Oil Workers Union (USO), knows of your interest regarding the Colombian government's record on human, labor and union rights within the framework of current discussions about a Free Trade Agreement between Colombia and the United States. We wish to inform you that our Colombian Oil Workers Union (USO), an affiliate of our national labor federation CUT, has been the constant target of government attacks which we summarize below.

1. HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

During the last 25 years our union has resisted, at a very high human cost, government attempts to privatize ECOPETROL, the Colombian State-owned national oil company. Human Rights organizations have documented that 101 of our members have been murdered; 2 have "disappeared;" 10 have been kidnapped; 26 wounded in attacks; 400 forcefully displaced; 10 exiled; 300 threatened; 30 arrested; 300 children have become orphans. At the present time the government is pursuing some 900 legal cases against our leaders and activists. These numbers are part of a process of attempted annihilation of our union as the Inter American Commission of Human Rights of the Organization of American States concluded when it recommended protective measures for our membership in 2001. Under the current administration of President Uribe, the company has put into effect punitive programs, known as "resocialization," whereby employees are forcefully removed from their usual workplace, and kept in isolation, so that they are unable to carry out union tasks among the rank and file.

2. SUBCONTRACTING AND LAY-OFFS

Even though oil industry employment is one of the most high-risk occupations in the world, current Colombian President Uribe signed in 2003 a decree which put into effect a decrease in wage levels for a large number of the oil industry jobs. Furthermore the state company, ECOPETROL, has turned all production and maintenance activities over to private subcontractors. This has meant the mass layoff, without severance compensation, of seven hundred workers who had worked ten, twenty, and in some cases thirty years, for the company either as permanent or temporary workers.

3. LACK OF OBSERVANCE OF THE INTERNATIONAL LABOR ORGANIZATION
(ILO) AGREEMENTS

After our 2004 strike, carried out in order to stop the privatization of the state company, the Uribe government summarily fired 260 workers. Of those, 103, who were re-instated by decision of an arbitration tribunal in January, 2005, have been fired once again by the government under aggravated circumstances: with the acquiescence of the President's minister of Social Protection, the Attorney General and the courts, these workers are being banned from public employment for ten to twelve years. This violation of international labor agreements has been rejected by international institutions. The International Labor Organization (ILO) has, in its last three meetings, protested these violations and recommended their immediate cessation, the acceptance of the rights of the union and the expelled workers, and the re-hiring of the latter. Uribe's government, which claims to respect human and labor rights, has refused to abide by these ILO's recommendations.

Dear Senators and Members of the U.S. Congress: There is something very paradoxical going on in Colombia. On the one hand, the Uribe government refuses to recognize our basic rights and persecutes and punishes us for exercising our right to peaceful protests. On the other hand it offers all manner of political guarantees and economic support to armed groups which have displaced, with guns and power saws, thousands of peasants and indigenous people from their lands, in order to plant coca. Our countryside is littered with the unmarked graves of the victims of these activities. The Uribe government's support of the paramilitary preserves a situation of misery, exploitation and exclusion which, on a daily basis, tramples upon labor rights and robs the Colombian people of freedoms.

Honorable Senators and Members of the U.S. Congress: we bring our protest to your attention. We request that you support our just demand that President Uribe's government apply corrective measures; that it respect our human and labor rights and the rights of union to freely organize; and that it abide by the recommendations of the ILO.

We would also like to request a meeting with you so that we may be able to give you further details about the situation described above.

Cordially,

Jorge Enrique Gamboa, President
USO-Colombian Oil Workers Union