

A LETTER to CONGRESS from U.S. TRADE UNIONS OPPOSING
MORE U.S. AID to the COLOMBIAN MILITARY
and the
U.S.-COLOMBIA FREE TRADE AGREEMENT
June 11, 2007

Dear Member of Congress:

In light of upcoming Congressional consideration of the Administration's proposal for a new phase for Plan Colombia as well as the pending Free Trade Agreement with Colombia, we write to you today as U.S. trade unions concerned about violence against Colombian trade unionists.

Colombia continues to be the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists. More trade unionists are killed in Colombia than the rest of the world combined. In 2006 alone, 72 trade unionists were assassinated, a slight increase over the 70 murdered in 2005.

The Colombian government has also consistently failed to investigate and charge those responsible for the murders of Colombian trade unionists. Out of the over 2,200 murders that have occurred since 1991, the Colombian Ministry of Social Protection has been able to demonstrate only 34 cases of trade union murders in which there was a conviction. For the over 400 murders that have occurred during the presidency of Alvaro Uribe, there have been convictions in only 10 cases. For the 236 trade unionists murdered in the last three years, there have been only two convictions.

The Escuela Nacional Sindical (ENS), the National Labor School in Colombia, a well-respected NGO, has found that paramilitary groups are responsible for the greatest number of violations (49%) against Colombian trade unionists, with Colombian state entities a close second (43%), in cases where the assailants were known. As has been demonstrated by the recent arrests of Colombian Members of Congress and government leaders and the testimony in recent weeks of paramilitary leaders, collaboration between paramilitary groups and the Colombian military has been extensive, touching deeply into President Uribe's political circle. Under Plan Colombia, U.S. aid supports a military that continues to attack trade unionists and collaborate with paramilitary terrorists while tolerating a policy of impunity. As unions concerned about the impact of U.S. policy on workers here and abroad, we believe that the U.S. should sharply cut back its massive aid to the Colombian military.

Colombian workers, along with much of civil society, oppose the continuing militarization of U.S. aid to Colombia. They advocate a more balanced foreign aid program that would direct more aid towards social and economic programs and the strengthening of the rule of law. Aid is also needed to support sustainable development and viable alternatives to drug production and trafficking.

The Latin America Working Group (LAWG) reports that over the last five years of Plan Colombia, the United States has given Colombia over \$4 billion, nearly 75% of it destined for the Colombian military and police. In January 2007, the U.S. and Colombian governments announced a new phase of Plan Colombia, claiming that there would be a greater emphasis on social spending. The FY08 budget, however, proposes that 76% of the funding continue to go to military and police aid. This is nearly identical to the proportions in previous aid packages.

We are also strongly opposed to the pending Free Trade Agreement with Colombia. A free trade agreement with Colombia cannot be "fixed." Regardless of what may be negotiated with respect to other pending trade agreements with Peru and Panama, Colombia represents a special case. Approval of a free trade agreement where more trade unionists continue to be killed than in the rest of the world combined

and where murderers of trade unionists continue to enjoy a 98% rate of impunity would make a mockery of any U.S. trade policy commitment on worker rights. President Uribe's recent promises to do better are too little, too late. He should be told to come back in a couple years when we assess whether there has been real, concrete progress.

Our unions represent nearly 12 million tax-paying workers who are concerned that U.S. policies are promoting a race to the bottom in terms of wages, working conditions, and respect for basic rights. Approval of a free trade agreement with Colombia would be a slap in their faces and a complete rejection of their concerns. These workers are also concerned about how we allocate our foreign aid. How can we tell them that the U.S. is continuing to support a foreign military that both supports and commits violence against workers with impunity in Colombia?

U.S. aid and trade policy should promote a democracy based on the protection of fundamental human rights, not a race to the bottom for labor rights spearheaded by the assassination of trade unionists.

We therefore urge you to support any measure that limits or decreases U.S. foreign aid to the Colombian military and to support any congressional initiative that reduces militarization of the conflict in Colombia. We also urge you to make clear your opposition to the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement.

Sincerely,

William Lucy
Coalition of Black Trade Unionists

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