

Ratifying Death in Colombia

By Harold Meyerson

Wednesday, June 14, 2006; A23

Over the past 15 years, the trade agreements that the United States has entered into with other nations have been, when it comes to ensuring the rights of workers in those nations, merely outrageous and inadequate. Now the administration is about to send up to Capitol Hill a new accord that takes our trade agreements to a whole new level. The proposed agreement is with the government of Colombia, and it's ridiculous.

Colombia, you see, has a bit of a workers' rights problem. It's not just that more union leaders, activists and members are killed in Colombia than in any other nation. It's that, year in and year out, more unionists are killed in Colombia than in all other nations combined. In 2004, according to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, which produces an annual tally of people killed because of their union activities, 145 unionists around the world were murdered. Of these, 99 were killed in Colombia. Colombia's labor college, the Escuela Nacional Sindical (ENS), came up with a slightly lower count: 94. Either way, that's about two-thirds of the entire planet's casualty count.

And the 2004 death count was a bit on the light side by Colombian standards. In 2002 the number of murdered Colombian unionists, according to the ENS, was 184; in 2003 it was 91. Last year the figure dropped to a mere 70, but in the first three months of this year, it surged to 29. All in all, more than 4,000 Colombians have been murdered for their union commitments since the early 1980s.

One reason for this epidemic of homicides is that killing a unionist is a punishment-free crime. Of the roughly 3,000 murders of unionists between 1986 and 2002, according to a study being released tomorrow by the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center, only 376 were even investigated by the government, and the number of guilty verdicts returned in those cases totaled five. For the statistically minded among you, that's a conviction rate of one-sixth of 1 percent. Kill a unionist in Colombia and you have about as much chance of doing time as you do of being hit by lightning.

The violence against Colombian unionists afflicts every unionized sector of the nation's economy. The largest number of victims come from the teachers union, since unionized teachers are found, and killed, even in remote villages. But industrial, service and farm workers are regularly slain as well. In December 1996, to take just one case, two members of the local right-wing paramilitary fired 10 shots into Isidro Segundo Gil, a union activist at the Coca-Cola bottling plant in Carepa, and later that night, their energies not yet expended, set fire to the local union offices. Segundo's widow, Alcira Gil, spent the next several years seeking justice in the Colombian courts and reparations from Coca-Cola, with which Segundo's union had been involved in a contractual dispute at the time of his murder. In 2000 Alcira Gil, too, was murdered, leaving two children orphaned. The charges against Segundo's alleged killers were dropped.

Colombia is a land of dropped charges and aborted investigations, because judges and prosecutors are themselves often the victims of paramilitary and guerrilla violence. According to an ENS study, however, the killers of unionists -- in those instances when the police have been able to identify the killers -- tend overwhelmingly to come from the paramilitaries, private armies in the service of drug lords, large landowners and the occasional factory. Unions, after all, run counter to the laissez-faire ethos that is apparently dear to the paramilitaries' hearts. "We kill trade unionists," Carlos Castano, the former leader of AUC, the nation's largest paramilitary group, once said, "because they interfere with people working."

And in Colombia people work. With unions' ability to set minimal standards for workers under constant and deadly assault, even children work.

That Colombia's million-member union movement functions at all, given the steady reign of paramilitary terror and governmental indifference (if not complicity) to which it is subjected, is a testament to countless acts of daily heroism. The movement is no fan of the proposed trade accord, which it fears will allow U.S. agribusiness to undercut Colombia's non-drug-related agricultural economy while doing nothing about the nation's abysmal standards of worker rights. For the average Colombian, the trade agreement would add insult to what is all too often deadly injury.