

American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations



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September 26, 2011

The Honorable Barack Obama
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

On behalf of the 12.5 million members of the AFL-CIO, I write to urge you not to send the Colombia Trade Agreement to Congress for approval. As a candidate for President, you opposed the Colombia Trade Agreement, "because the violence against unions in Colombia would make a mockery of the very labor protections that we have insisted be included in these kinds of agreements."

Despite the Labor Action Plan that Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos agreed to in April, violent suppression of workers, as well as land rights, indigenous, and Afro-Colombian activists continues unabated. The Labor Action Plan has proved ineffective, as workers continue to be forced to sign "pactos colectivos" (unilaterally determined salary and benefit schemes imposed by employers to dissuade workers from joining a union), join cooperatives or cooperative-like structures that act as labor intermediaries (to avoid direct employer-employee relationships and thereby prevent workers from forming a union), illegally fired for legitimate union activity (such as asking that an employer deduct dues from the employee's paycheck), and threatened and even killed.

Twenty-two union leaders have been killed so far this year in Colombia, including 15 since the Labor Action Plan went into effect. While the new government may have good intentions, unfortunately, on the ground, Colombian working families are neither safer nor more able to exercise their basic rights. Colombia continues to be the most dangerous place in the world to be a union member. Indeed, as the International Trade Union Confederation concluded in its most recent (2011) world survey of anti-union violence, Colombia continues ***"to maintain the lead in a grim record of murder and repression of workers involved in trade union activities."***

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We have included below a very brief summary of the unionists killed so far this year in Colombia. Each death is a tragedy in itself—and a testament to the lengths that some will go to in order to intimidate workers and prevent them from exercising any collective power in Colombia. To date, the Colombian Government has solved none of these cases.

In addition, the AFL-CIO and its affiliates have been shocked to learn that **six (6) Catholic priests have been murdered in Colombia so far this year**, leading the Catholic Bishops Conference of Colombia to call for protection for its clergy. As the Bishops Conference notes, these priests, much like the union leaders in Colombia, are being targeted for assassination because of their **“courageous commitment . . . with the prophetic denunciation of injustice and the cause of the poorest in the country.”**

Simply put, Colombia should **not** be rewarded with a trade agreement until it develops a proven track record of ensuring that workers can exercise the fundamental rights of free association and collective bargaining; preventing violence against union leaders and other social justice advocates; and bringing to justice those who have perpetrated such crimes. Providing Colombia with unfettered access to the U.S. market, and beneficial terms for investment, government procurement, and other commercial areas without requiring sustained and measurable progress toward protecting human rights will undercut our leverage to encourage Colombia to follow up its promises and intentions with effective actions.

In addition, while there is hope that the Colombia Trade Agreement will create jobs in the U.S., the experience from such agreements (NAFTA has been the most notable) has actually been the loss of jobs. And, indeed, the Economic Policy Institute predicts a net loss of 55,000 jobs due to the Colombia FTA. Given this predicted job loss, at a time when working Americans are already struggling to find jobs, pay their mortgages, and make ends meet, advancing the Colombia Trade Agreement will send the wrong message to the working people of both Colombia and the U.S.

Sincerely,


Richard L. Trumka
President

Enclosure

RLT/CD/sbc

CC: All Members of the House and Senate

Colombian Unionists Killed So Far This Year

(According to the ENS)

1. **Luis Alberto Durante Álvarez**, member of the workers' committee for the SINTRAINAGRO union, was murdered on September 3 in Apartadó, Antioquia.

2. **Tapias Jiménez Nallyd**, a teacher in the municipality of Arboletes and member of the Adida union, was killed on September 1. On September 14, his union called on the government to investigate the killing.

3. **Luis Alfonso Díaz Villa** was assassinated near his home. Diaz, who was a regional leader of the University Workers' Union SINTRAUNICOL, and a security guard at the Monteria Public University in Cordoba Department, was shot four times.



4. **María Eugenia Arango Zapata**, a member of the ADIDA union, was killed on August 10 in Tarazá, Antioquia.

5. **Eduardo Zuñiga**, a banana plantation worker employed by the Sarapalma Company at the Las Ninas farm, and a member of the SINTRAINAGRO union, was killed in the municipality of Apartado on July 31.

6. **Wilmar Serna**, also a banana planation worker at the Las Ninas farm, and a member of the SINTRAINAGRO workers' committee on the farm, was also killed in the municipality of Apartado on July 31.

7. **Alejandro José PeñataLópez**, teacher and member of the Asociación de Maestros de Córdoba—ADEMACOR (teachers' association of Córdoba), affiliated to the CUT, was murdered on June 20. After he disappeared after leaving school, his body was found with signs of torture. He had been hanged with barbed wire.

8. **Jorge Elicer de los Rios Cárdenas**, teacher, environmental campaigner, and member of the SER union, killed June 8, 2011 in Pereira, Risaralda department. He was shot several times from a motorbike while on his school's campus. A leading member of the Meedrua non-governmental organization, he had led a campaign to expose the damage wreaked by an open air mine belonging to multinationals.



9. **Carlos Julio Gómez**, teacher and member of the SUTEV union, shot and killed May 29, 2011 in Cali, Valle department.

10. **Freddy Antonio Cuadrado Nuñez**, teacher and member of the EDUMAG union, killed May 27, 2011 in Ciénaga, Magdalena department. He was shot in the head and killed as he celebrated his 46th birthday.

11. **Carlos Arturo Castro Casas**, 41, engineer, member of the SINTRAEMCALI union, and father of three, shot in the neck by two armed men and killed May 23, 2011 in Cali, Valle department.



12. **Juan Carlos ChagüiCueter**, prison guard and member of the SIGGINPEC union, killed May 15, 2011 in Barranquilla, Atlántico department.

13. **Dionis Alfredo Sierra Vergara**, elementary school teacher and member of the ADEMACOR union, killed May 15, 2011 in La Apartada, Córdoba department.



14. **Luci Ricardo Florez**, 28, teacher and member of the ADEMACOR union, shot by armed men on motorbikes and killed May 3, 2011 in Ayapel, Córdoba department as she was walking home with her mother.

15. **Antonio Ramiro Muñoz Sánchez**, member of the ASOTMEM union, killed April 8, 2011 in Puerto Boyacá, Boyacá department. According to witnesses, he was shot repeatedly by two men riding a motorbike as he was leaving a union meeting. According to Justice for Colombia, the union had been organizing workers and the local community to demand that oil companies hire local labor.

16. **Héctor Orozco**, 35, father of three and Vice-President of the ASTRACATOL union, killed March 30, 2011 in Chaparral, Tolima department. In the days before he died, Orozco had reported to the local office of the Reiniciar human rights non-governmental organization that he and several other persons had been threatened by an army officer named John Jairo Velez.

17. **Hernán Yesid Pinto Rincón**, member of the CGT union and founder and member of the national board of the new farmers' organization, killed March 19, 2011 in Tibacuy, Cundinamarca department. Before his death, he had taken the lead in the struggle of farm workers.



18. Carlos Alberto Ayala Moreno, member of the ASEPUNION and Director of the Cauca Asia Rural Education Institute, killed February 5, 2011 in Puerto Asís, Putumayo department. He was shot and killed by gunmen as he left his home.

19. Humberto de Jesús Espinoza Díaz, teacher in the Mistrato Agricultural Institute and member of the SER union, shot and killed by armed men in January 30, 2011 in Mistrató, Risaralda department.

20. Jairo Enrique Veloza Martínez, 35, member of the SIGGINPEC union, shot three times in the head by gunman and killed January 27, 2011 in Bogotá, Cundinamarca department.

21. Silverio Antonio Sanchez, 37, member of the union SER, killed on January 24, 2011, from an intentional explosion which caused burns to 80% of his body on December of 2010.



22. Manuel Esteban Tejada, teacher and member of the ADEMACOR union, shot and killed in his home by armed men on January 10, 2011 in Planeta Rica, Córdoba department.