

Tell Colombia Free Trade Comes at a Price

By Kathleen Peratis

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Last November, the Bush administration signed a free-trade agreement with Colombia that would give the Andean country access to American markets on favorable terms. In the months since, Colombian president Alvaro Uribe has conducted a high-priced lobbying campaign in Washington to persuade Congress to ratify the deal, officially known as the United States-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement

Uribe already has President Bush on his side. On the other side, though, stands the American labor movement. It has stood firm, and it is gaining ground.

A little background: Colombia has a long tradition of labor activism. It was a 1928 strike against the United Fruit Company that inspired Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novel "One Hundred Years of Solitude." Until the mid 1980s, Colombian workers were among the most organized in Latin America.

Today, however, Colombia is the deadliest place on earth to be a trade-union member. More than 2,500 union activists have been murdered in the last 20 years — more than in all the rest of the world. Carlos Castaño, head of the right-wing paramilitary umbrella group United Self Defense Forces of Colombia, or AUC — which acts in concert with the Colombian military — once said, "We kill trade unionists because they interfere with people working."

The massive military aid that the United States has provided to Colombia — more than \$4 billion over the last five years, a higher total than to any country outside of the Middle East and Afghanistan — means that Washington has effectively been underwriting Colombia's goons and anti-labor assassins.

Scenarios like this one are common: According to the highly respected research organization U.S./Labor Education in the Americas Project, a day after flower workers in Medellin tried to organize last February, Colombian soldiers visited the work place and warned the workers that they would be declared military objectives if they did not cease their activities. They ceased, lest they end up like thousands of others — disappeared or dead.

Even by Colombia's official count, the impunity rate is appalling: At least 98% of the murders are never solved. It's no wonder, given the sympathies of the government. Uribe himself has accused the labor movement of having ties to the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces, the murderous left-wing guerilla movement, and he has called a murdered union activist a "terrorist."

According to a 2006 report by the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center, this impunity for the killers is the largest single obstacle to workers' rights in Colombia today. Although the recent arrests of more than a dozen Colombian lawmakers for colluding with the paramilitaries is a promising sign of the emerging independence of Colombia's institutions of justice, it is also alarming confirmation that widespread governmental collusion is a reality.

Much of the American aid has gone to "Plan Colombia," which was begun by the Clinton administration. It originally focused on the fumigation of drug crops and the strengthening of the military, but later expanded to include support for combating of insurgents, prosecution of drug moguls and demobilization of paramilitary death squads.

Uribe touts the success of the demobilization program; he did so in May before the American Jewish Committee, which bestowed upon him its "Light Unto The Nations" award. Labor and human rights activists say that the demobilization program is mostly a sham. Even those few kingpins who are serving prison sentences continue to mastermind crimes from behind bars because their jailers give them unrestricted access to cell phones.

But Bush is a big fan of Uribe, whom he calls his "personal friend." Bush spent seven hours in Bogota in March, and praised Colombia's progress in establishing the rule of law.

As for the rule of law that Bush enjoyed during his stopover in town, it took 21,000 police officers to protect the American delegation, the motorcade traveled at speeds of up to 60 miles an hour under heavy military guard, the route was lined with manned submachine guns visible on the streets and rooftops, a second motorcade served as a decoy and much of downtown was shut down for the day. Bogota was the only stop on Bush's Latin American tour where the president did not spend the night.

Another of Colombia's friends in seeking passage of a trade agreement — as well as a renewal of Plan Colombia, which was approved by the House two weeks ago — is former President Clinton, whom Uribe honored at a gala event with 500 guests dinner during his trip to New York in June. (Al Gore, it's worth noting, pulled out of an environmental meeting in April rather than share a stage with Uribe.) Many big corporations, including that well-known friend of labor, Wal-Mart, are rooting for the trade deal.

But the American labor movement has been full tilt against it. In a letter sent to Congress on June 11, a broad coalition of American trade unions declared that Uribe's newly minted promises to protect union members and prosecute killers is "too little, too late," and that "he should be told to come back in a couple of years when we assess whether there has been real, concrete progress."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi seemed amenable to taking the free trade agreement off of this year's legislative agenda, but other congressional leaders, notably Rep. Charles

Rangel — chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, which handles trade legislation — were playing their hands close to the vest.

A significant victory came on Friday. The leadership of the House and Senate, including Pelosi and Rangel, announced that there will be no FTA until Colombia shows concrete and sustained results on the ground on impunity, violence against trade unionists, and dismantling paramilitaries. For now at least, American producers will not have to compete with Colombian producers whose workers often cannot exercise basic rights without risking their lives.

Yet such battles are rarely won decisively. Uribe has already criticized the Democrats for failing to “respect” his government. At least we, for the moment, can respect and applaud ours.

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