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On One Year Anniversary of U.S. Free Trade Agreement, Colombia Remains Deadliest Country for Union Members

Violent Displacement of Unionists Up, Death Threats Unabated Grim Contrast to Promises Made by Obama Administration to Promote Colombia FTA Passage

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The number of Colombian [union members violently displaced from their homes has increased](#) and death threats against unionists have remained appallingly high since the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was implemented one year ago today, according to the Escuela Nacional Sindical (ENS), the institution recognized as an authoritative source of monitoring data. The data show that unions and congressional labor rights defenders in Colombia and the United States were sadly correct in opposing the Colombia FTA on concerns of continued violence against workers, while the Obama administration's promises about the FTA were incorrect, said Public Citizen.

One year after implementation of the FTA and two years after the Obama administration announced a Labor Action Plan with Colombia to improve its labor rights protections, Colombia remains the world's deadliest place to be a union member. The number of unionists violently forced to flee their homes jumped 76 percent in 2012 compared to 2011, before the FTA took effect. Death threats against unionists have remained rampant, with 471 unionists receiving death threats in the year after the U.S.-Colombia FTA Labor Action Plan was launched – exactly the same yearly number as in the two years before the Plan, according to ENS. At least 20 Colombian unionists were assassinated in 2012 according to ENS data, while [the International Trade Union Confederation \(ITUC\) reported 35 assassinations](#) last year. These numbers are even more shocking when one considers the diminished ranks of unionists in Colombia, where [more than 3,000 union members have been assassinated since 1986](#) and many have fled to exile. Meanwhile, [many of the accused in the more than 2,000 unionist murder cases remain free.](#)

In addition, violent mass displacements of Colombians [rose 83 percent](#) in 2012, adding to the five million Colombians who have been forced from their homes and their land in [the world's largest internal displacement crisis](#). Since the FTA's 2012 passage, horrific violence and forced displacement [has occurred in venues targeted for development under the FTA](#), such as the port of Buenaventura. Afro-Colombians, whose major civic organizations also opposed the FTA, have been among the hardest hit.

Sadly, U.S. and Colombian unions and human rights organizations warned the Obama administration that the FTA would not alter on-the-ground realities. Among the unionists who have

received death threats since the FTA went into effect is Jhonsson Torres, a sugar cane worker who came to Washington to plead with members of Congress not to approve the FTA until and unless labor protections improved. One year ago, as Obama was declaring the FTA ready for implementation, the general secretary of Jhonsson's union, who had also been a target of death threats, [was shot and killed while walking with his wife.](#)

“Many people were shocked that the Obama administration would push a trade deal with Colombia, given the record of widespread deadly violence against unionists, human rights defenders and Afro-Colombian community leaders, some of it perpetrated by the military and all of it occurring with impunity”, said Lori Wallach, director of Public Citizen’s Global Trade Watch. “Now that the Obama administration is responsible for passing this agreement, the question is what will it do to reverse this horrible trend.”

During his 2008 presidential campaign, then-candidate Obama famously opposed the Colombia FTA, stating in the third debate with Republican nominee Senator John McCain that “[we have to stand for human rights and we have to make sure that violence isn’t being perpetrated against workers who are just trying to organize for their rights.](#)”

But in April 2012, as anti-union repression remained rampant in Colombia, President Obama travelled to Cartagena to announce the implementation of the FTA saying “[this agreement is a win for our workers and the environment because of the strong protections it has for both – commitments we are going to fulfill.](#)”

“The complete flip-flop from the reform trade agenda President Obama campaigned on in 2008 to the retrograde policies the administration is negotiating today with Latin American and Asian nations reveals the deep influence big business has on determining U.S trade policies that affect wide swaths of non-trade related issues,” said Wallach. “Despite members of Congress, labor unions and human rights groups in Colombia and the United States pointing out the lunacy of implementing the FTA before real improvement on labor and other human rights could be measured, the infuriating reality is a continuation of truly horrifying conditions.”

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