

American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations



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Statement by AFL-CIO President John Sweeney On U.S. - Colombia Free Trade Agreement April 7, 2008

President Bush's decision to send the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement to Congress tomorrow over the strong objections of the leadership of both the U.S. House of Representatives and the Senate shows an outrageous disregard for basic human and workers' rights. Workers in Colombia are terrorized every day for standing up for their economic freedom and union supporters are routinely murdered. Our government should not reward the Colombian government for such callous indifference to the rights and lives of Colombian workers.

Working people – in the U.S. and around the world -- are bearing the brunt of years of bad trade policy. Our nation has lost three million good manufacturing jobs on President Bush's watch alone. The economic damage has inspired a new consensus around the necessity of protections for workers' basic rights to stanch the worldwide race to the bottom in living standards. Yet today, the Bush Administration has scuttled the progress toward a new consensus with its willingness to turn a blind eye to rampant human rights atrocities -- all for a trade agreement that even Administration economists anticipate will be of little economic consequence. Today's announcement makes a complete mockery of the labor protections that were negotiated and incorporated into the trade agreement, and which would be violated from day one.

In Colombia, joining a union or advocating for workers' rights can be a de facto death sentence. The human rights atrocities against union activists and supporters are not isolated, rogue events; they are committed largely by the armed forces and paramilitary organizations with ties to elected officials close to President Uribe. This year, we have witnessed the brutal murders of Colombian trade union activists at a rate of over one a week. This year is shaping up to be even worse than the last, when 39 union workers were murdered, 11 were victims of attempted murder and 224 received death threats. An unimaginable 2,500 have lost their lives in the last two decades simply trying to provide good homes for their families and decent workplaces for themselves and their coworkers.

This long legacy of atrocities affects workers today. The continued murder and threats of murder has a chilling effect on workers' drive for economic freedom through unions. Many have had no choice but to leave the labor movement to protect themselves and their families. Others simply no longer speak out at work, even in the face of desperate poverty.

Those responsible for violence against human rights defenders and labor activists are simply not facing justice in Colombia. There was not a single indictment of a paramilitary last year under the Peace and Justice Law, allowing impunity to flourish and creating the space for new, armed organizations to emerge and terrorize union leaders and rank and file. The Office of the Attorney General of Colombia reported earlier this year that it has secured convictions in only 68 cases related to violence against trade unionists from 2001 to the present – a rate of impunity of over 97 percent. Even more alarming, just over half of those sentenced are actually in custody.

The AFL-CIO stands in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in Colombia in opposition to violence against trade unionists. We stand for the rights of workers in both Colombia and the United States to organize and bargain collectively without fear of firing, retribution or bodily harm. The AFL-CIO is strongly opposed to the Colombia FTA and will mobilize with all of our might to defeat it.

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