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## **After Supporting Colombia Free Trade Agreement as a Senator With Claims It Would Improve Labor Conditions, Will Kerry Demand Action as Colombia Remains World's Deadliest Country for Unionists?**

### ***Violent Displacement of Unionists Up, Death Threats Unabated – a Grim Contrast to Promises Made by Obama Administration in Promoting Colombia FTA Passage***

WASHINGTON, D.C. – John Kerry must use his first visit to Colombia as secretary of state to demand an end to the violence against unionists that he claimed the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) would stop, Public Citizen said today.

“Kerry not only supported the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement over the opposition of labor unions in both countries, but was among the loudest voices claiming that it would help to reverse the horrific violence in Colombia against unionists,” said Lori Wallach, director of Public Citizen’s Global Trade Watch. “Now that he is uniquely positioned as America’s top diplomat and given the sorry record during the agreement’s first year, what will he do to obtain real change?”

The number of Colombian [union members violently displaced from their homes has increased](#) and death threats against unionists have remained appallingly high since the FTA was implemented in May 2011, according to the Escuela Nacional Sindical (ENS). These data are aligned with the repeated warnings from unions and labor rights advocates about the risk of continued violence under the Colombia FTA.

“On his visit to Colombia, will Kerry follow through on his [claims as a senator](#) and the Obama administration’s [pledges that the deal would result in strong worker protections?](#)” Wallach asked.

More than a 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, when the FTA took effect, compared to 2011, according to ENS. Death threats against unionists have remained rampant, with 471 unionists receiving death threats in the year after the Labor Action Plan was launched – exactly the same yearly number as in the two years before the plan.

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. [More than 3,000 union members have been assassinated since 1986](#) and many have fled to exile. Meanwhile, [many of the accused in these 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](#).

“Given the continued widespread deadly violence against unionists and human rights defenders under the U.S.-Colombia FTA, the Obama administration now has a chance to reverse this horrific trend and ensure future trade agreements protect workers around the world,” said Wallach. “While the administration ignored repeated warnings about workers’ rights in Colombia, the question now remains as to whether the administration will continue negotiating trade pacts with countries that also permit similar human rights violations, like Vietnam.”

A recent [report](#) on the abysmal labor conditions in Vietnam confirmed the U.S. Labor Department’s 2012 downgrading of Vietnam to the worst category of labor rights violators. The United States is negotiating the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a trade and investment agreement that the Obama administration seeks to conclude in October with Vietnam and 10 other countries. Human rights and [labor organizations have called for suspension](#) of the talks until Vietnam can meet basic labor and human right standards, the same calls made before the implementation of the U.S.-Colombia FTA.

“The continuing violence against unionists in Colombia provides a clear example that countries with abysmal labor rights records simply are not appropriate U.S. trading partners,” said Wallach. “It is shameful that the United States does not use governments’ interest in trade agreements with us to obtain real labor rights improvements for workers before signing more of the same deals.”

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