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Obama's Colombia-Korea NAFTA Expansion Is Damaging, Heartbreaking, Infuriating and Disgusting

Statement of Lori Wallach, Director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch

The “action plan” being sold as a means to improve Colombia’s horrific labor rights conditions is in fact a remarkably cynical maneuver to facilitate passage of yet another leftover NAFTA-style Free Trade Agreement (FTA) developed by former President George W. Bush that many in the Congress and American public oppose.

With today’s move, President Barack Obama takes ownership of a Colombia-Korea trade agreement package that poses enormous policy and political peril.

Passing the Korea deal would kill U.S. jobs; even official government studies show it will increase the U.S. trade deficit. Passing the Colombia deal would kill any leverage Colombian union, and Afro-Colombian and other community leaders and their U.S. union and civil society friends and allies have to stop the murders, forced displacements and other acts of political violence that dominate life in Colombia.

Even on the very week that President Obama announced his re-election bid, once again the administration’s response to a GOP/corporate hostage situation has been to betray its commitments and stomp its political base to comply with hostage takers whose goal is Democrats’ defeat.

Obviously, if the goal of this administration action really was to address the conditions in Colombia – where the number of [unionist assassinations](#) has grown during the period of maximum congressional and public scrutiny from 37 when the FTA was signed in 2007 to 51 in 2010 – a very different approach would be undertaken.

To start with, the administration would have adopted the recommendations of those in Congress, unions and other civil society groups who have taken a lead on these issues, rather than springing on them a done deal that meets none of the congressional benchmarks and requires no change in outcomes in the horrible human and labor rights violations suffered daily in Colombia before a trade agreement may be considered. Instead of rushing into an easy-to-meet list of changes to laws and agencies in Colombia, which can be done largely with the stroke of a pen, the administration would have required demonstrated changes on the ground – a serious reduction of unionist and other rights defenders’ murders, successful prosecution of some of the

thousands of impunity cases – then conditioned consideration of any trade pact on evidence that such changes had actually occurred. Ninety-seven percent of past murders remain unprosecuted.

The terms of a real initiative would have been enforceable as part of a trade agreement – with consequences related to a loss of trade benefits for failure to maintain real improvements. Instead, this plan is all optics, with no requirement that conditions improve all at before an FTA could be moved. And contrary to administration claims, many aspects of it fall outside the weak labor chapter in the FTA text, which relates only to “trade-related” labor issues. And, the deal would have explicitly addressed the documented and escalating human rights abuses, murders and forced displacement of Afro-Colombians, indigenous people and other vulnerable populations.

The goal was not to get a real deal, but to get something that could be announced when Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos visited the White House today.

We face a situation – an Obama Colombia-Korea NAFTA expansion – that is equal parts damaging, heartbreaking, infuriating and disgusting.

Click [here](#) to see statements on the “action plan” from members of Congress and U.S. and Colombian union leaders.

BACKGROUND:

In February, GOP congressional leaders announced that they would consider the Korea FTA only if the Obama administration also submitted the Colombia and Panama FTAs to Congress. This would thereby ensure that if the Obama administration wanted credit with potential corporate donors for the Korea FTA – the biggest NAFTA-style job-offshoring deal since NAFTA and beloved by Wall Street for its financial deregulation terms – then the ultimate price had to be paid: also move Bush’s Colombia deal, reviled by labor and other key elements of the Democratic base.

Obama had the power to call the GOP bluff. The Korea FTA remains under the extreme White House power rules of the fast track procedure. Fast Track votes are the ONLY ones over which the White House controls timing. Under fast track, if the White House sends a trade pact to Congress, it gets an automatic vote within a set number of days. Stopping it would require the House GOP to take action to stop the highest dollar trade deal since China PNTR that every GOP corporate constituency is salivating over.

Yet, instead of countering the GOP gambit by exercising its strength, the administration scrambled through March to dust off basically the same list of easily doable “demands” that had been blasted by Democrats and labor during the Bush administration. The motivation was transparent: comply with the GOP demands to move the Colombia FTA through Congress.

Statements from members of Congress, USW President Leo Gerard and AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka outline the extreme deficiencies in this sham “plan.” Last month, a group of six leading human and labor rights advocates in Congress submitted a [document](#) noting

that the conditions in Colombia made considering any trade agreement unacceptable and setting forth some real benchmarks for improvement. This adds to the long-standing demands of [TransAfrica](#) and American and Colombian [unions](#) for real reform. All were ignored.

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