

***A LETTER to CONGRESS from U.S. TRADE UNIONS  
SUPPORTING a CALL for a  
NEW U.S. POLICY TOWARDS COLOMBIA***

November 20, 2009

Dear Representative:

As leaders of U.S. trade unions concerned about ongoing violence against trade unionists and other worker rights violations in Colombia, we would like to draw your attention to a Dear Colleague letter circulating from Representatives James P. McGovern, Janice D. Schakowsky, Donald M. Payne and Michael M. Honda. These representatives are gathering support for a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to call for a reconfiguration of U.S. policy towards Colombia.

We hope you will join these members in signing the letter to Secretary Clinton, which currently has a closing date of November 24. The chief contact is Cindy Buhl in Representative McGovern's office (Cindy.Buhl@mail.house.gov).

We firmly support a new policy, aid package, and diplomatic effort that, as called for in the Dear Colleague, would include a focus on better governance, full respect for human rights, and a stronger justice system capable of punishing abuse and corruption. We also support a rebalancing of the FY 2011 foreign aid package to provide for an increase in social and economic aid and a decrease in military aid. We continue to oppose the pending Free Trade Agreement with Colombia.

The need for a new policy towards Colombia is reflected in our particular area of concern, the ongoing high rates of violence against trade unionists and continuing impunity for the perpetrators of that violence. In 2008, another 49 trade unionists were murdered, a level that once again exceeded the number murdered in the rest of the world combined.

Despite the implementation of specialized subunits in the Prosecutor General's Office and the Judicial branch to focus specifically on cases of violence against trade unionists, advances have been minimal. In 2008, out of a caseload of more than 2,700 murders committed since 1991, these subunits produced convictions in the cases of 49 murdered trade unionists. This "progress" was completely offset by the 49 murders that occurred in 2008. In addition, although the ongoing legal process resulting from the Peace Process with paramilitary groups accounted for more than half of the convictions in 2008, the information revealed in paramilitary confessions is not being used to pursue other cases of violence against trade unionists. Fundamentally, the Colombian government has failed to adopt a strategic approach to investigate and prosecute these cases in a way that recognizes the systematic nature of violence against trade unionists.

At the same time, there have been harsh political attacks by leading government officials on trade unionists, unions, and other human rights defenders. Even seemingly positive efforts have been undermined. For example, a U.S.-funded government protection program for threatened trade unionists was recently found to have conducted illegal surveillance of trade unionists. This appalling revelation came out of a much broader scandal involving the Department of Administrative Security, an intelligence arm of the executive branch, that has repeatedly attacked trade-unionists and human rights work in general.

We believe there should be a more balanced foreign aid program that would direct more aid towards social and economic programs and the strengthening of the rule of law, while sharply reducing aid

to the Colombian military, whose members have been linked to extrajudicial killings of innocent civilians and widespread collaboration with paramilitary groups

Our unions represent millions of tax-paying workers who are concerned that U.S. trade policies are promoting a race to the bottom in terms of wages, working conditions, and respect for the basic rights of workers. The limited action to address violence against trade unionists represents an overall lack of political will to respect labor rights. If the Colombian legal system moves this timidly in addressing violence against trade unionists and impunity, how can we expect it to act effectively to ensure the enforcement of core worker rights like freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining? We therefore reiterate our long-standing opposition to the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement.

It is time for a new U.S. policy towards Colombia. Please support the effort being led by Representatives McGovern, Schakowsky, Payne and Honda and sign their letter to Secretary Clinton.

Thank you for your consideration of our views.

Sincerely,

Richard L. Trumka  
President  
AFL-CIO

Leo W. Gerard  
International President  
United Steelworkers of America (USW)

Larry Cohen  
President  
Communications Workers of America (CWA)

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