

A LETTER from CHICAGO-AREA ORGANIZATIONS AND UNIONS
OPPOSING the U.S.-COLOMBIA FREE TRADE AGREEMENT
January 28, 2008

Dear Senators Durbin and Obama:

In light of upcoming Congressional consideration of the pending Free Trade Agreement with Colombia, we write to you today as Chicago-area trade unions and human rights, ecojustice, faith, and community organizations concerned about significant flaws in the current trade model as a whole, and in particular in the U.S.-Colombia FTA.

The Colombia agreement stands out from all other trade agreements negotiated by the United States due to the unparalleled levels of violence experienced by Colombian workers. Colombia continues to be the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists. In 2006 alone, 72 trade unionists were assassinated in Colombia, out of 136 killed globally. That same year 244 Colombian union members suffered death threats, in addition to forced displacement, violent intimidation, arbitrary detention, kidnapping, harassment, and torture. These forms of violence victimize not only workers but also families and entire communities.

The agreement also poses major threats to the rights of indigenous and Afro-Colombian groups, particularly around issues of land control. In preparation for FTA implementation, the Colombian government has passed new laws that threaten the collective land holdings of these groups. In order to make Colombia more attractive to U.S. investors, indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities that have collective title to their lands will now own only the first three meters of the trees on their land, with the rest made available to loggers.

Further, as the Colombian countryside is being taken over by companies cultivating African oil palm for export, thousands of acres of forest are being destroyed. Increased investment by U.S. companies in natural resource exploitation will only exacerbate this problem. The FTA limits itself to demanding that Colombia's government comply with its own very lax environmental laws, which have been aggressively weakened in recent years. Global climate change will proceed apace.

The Free Trade Agreement process overrides the democratic processes of both countries. With corporations permitted to sue for damages where regulations and laws diminish their profits, either nation might be required to ignore its own sovereign laws and even provisions of its constitution. Only those who have the money and power end up benefiting under this current model of trade: international corporations and government elites.

Perhaps the most alarming aspect of this particular agreement is the ongoing collusion between the Uribe administration and the paramilitary apparatus in Colombia. As has been demonstrated by the arrests of Colombian Members of Congress and government leaders in recent months, collaboration between paramilitary groups, the Colombian military, and the political establishment has been extensive, reaching deeply into President Uribe's political circle. Ratifying a trade agreement with Colombia would send a clear signal that the United States is willing to support a terrorist state if there is potential for economic benefit.

The expanded labor and environmental provisions that were added to the trade template do not compensate for the flawed economic model it is based upon. A new vision for trade will have to be grounded in democratic and inclusive processes and a genuine respect for human rights and the environment.

We therefore call on you to take a public, vocal position against the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement and the other pending agreements (South Korea, Panama) based on the current trade model. We hope you will find the courage and clarity to stand with us in calling for real change.

Sincerely,

Wellington Avenue United Church of
Christ, Peace and Social Justice
Committee

US Labor Education in the Americas Project
(USLEAP)

United Electrical, Radio, and Machine
Workers of America (UE), Western Region

Tinta Roja Projects

Teamsters Local 743

Sacred Heart Province JPIC

Progressive Democrats of America

Pilsen Green Party

National Alliance of Latin American and
Caribbean Communities (NALACC),
Chicago Chapter

MIGUA Chicago

Metro Chicago Fellowship of Reconciliation
(FOR)

Loyola Students Against Sweatshops

Latinos Progresando

Labor Express Radio

Labor Council for Latin American
Advancement (LCLAA)

La Voz de los de Abajo

Jobs with Justice Chicago

Environmental Research Foundation

Eco-Justice Collaborative

Durango Unido en Chicago

Democratic Socialists of America, Chicago
Chapter

Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW),
Chicago Chapter

Coalition of Black Trade Unionists (CBTU),
Chicago Chapter

Christian Peacemaker Teams - Chicago

Chicagoans for a Peaceful Colombia

Chicago Socialist Party

Chicago Religious Leadership Network on
Latin America (CRLN)

Chicago Fair Trade

8th Day Center for Justice