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**Colombia****February 17, 2000****New Orleans, LA**

Colombia's trade unions have been the leading advocates for peace, human rights, and economic justice in a nation afflicted by internal violence and external economic pressures.

According to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), more than 90 Colombian trade unionists were murdered in 1998, mostly at the hands of paramilitary organizations supported by government security forces. Among the victims was Jorge Ortega, Vice President of the Confederacion Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT) and one of many union leaders who have denounced both guerrilla and government violence and played key roles in efforts by civil society to achieve an effective and lasting peace. The violence continued in 1999, culminating in the assassination on December 13 of Cesar Herrera, president of the banana workers' union SITRAINAGRO. In the past five years, not a single assassin responsible for the murder of unionists has been arrested or tried. Yet unionists who strike or otherwise defend their rights have been prosecuted in regional courts, where judges' and witnesses' identities are hidden and secret evidence can be admitted.

While physical terror against unionists has drawn international condemnation, the government's program of privatization and economic deregulation to create "flexible" labor markets, as required by the IMF, has also undermined freedom of association and taken a severe toll on working families. The official unemployment rate now exceeds 20 percent, and mass dismissals and firings are widespread. Because of high unemployment and poverty, child labor is common in the cut flower and coal mining industries: there are 784,000 working children between the ages of 6 and 11. Yet the IMF has opposed indexing of the minimum wage to protect working families from inflation.

Despite these threats to human and worker rights, the Administration is proposing a \$1.6 billion aid package for Colombia, mostly to assist the military.

In solidarity with our Colombian trade union sisters and brothers, we condemn violence and drug trafficking, whether carried out by the military, paramilitary forces, or the guerrillas. Nevertheless, we think the United States should not deepen its entanglement with a military which has been responsible for the violence perpetuated against trade unionists.

Our government should do more to promote peace negotiations that include unions, religious bodies, and other civil society groups. More aid should be provided for human rights, including assistance to promote worker rights and protect the physical security of union members, strengthen the Colombian government's ability to investigate human rights violations, and assist non-governmental organizations engaged in peace, human rights, economic development, and humanitarian relief efforts. At a minimum, existing pre-conditions on disbursement of aid to the military should be retained and broadened to cover all military units, and any such aid should be pre-conditioned on clear progress in investigating the murders of union members and human rights activists, including the adjudication of those responsible, and the dismantling of the regional courts.

We look forward to the report of the ILO Direct Contacts Mission which is visiting Colombia this week, and reaffirm our support for a Commission of Inquiry as recommended by the Workers' Party at the ILO. And we renew our commitment to defend our Colombian union sisters and brothers whose lives are endangered because of their attempts to exercise their fundamental human rights.

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