

A LETTER to CONGRESS
From U.S. TRADE UNIONS
OPPOSING MORE U.S. AID to the COLOMBIAN MILITARY

June 7, 2005

Dear Member of Congress:

We write to you today as U.S. trade unions concerned about violence against Colombian trade unionists in light of the approaching congressional consideration of the FY 2006 foreign aid appropriations bill.

Colombia continues to be the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists. More trade unionists are killed in Colombia than the rest of the world combined. In 2004 alone, 94 trade unionists were assassinated, bringing the total to over 2,100 Colombian trade unionists murdered since 1991. The Escuela Nacional Sindical (ENS), the National Labor School in Colombia, a well-respected NGO, has found that paramilitary groups are responsible for the majority of violations against Colombian trade unionists, including 70% of homicides in cases where the assailants were known. According to the 2004 State Department Report on Colombia, collaboration between paramilitary groups and the Colombian military continues.

ENS has also reported that Colombian state entities are directly responsible for 40% of violations with known assailants in 2004 and have increased their attacks on labor unions by 204% between 2002 and 2004. U.S. policy towards Colombia fails to address the ongoing violence against Colombian trade unionists and instead supports a military that continues to attack trade unionists and collaborate with paramilitary terrorists. The U.S. should not support the Colombian military while it attacks trade unionists.

The Colombian government has also consistently failed to investigate and charge those responsible for the murders of Colombian trade unionists. According to the Human Rights Observatory of the Office of the Vice President of Colombia, of the 1,981 murders of trade unionists from 1992 to 2004, only 0.01% of these murders ever resulted in jail time for those responsible. As international unions concerned about the impact of U.S. policy on workers here and abroad, we believe that the U.S. should sharply cut back its massive aid to the Colombian military while impunity reigns in Colombia.

When Plan Colombia was originally debated in 2000, many members of Congress were concerned that this policy would draw the U.S. deeper into Colombia's civil conflict. Now, at the end of Plan Colombia, the current Administration has asked for another \$731 million for Colombia in FY 2006, a funding level on par with past years despite the end of Plan Colombia. Since the initiation of Plan Colombia more than \$3.2 billion of taxpayer money has been sent to Colombia, 80% of which has gone to the Colombian military and police. The end of Plan Colombia calls for an examination of this policy. The U.S. government should take extreme care in how aid is allocated to Colombia so as to not perpetuate the violent situation there.

Colombian workers, along with much of civil society, oppose the continuing militarization of U.S. aid to Colombia. They advocate a more balanced foreign aid program that would direct more aid towards social and economic programs and the strengthening of the rule of law. Aid is needed to support the effective protection of Colombian trade unionists and prosecution of those responsible for the assassinations of trade unionists as well as sustainable development and viable alternatives to drug production and trafficking.

Our unions represent more than 9.9 million tax-paying workers who are concerned that U.S. policies are promoting a race to the bottom in terms of wages, working conditions, and respect for basic rights. How can we tell them that the U.S. is continuing to support a foreign military that both supports and commits violence against workers in Colombia?

We urge you to support any measure that limits or decreases foreign aid to the Colombian military and to support any congressional initiative that ends additional military escalation of the conflict in Colombia.

Sincerely,

Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance, AFL-CIO
(APALA)

Communications Workers of America
(CWA)

International Brotherhood of Teamsters
(IBT)

Labor Council for Latin American Advancement
(LCLAA)

United Automobile, Aerospace & Agricultural Implement Workers of America International Union, AFL-CIO
(UAW)

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

United Food and Commercial Workers, AFL-CIO
(UFCW)

United Mine Workers of America, AFL-CIO/CLC
(UMWA)

United Steelworkers of America, AFL-CIO/CLC
(USWA)

National Education Association
(NEA)