

Bogotá
January 23, 2007

OPEN LETTER TO THE HONORABLE REPRESENTATIVES, TO THE COMMITTEE
ON WAYS AND MEANS AND TO THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ATTN: REPRESENTATIVE CHARLES RANGEL

Since the initial negotiations of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the governments of the United States and Colombia, our country's labor unions have expressed our total opposition to the content of this agreement, not solely related to the labor clause, but also as related to the package of rules that would prove harmful to national economic interests, as it would facilitate the destruction of our productive capacities in the agricultural, industrial, and service sectors, with the consequent rise in unemployment and worsening of the standards of living and of labor for the population. Therefore, on May 18, 2005 the AFL-CIO and the Colombian unions signed a declaration elaborating the problems we have with this type of FTA.

Our initial views have been confirmed by the final FTA text and also given support by new analyses from U.S. civil society and labor groups, whom are concerned not only about the FTA's effects on labor, but also about the FTA's rules on commercial goods, intellectual property, and the environment, among many others.

Given the asymmetry between our countries and the fact that the U.S. economy is over 100 times as developed as ours, commercial exchange on equal terms is impossible. On such an uneven playing field, the national and multinational companies installed in Colombia have little choice but to base their export advantage in a race-to-the-bottom in labor and tax costs, resulting in an increase in misery and a reduction of fiscal revenues and of the State's social service obligations.

Ratification of the FTA will cut the few remaining jobs that still survive after 15 years of opening of the Colombian internal market, which has already increased unemployment and poverty.

Over this 15-year period, Colombian labor legislation has been weakened to the point where workers' rights to organize and collectively bargain have practically disappeared. Currently, of an 18 million person labor force, half of which are wage-earning, there are less than one million unionized workers and less than 200,000 who are covered by collective bargaining contracts.

Additionally, irregular labor contracting practices, such as temporary employment agencies, associated work cooperatives, lending services contracts, etc, dominate the Colombian labor market, in which the overexploitation of the work of women and children has become increasingly notorious. Colombian labor legislation and the business practices supported by the government are becoming ever more distanced from the normative practices of the ILO.

Implementation of the FTA will lead to further labor law changes that will eliminate our remaining rights. As a sign of things to come, President Uribe recently ordered by decree the liquidation of the Institute of Social Security, which is entrusted with safeguarding workers' health care, pensions, and insurance, in order to hand over all Social Security to the private sector.

This situation will worsen with the reduction in the availability of medical procedures and medications that will be wrought by the FTA's intellectual property provisions. Recently, a World Bank mission encouraged eliminating the legal minimum wage, an opinion that has been echoed among corporate lobbyists and government officials.

And beyond the virtual lack of labor rights in Colombia, human rights are constantly violated. These deprivations of rights feed into the anti-union campaign, and are visible through the assassinations of union leaders and activists and the death threats that leads to the forced displacement and exile of thousands of workers.

Furthermore, it is profoundly distressing that the FTA, which will predictably lead to food import surges and thus to a sharp reduction in sustainable rural livelihoods, will in turn obligate many Colombian farm workers to dedicate themselves to the cultivation of illegal crops and other delinquent activities in order to survive.

We are not opposed to the strengthening of trade and economic exchange, but this should take place within a context of respect to sovereignty, reciprocal benefits, and the promotion of productive development, aspects notably absent in the FTA.

For all of these reasons the Central Labor Unions of Colombia urge the U.S. Congress to not ratify the Free Trade Agreement as it has been negotiated by the U.S. and Colombian governments.

Sincerely,

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