

# Talking Points

## *Opposing U.S. Aid and Trade Policy in Colombia*

*When you contact your members of Congress or their foreign policy and trade aides, you may want to use the following talking points to support your request that Congress oppose (1) more military aid to Colombia and (2) the Andean Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) due to its failure to protect Colombian workers. You may also want to use accompanying response arguments found on the back of this sheet.*

- **The U.S. must exercise extreme precaution in determining how to distribute foreign aid and expand trade with Colombia, as to not perpetuate the violent situation for trade unionists there.** Colombia is the most dangerous place in the world to be a trade unionist. In 2004, 94 trade unionists were assassinated bringing the total of trade unionists killed in Colombia since 1991 to more than 2,100. Public sector workers such as teachers and health care providers are especially targeted, as are trade union leaders who denounce human rights violations.
- **The U.S. should not keep approving massive amounts of aid to the Colombian military while it continues to collaborate with paramilitary terrorists.** Most Colombian trade unionist murders are committed by paramilitary terrorists, in cases where the assailants are known. Paramilitary groups from Colombia are not only on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations, but are also linked to the Colombian military. The Colombian state itself has also been found responsible for a significant amount of the violence against trade unionists.
- **U.S. foreign aid and trade programs should be conditioned on an end to impunity for those who assassinate Colombian trade unionists.** Of the over 2,100 Colombian trade unionists murdered since 1991, less than 1% of the killers of Colombian trade unionists have been prosecuted.
- **Any free trade agreement that does not include strong and effective mechanisms to protect labor and social rights should not be approved by Congress.** The Andean Free Trade Agreement, in its current state, fails to protect labor rights and represents a step back from existing U.S. protections for worker rights under U.S. trade programs. If AFTA is passed in its present form, it would greatly weaken U.S. leverage to improve respect for labor rights in Colombia.
- *[this talking point should only be used with union-friendly members of Congress. Contact US/LEAP if you need background on your particular member of Congress]*  
**U.S. unions challenge support of the Colombian military.** Unions such as AFSCME, CWA, SEIU, and other labor organizations have challenged U.S. support of the Colombian military because it contributes to violence against trade unionists. The AFL-CIO, along with Colombia's largest labor federation, the CUT, are opposed to the Andean Free Trade Agreement due to the negative impact on workers.

(over)

### **U.S./Labor Education in the Americas Project (US/LEAP)**

P.O. Box 268-290, Chicago, IL 60626,

Tel: 773/262-6502, Fax: 773/262-6502,

Email: [apaul@usleap.org](mailto:apaul@usleap.org), Web: [www.usleap.org](http://www.usleap.org)

## *Response to Defense of Current U.S. Policy*

Here are some arguments from defenders of current U.S. policy in Colombia and suggested responses:

**They say:** The Colombian people elected President Uribe because he promised to take a hard-line stance against the guerillas. We're only supporting an administration's agenda that the Colombian people approved.

**Response:** The Colombian people are understandably weary of a long struggle. But President Uribe's policies curtailing civil rights and continuing impunity are not supported by the population, nor is the continuing high-level of violence against trade unionists and other defenders of basic rights. President Uribe's efforts to roll back civil rights have been declared unconstitutional by the courts and he has suffered significant electoral defeats. Also, opposition to the Andean Free Trade Agreement in Colombia has been massive with over 80,000 participating in a national strike during the negotiations.

**They say:** President Uribe's policies are working, even on the issue you have raised: trade union murders have declined dramatically since he took office.

**Response:** Although levels of violence against trade unionist in 2003 and 2004 were less than they were in 2002 when 184 trade unionists were murdered, the total is still higher than the rest of the world combined. And in 2004, the number of murders actually went up from 90 to 94 and other human rights violations also increased, including arbitrary arrests and detentions. Moreover, murders are down since the Uribe government came in not because the government has sought to reduce human rights violations or prosecute killers but because paramilitary groups are hoping to get an amnesty for the thousands of murders they have already committed by negotiating a "peace" agreement that ignores past crimes. A lasting peace cannot be built on a foundation that doesn't address justice and impunity.

**They say:** Aren't a lot of these murdered trade unionists really guerrillas?

**Response:** No. According to the National Labor College, whose information and data is used by the U.S. government and the International Labor Organization, most trade unionists are killed while performing normal trade union activities. But paramilitary groups view trade unions as extensions of guerilla groups and others are targeted for denouncing corruption in public institutions. Some businesses also use the cover of the civil war to recruit paramilitaries to attack their unions while some guerilla leaders view union leaders with hostility because they can't control the unions.

**They say:** U.S. aid to the Colombian military is necessary to reduce illegal drugs.

**Response:** Our drug problem cannot be solved until we deal with the demand side of the equation here in the U.S. Wiping out highly profitable coca production in one area will only cause it to shift somewhere else. Indeed, coca production in the Andean region has remained virtually steady despite the \$5.6 billion of U.S. taxpayers' dollars spent in eradication efforts since 1988.

### *An Alternative to Current U.S. Policy: What We Should Do Instead*

Colombian trade union leaders, human rights advocates, and other civil society groups are calling for a major change in U.S. policy towards Colombia that shifts away from a single-minded military solution to the conflict and instead seeks to address root causes of injustice and insecurity. U.S. aid and trade should support:

- Economic and social programs that address the needs of refugees displaced by the war;
- A strengthening of the judicial system and the rule of law and respect for human rights;
- An end to impunity, including an end to impunity for those who murder trade unionists;
- Alternative development to help farmers switch to legal crops.
- Efforts to resume a peace process based on justice and reparations in any negotiated settlement.