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NY Times Letters
Colombia, Trade and Human Rights

Published: November 22, 2008

To the Editor:

Re "Pass the Colombian Trade Pact" (editorial, Nov. 18):

You argue that rejecting the United States-Colombia free trade agreement "would send a dismal message to allies the world over that the United States is an unreliable partner."

But the most dismal message we could send is that we are not concerned by the egregious and systematic violence against Colombian workers, near-total impunity for the perpetrators of that violence, and the failure of President Álvaro Uribe's government to reform its labor laws.

Workers in Colombia face credible threats of death and violence against themselves and family members when they organize a union or try to bargain collectively for a better life. More than half of Colombians live in poverty. The Uribe administration has done far too little to discourage the violence and remove legal obstacles to organizing.

While the violence is down from historical highs, union murders were actually higher in 2008 than in 2007. Repeated threats by government officials against human rights defenders have contributed to the deteriorating situation.

Congress is right to reject this agreement. We should not sign a trade agreement with a country that is unable or unwilling to protect the lives of workers exercising their fundamental human rights.

John J. Sweeney
President, A.F.L.-C.I.O.
Washington, Nov. 19, 2008