

American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations



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August 16, 2007

His Excellency Álvaro Uribe
President of the Republic of Colombia
Cra. 8 No. 7-26, Palacio de Nariño
Bogotá, D.C.

VIA FACSIMILE: 571.566.20.71

Dear Mr. President:

I write to you today in furtherance of the frank, open dialogue we initiated in Washington, D.C. during your visit earlier this year. I value the exchange we had then, and I wish to continue that by bringing to your attention a matter of high importance to us.

In July 2007, leaders of the Union Sindical Obrera de la Industria del Petrolero (USO) visited with the American Federation of Labor & Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), and affiliate unions, to discuss labor relations in the petroleum sector and to further our discussions on the trade agreement between the United States and Colombia. The meeting in Washington, D.C., reinforced an already strong relationship between our unions, which have for many years worked to defend and promote the full exercise of trade union rights at both the national and international levels. It is for this reason that we are particularly outraged at recent reports of death threats against members of USO, a union that continues to pay an extremely heavy price for the exercise of its fundamental rights.

Recently, the AFL-CIO was informed that USO had received a pamphlet that threatened with death, among others, Jorge Gamboa, the National President of USO. This pamphlet has been attributed to the Águilas Negras, "demobilized" paramilitaries that have rejoined the existing criminal networks and are undertaking acts of political and social violence under a new name. Moreover, on August 2, German Osman, the National Vice President of USO and a participant in the USO delegation to the United States, was threatened by phone in Barrancabermeja. The unidentified caller told him Mr. Osman that they knew where he was and that he would be killed, even if they had to take him from the union hall to do it. We can only conclude that these reported threats to the union and to Mr. Osman personally are directly related to his recent union activities here in the United States.



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The AFL-CIO urges the government of Colombia to immediately take all necessary measures to ensure the safety and security of President Gamboa and Vice-President Osman. As you know, over the last 20 years, over 100 members of USO have been murdered for their trade union activities, with hundreds more threatened with death, internally displaced or forced into exile. In fact, the situation became so grave that in December 2001, the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights of the Organization of American States ordered Colombia to extend protective measures to all members of USO. From then to now, leaders and members of USO have lived under the constant threat of death, and indeed some have been murdered for their trade union activity. This must end now.

The AFL-CIO also urges the government of Colombia to comply with the International Labor Organization's (ILO) multiple resolutions with regard to USO's 2004 strike at Ecopetrol, the state oil company. In the most recent pronouncement on the strike, found at CFA Report No. 343, Case No. 2355 (2006), the ILO once again stated that the strike could not have been declared illegal on substantive and procedural grounds, that the government should respect the May 26 order of the arbitral tribunal with regard to the reinstatement of the workers, and that the company should desist from firing workers for having participated in the strike and to rehire those that have once again been fired. The government has yet to comply with these recommendations.

Mr. President, you gave me a personal commitment that your government would take the steps necessary to guarantee the exercise of fundamental labor rights in Colombia. I call upon you to ensure the safety of the leaders and rank and file members of USO, and comply with the recommendations set forth in ILO Case 2355, adopted by the ILO's Governing Body in 2005. I look forward to working with your government on this matter, and on other matters of mutual interest to the working people of our two countries.

Sincerely,


John J. Sweeney
President

JJS/jhl