

The Pro-FTA Visit of U.S. Congresspersons to Colombia
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Once again the Bush-Uribe administration has launched a propaganda offensive to pressure for approval of the FTA in the United States. Falling in step with what Bush has called a march in favor of business, Rep. Henry Cuellar (D-TX) has affirmed that the country must not turn its back on Latin America at this time, just as the Bush administration is struggling to stay afloat and most South American governments are questioning its policies. The “march” involves one more effort by the U.S. president to impose his legislative agenda on the Democrats. As part of this campaign, U.S. Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez will accompany twelve U.S. congresspersons who favor the FTA as they spend a day in Medellín after visiting Lima and Panama.

The congressional group is basically made up of Republicans, along with a few conservative Democrats who have voted in favor of all the free trade agreements that successive U.S. administrations have brought before Congress. The absence of Charles Rangel and Sander Levin is notable, as they head the Ways and Means Committee and the Finance section of that committee; their cooperation would be essential to open the way for the Colombia FTA—and they cannot be called opponents of free trade.

Of course, the members of Congress on this trip are not those who are suspicious of Uribe because of the parapolitics scandal that has rocked both Colombia and the international community or who question “fair trade,” but those who vote in lock-step with the Bush agenda. They will not be meeting with those who oppose the FTA, they will not sit down with human rights defenders, nor will they dialogue with unionists. They will merely have an audience with the Colombian-American Chamber of Commerce, after which they’ll emerge to affirm the same things that Bush and Uribe have been repeating for years.

Uribe has left no stone unturned in beseeching approval of the FTA in the United States: he has pushed for quick approval by Colombia’s Congress of the FTA changes required by U.S. Democrats; he has sought advice from Bill Clinton; he has paid out millions to PR and lobbying firms. The recent firings of high-ranking Colombian military officers and captures of drug traffickers along with the prospect of more extraditions to the United States are more a message to the U.S. than a genuine change of direction. Uribe’s only guiding principle in these matters is to do as Bush commands, when and as he commands.

Nevertheless, every day the popular movement in Colombia gives

witness to the continuation of threats and tactics of intimidation against it. In many parts of the country there is no guarantee of participation in free and fair elections, and restrictions on union organizing are being maintained and intensified. The government persists in attempting to create the impression that all who oppose its policies do so because they support the guerrillas. Uribe continues thus to offer proofs of his servility, but not of actual democracy.