

## **Free Trade with Colombia**

### **Doublespeak, Deadly Silence, and Deception**

April 26, 2008 By **Raul Fernandez**  
and **Daniel Whitesell**

Something peculiar happens in United States political and media circles when the discussion is about "free trade" with Colombia.

Take for instance the topic of labor conditions. We have grown accustomed to serious and needed condemnations against child labor, sweatshop conditions, etc, when discussing trade issues with China, Thailand and other countries. This is as it should be.

The same labor conditions obtain in Colombia as well. For example independent research sources estimate that there are at least 2.5 million children working in Colombia today, and that only 1 of every 5 children is working legally. In oil companies such as British Petroleum, Natural Gas of Spain, Shell and others, unions are prohibited. In the large chain supermarkets in Bogotá and other major cities workers who bag groceries work for tips alone. In American, Colombian and Spanish banks unions have been eliminated. The right to collective bargaining and the right to strike are denied to government employees. Clearly labor conditions in Colombia are deplorable.

U.S. media and political circles discuss labor in Colombia as part of debates over a free trade agreement. But unlike the approach used with other countries, commentators focus on only one thing, namely, the fact that it is dangerous in Colombia to become a labor organizer because your life is at risk. This is not to be minimized. But what is peculiar is the macabre calculus of death used by some commentators when arguing that because murders of Colombian unionists decreased from 275 in 1996 to 39 in 2007, labor conditions in Colombia have somehow improved. They have not. The reduction in the total number of union leaders killed (still horrific by any interpretation) reflects the efficacy of state-allowed terror, not of the judicial system. In a rhetorical sleight-of-hand it appears that, for Colombia, as long as the rate of murders linked to labor meets an "acceptable" limit, other miserable conditions for workers can be ignored and a "free trade" agreement with Colombia should be supported.

Let's turn to the issue of human rights crises. We hear about them, as we should, in the media everyday. We know about the suffering of peoples in Darfur caught in a cross-fire. Elected officials and presidential candidates make statements about Darfur, e.g. Barack Obama has indicated that the United States has a moral obligation to stop humanitarian catastrophes and has repeatedly called for

a United Nations protective force on the ground in Darfur. The UN High Commissioner on Refugees just released its annual report on internally displaced people. The number of people forced to leave their homes in 2007 grew to more than 26 million. Darfur leads the list with 5.8 million people displaced. But Colombia is a close second: more than 4 million people displaced, up from 3.8 million the year before. These displaced Colombians, disproportionately Afro-Colombian and Indigenous people, have been forced off their land by violence or the threat of violence from armed guerrillas, vigilante death squads or both. Why does this Colombian refugee tragedy barely get a passing mention by the media or by officials in Washington? Shouldn't elected representatives discussing the Free Trade Agreement with Colombia wonder why millions of people have become homeless in their own land? Isn't that an indication of a major crisis and a nearly lawless state of affairs? The silence on this question is deafening. Apparently some politicians and the media don't want small distractions, like 4 million displaced refugees, to cloud our vision about the benefits of "free trade."

Not a day passes without media references to human rights abuses in China, Tibet, Chechnya and the alleged anti-democratic proclivities of various foreign leaders, e.g. Putin, Chavez, the Chinese leadership, etc. In recent weeks Tibet and Zimbabwe are getting all the attention. But when it comes to Colombia these righteous concerns seem to evaporate. There is very little coverage of the "statistics" on the death squads scandal in Colombia, which reveal that many members of the Uribe government, his important allies in the Colombian Congress, and close political supporters who helped him twice get elected are either in jail or under investigation for their connections with the vigilante death squads that have murdered hundreds of Colombians. Or that the office of the Colombian President has tried by every means available to stop and thwart investigations, and to cover up evidence linking the President himself to death squad activities.

Can it be that free trade is too important to let concerns about child labor, prohibitions against union organizing and the right to strike, miserable wages and labor conditions, the uprooting of millions of people, and a corrupt government deeply implicated with vigilante death squads, interfere with the benefits of the free market?

What is so important about free trade? Here the doublespeak becomes compounded because the media discussion suppresses the crucial context: United States agribusiness will continue to receive its multi-billion dollar yearly subsidies, denied to Colombia in the treaty, making a joke out of any argument for "level playing fields" or respect for the "free market". U.S. agriculture subsidies allow American producers to sell their crops below cost. Under these conditions, the U.S. exports corn at 30% below costs of production, wheat at 40% below, and cotton at 57% below, to mention just a few examples. In the face of this unsettling reality, the government of President Uribe agreed, by signing the FTA, to eliminate Colombia's agricultural protections as well as tariffs.

Negotiating merely defined the time frame for lifting all agricultural protection for Colombian farmers. At the same time, however, the United States government, in an unequal and asymmetrical manner, will maintain domestic supports for its agricultural producers who will continue to export their surpluses below the cost of production, a practice deemed illegal in world commerce and known as dumping.

With another rhetorical trick the multi-billion dollar tax-payer supported welfare-for-agribusiness program is defended in the name of the "free market" and anti-protectionism.

As George Orwell expressed so well, fallacies such as these will not even occur to people if the institutions of indoctrination are functioning properly: "the mind should develop a blind spot whenever a dangerous thought presents itself. The process should be automatic, instinctive. Crimestop, they call it in Newspeak."