

THE FREE TRADE AGREEMENT (FTA) BETWEEN COLOMBIA AND THE UNITED STATES CANNOT BE SALVAGED

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Colombian Senator

From March 26 to March 30, I visited Washington, D.C. along with Iván Moreno Rojas, Senator of the Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA-Alternative Democratic Party), Apecides Alvis, President of the Confederación de Trabajadores de Colombia (CTC-Colombian Workers Confederation), Boris Montes de Oca, Secretary General of the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT-Workers Unitary Central Union), and other leaders of the main Colombian trade union federations. We exchanged views about the Colombian Free Trade Agreement with leaders of the AFL-CIO, Democratic Party Congressional members, and Thomas Shannon, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs.

In these meetings we reported that eighty Colombian agrarian organizations had just ratified the decision to reject the FTA. We explained why the Treaty should not be approved by either house of Congress, if the intention is to have mutually beneficial economic relations between both nations. We specified that our disagreement with the FTA is not merely with particular parts, but with the text as a whole, that is, with the very conception of so-called “free trade”, because its aim is a world that benefits only a handful of monopolies. To demonstrate the degree to which the “free trade” conception is regressive, even for the people of the United States, we noted that, in the United States, the minimum wage is just now being increased for the first time in ten years! This shocking fact confirms that neoliberal globalization implies degradation of living standards for all nations in the world. We explained that the atrocious violence that has afflicted and continues to afflict Colombia, which is understandably appalling to outside observers, makes it even more difficult for our country to compete on an equal footing with an economic competitor whose Gross Domestic Product is 129 times larger than ours.

Colombia would suffer enormous losses due to the extremely one-sided character of what has been agreed in terms of tariffs, agriculture, industry, sanitary and phyto-sanitary controls, subsidies allowed to the United States, intellectual property, medicines, investment rules, procurement contracts, telecommunications, financial services, dispute resolutions, the balance of payments clause, indirect expropriation, labor mobility, trans-border commerce, and culture, among other things. In terms of labor conditions, Article 17.2 of the FTA will intensify the already shocking situation for Colombian workers by authorizing further weakening of labor standards for the benefit of employers. Article 18.2 does the same as it pertains to environmental norms. To try to change the FTA into a positive agreement with a few cosmetic changes is like trying to alter Frankenstein’s nature with a bit of lipstick and earrings.

By the time of our trip it was clear that President Bush's administration had failed to secure Congressional approval of the FTA, as stipulated in the text agreed to with Colombia’s

President. Bush had not even dared to introduce it for consideration by the U.S. Congress since the Democratic Party, which had been ignored during the negotiations and is now in control of both Houses of Congress, had already communicated its intention to bury it. It became evident that, while there are some Democratic Congress members who pursue the impossible objective of "fixing" what's wrong with the Agreement, there are others who remain faithful to the commitment against "free trade" which contributed to their party's victory in the November elections. The latter preferred that the Agreement not be ratified, allowing then for a redefinition of policies regarding U.S. relations with the rest of the world. Following this logic and to ease pressure for passing the pending FTA, a new law that would extend for two years the Andean Trade Preferences and Drug Eradication Agreement (APTDEA), due to expire at the end of June, 2007, has been introduced in Congress. The APTDEA is a mechanism that reduces tariffs on Colombian exports to the U.S. by \$160 million dollars annually. Making the minor APTDEA temporary tariff relief permanent has been used as a deceptive enticement to promote the neoliberal "free trade" formula and would be the main achievement of the FTA for Colombia.

What remains to be seen is who can exert more influence on the Democratic majority in Congress. Will it be United States transnational corporations that apply pressure because of the profits they expect from the FTA, or those U.S. democratic sectors and workers that elected Democrats to Congress with their votes? The former, which promote the petty interests of a very powerful minority or the latter, who advocate relations that are truly beneficial between Colombia and the United States?

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