

The US-Colombia Unfair Trade Agreement: Just Say No!

by Yifat Susskind. CommonDreams.org. April 2, 2008

With Congress back in session, the Bush Administration is pushing hard to pass another trade agreement based on the failed NAFTA model, this time with Colombia. The Administration is in a race against public opinion, which is quickly turning against the kind of neoliberal trade deals that have worsened poverty and inequality in every country where they have been implemented and led to a massive loss of jobs in the United States. The proposed Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Colombia promises more of the same. The deal will also strengthen Colombia's government, which is responsible for severe human rights violations.

With more and more people — in Latin America and in the US — becoming aware of the repercussions of unfair trade rules, [MADRE](#) has urged its members to take action and to let their Congressional representatives know that a vote for this trade agreement is a vote for:

1. Worsening Rural Poverty and Hunger

The FTA cuts tariffs on food imported from the US but benefits only the few Colombian farmers who export to the US. Moreover, the deal bars the Colombian government from subsidizing farmers, while large-scale US corn and rice growers enjoy billions in subsidies. These double standards guarantee that US agribusiness can undersell Colombian farmers, who will face bankruptcy as a result. Many of Colombia's small-holder farmers are women and Indigenous Peoples who are losing their livelihoods and being forced off their lands.

2. Fueling Armed Conflict and Drug Trafficking

The intertwined crises of poverty, landlessness and inequality are at the root of Colombia's 50-year armed conflict. The FTA will further concentrate wealth in the hands of a few while worsening poverty for millions of people. Many Colombian farmers, whose livelihoods will be destroyed by the FTA, will be compelled to cultivate coca (the raw material for producing cocaine) to earn a living.

Continuing a trend begun in the wake of 9-11, the US has cast the FTA as a matter of its “national security,” and the Colombian government has followed suit by treating anyone opposed to the deal as a terrorist. Colombia's workers, Afro-Colombians and Indigenous Peoples have taken a clear position against the FTA. Their peaceful protests have been met with severe repression, including murder.

3. Repressing Labor Rights

Colombia is already the world's deadliest country for trade unionists, with more than 2,000 labor activists killed since 1991. The FTA does not require Colombia to meet international core labor standards; it merely calls on the government to abide by its own weak labor laws. Without enforceable labor protections, the trade deal will put more workers at risk. US workers' power to negotiate better wages will also be weakened by a deal that allows corporations operating in Colombia to keep labor costs down through sheer violence.

4. Exacerbating Climate Change and Threatening Biodiversity

The FTA will increase logging in the Colombian Amazon, weakening the rainforest's capacity to stabilize the Earth's climate. Under provisions sought by the US, corporations that have bought the rights to a country's forests, fishing waters, mineral deposits or oil reserves can totally deplete these resources, with grave consequences to ecosystems and the many species that inhabit them. Small-scale farmers and Indigenous Peoples who depend directly on these natural resources will be the first people to suffer.

5. Subordinating National Sovereignty to Corporations

By allowing corporations to sue governments for passing laws that could reduce profits, the FTA erodes Colombia's prerogative to regulate foreign investment and undermines citizens' chances of improving health, safety and environmental laws. In anticipation of the FTA, the US pressed Colombia to pass a law that would expropriate land from Indigenous and Afro-Colombians and allow multinational corporations to gain control of millions of hectares of rainforest. The forestry law was part of a series of constitutional "reforms" undertaken to meet the conditions of a US trade agreement. In January 2008, Colombian civil society won an important victory: the forestry law was struck down as a violation of Indigenous rights. Had the FTA already been in place, US corporations would now be allowed to sue the Colombian government for "lost future profits."

6. Deteriorating Public Health

By extending patent rights on medicines produced in the US, the FTA hinders the use of far cheaper generic drugs and puts life-saving medicines out of reach for millions of Colombians. Women, who are over-represented among the poor and primarily responsible for caring for sick family members, are particularly harmed by this provision.

7. Loss of Vital Public Services

The FTA requires the Colombian government to sell off critical public services, including water, healthcare and education. Elsewhere in Latin America, this kind of privatization has resulted in sharp rate increases by new corporate owners that deny millions of people access to essential services. Women are hardest hit because it is most often their responsibility to meet their families' needs for such basic services.

8. Harming Indigenous Women

The FTA would enable corporations to exploit Indigenous Peoples' traditional knowledge by allowing companies to patent seeds, plants, animals and certain medical procedures developed and used by Indigenous women over centuries. Under the FTA, Indigenous women could lose access to important medicinal plants and agricultural seeds unless they pay royalties to patent holders. Indigenous women's role as the protectors of their community's natural resources and traditional knowledge would be eroded, threatening Indigenous cultures and women's status within the community.

There Are Viable Alternatives to Free Trade Agreements

Despite more than a decade of failed NAFTA-style trade deals, the US continues to insist that its trading partners adhere to rigid neoliberal economic policies. But Latin America's social movements are articulating viable alternatives for regulating trade and economic integration in ways that benefit women, families, communities and the environment. The women of MADRE's sister organizations in Colombia and throughout Latin America affirm the need for Fair Trade Agreements that:

- Are negotiated through democratic processes with effective participation from communities that will be impacted, including women's organizations.
- Ensure that life-sustaining resources such as water, food staples and medicinal plants are guaranteed to all people and not reduced to commodities.
- Ensure that access to basic services, including health care, housing, education, water and sanitation, are recognized as human rights that governments are obligated-and empowered-to protect.
- Institute the region's highest, rather than lowest, standards for labor rights and health, safety and environmental protections.
- Adopt principles of “fair trade,” including social security and development assistance programs that protect small farmers and workers and that recognize the economic value of women's unpaid labor in the household.
- Require foreign investors to contribute to the economic development of the communities where they have a presence.
- Promote policies that respect local cultures and collective Indigenous rights and that preserve traditional agricultural techniques and biodiversity in agriculture and nature.
- Recognize the links between economic growth, environmental sustainability and building peace.

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