

No trade agreement with Colombia acceptable at this time," US legislators say
http://canadianlabour.ca/index.php/colombia_projects/1318

Parliament of Canada
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K1A 0A9

Re: Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement

Dear Members of Parliament,

For almost two decades, the United States and Canada have been closely linked economically, first through the U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement, and later the North American Free Trade Agreement. Now, our respective governments are negotiating trade agreements with many of the same countries. These agreements will no doubt have an impact on both our respective economies and on our unique bilateral relationship. It is in this light that we would very much like to open a continuing dialogue with you about our respective trade policies and exchange views about the kind of policies needed to promote broadly shared benefits for the people of the United States, of Canada, and of our trading partners.

Last year, the United States concluded negotiations and signed a bilateral free trade agreement with Colombia. Even though the White House has not yet submitted the agreement to Congress for consideration, it has already generated considerable controversy and debate. While we support trade with Colombia, we have very serious concerns about deepening and making permanent that economic relationship at this time and with this agreement. First, we are disturbed by the human rights situation in the country, and the fact that many of these horrific crimes are committed with impunity. The ongoing repression of workers is of particular concern and is an issue that no labor chapter in a trade agreement will fix. Second, we simply do not believe that the trade agreement will foster the broad-based economic development needed in Colombia or that it will generate substantial economic opportunities at home.

It is our understanding that Canada is close to or has concluded negotiations for a bilateral trade agreement with Peru, Colombia and South Korea. We understand that these agreements are similar in many respects to our own. We would like to share some of our concerns regarding the U.S-Colombia Free Trade Agreement. These concerns, we believe, are equally applicable to the Canada-Colombia FTA.

* Labor: Colombia continues to lead the world in the number of murdered trade unionists. In 2007 alone, thirty eight labor activists were murdered. . Of the 2,262 labor activists murdered between 1991 and 2006, almost 400 were killed during the Uribe Administration. And these murders are committed with impunity - 97% remain unsolved. The ILO has also repeatedly criticized both the failure of Colombia to adopt laws consistent with the core labor standards and to enforce what domestic

labor laws it does have. The combined result has been a steep decline in union density in the country.

* Corruption: Several members of Congress and high-ranking officials closely allied with President Alvaro Uribe have been arrested or are under investigation for their links with paramilitaries. In Colombia, paramilitary organizations have been linked to egregious human rights violations, including massacres and narcotrafficking. In October 2007, Mario Uribe, a cousin of President Alvaro Uribe, resigned from the Senate to avoid an inquiry by the Supreme Court into his alleged ties to paramilitaries. The government has already proposed a plan to release these politicians with little or no sanction whatsoever.

* Demobilization: The government has taken some steps to dismantle the paramilitary structures in Colombia. However, the flawed process has contributed to thousands of former paramilitary members never truly demobilizing and has led to the creation of new and dangerous criminal organizations. Recent reports from the Organization of American States have noted the resurgence of new paramilitary groups.

* These groups are found throughout the country and, while assuming distinct organizational frameworks, many of them continue the legacy of the paramilitaries, including narcotics trafficking, death threats, and assassinations.

* Extra-judicial executions: Murders committed by state actors remain a very serious and under-reported problem. The Washington Office on Latin America recently reported that human rights groups in Colombia have collected detailed information on a total of 577 cases of extrajudicial execution between July 1997 and June 2002. The same organizations detailed 955 cases over the last five years, an increase in executions of nearly 66%. From July 2006 to June 2007, extra-judicial executions have taken place in nearly all of Colombia's departments.

Additionally, we have concerns about the impact of certain chapters of the U.S.-Colombia FTA. Of particular concern are the chapters on: services, investment, procurement, intellectual property and agriculture.

We believe that no trade agreement with Colombia is acceptable at this time. We have also learned that many Colombians, including representatives of organized labor, indigenous and afro-Colombian communities, small farmers, and religious leaders strongly oppose this agreement. We urge you to consider these important issues, which no doubt will also arise in the debate over the Canada-Colombia FTA. We welcome any opportunity to commence a more detailed discussion on this agreement and on trade policy generally.

Michael H. Michaud
Betty Sutton
Phil Hare
Linda Sánchez
Nancy Boyda

Keith Ellison
Marcy Kaptur
Members of Congress