

Colombia's Senator Robledo: U.S. Resembles Latin America's Spanish Colonial Masters More Each Day

A Leader of the Country's Opposition Explains What's at Stake as Obama Reconsiders U.S. "Free Trade" Policies Toward Latin America

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Special to The Narco News Bulletin

January 12, 2009

One of the few Latin American policy issues to provoke any kind of a fight in Washington over the last two years has been the passage of a Free Trade Agreement (or FTA) between Colombia and the United States. The same Democrats who have often been champions of the free trade policies that have devastated manufacturing jobs in the U.S. and the agricultural and other sectors in Latin America, have denied President Bush and his close political ally, Colombian president Álvaro Uribe, the satisfaction of closing the deal. Despite nonstop lobbying by Uribe's government and a series of bizarre FTA promotional tours led by U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez, House Democrats successfully blocked a vote on the issue throughout 2008.

The main argument put forth by the FTA's opponents in the U.S. (especially the AFL-CIO) has been that Colombia does not deserve such privileges from the U.S. while the rampant murders of trade unionists continue with impunity under Uribe's watch. However, many have wondered if the Democrats' stand has been more political than principled; whether the deal would go through once it was a Democratic president pushing it in Bush's place.

Colombian Senator Jorge Enrique Robledo is one of the FTA's most vocal and respected opponents. He was trained as an architect and later as an economist, has been a leader for most of his life both within social movements and as an academic, and has long been the most visible face of



Colombian Senator Jorge Enrique Robledo
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the small but influential Independent Revolutionary Workers' Movement (MOIR). Elected to the Senate in 2002, he was one of the representatives of a newly emboldened left opposition who would emerge successful that year, at the same time that Uribe sought to complete his movement's rightwing transformation of the country. Since those leftwing forces came together to form a single party, the Polo Democrático Alternativo (Alternative Democratic Pole, or PDA in its Spanish initials), Robledo has emerged as one of its most important leaders, and its authority on economic issues.

In a conversation at his Bogotá office, Robledo told Narco News how the resistance to the FTA in Colombia was much greater than U.S. observers might imagine. He sees the issue as much wider than the question of murdered unionists, and worries that many Democrats (including Obama) are using the FTA as a political punishment for Uribe (deserved as it may be) rather than thinking about the wellbeing of U.S. and Colombian workers.

Narco News: Why did you oppose the Free Trade Agreement with the United States?

Senator Robledo: Because it can be shown that free trade has done and continues to do immense damage to Colombia. Free trade began here in 1990, during the administration of President César Gaviria Trujillo. And the harm that free trade has done in Colombia is completely obvious. All we have to do is look at the concentration of wealth, the impoverishment of the Colombian people, the unemployment rates, the de-nationalization of the country. What the FTA does is complete the work of destruction that began in 1990.

With the FTA, the United States defines the interests of its multinational companies, and imposes them on Colombia in a process that ends up being an imperialist re-colonization. Each day, the relationship between Colombia and the United States resembles our old colonial relationship with Spain more and more. With the FTA, that becomes permanent, with a treaty that will be very difficult to back out of later.

Narco News: What are the most dangerous points in the current agreement that the two governments signed?

Senator Robledo: We have spoken at great length about the agricultural side of it, and it is very clear that this part is extremely harmful. It condemns us to import what we could produce in Colombia. Today we import eight million tons of food. In 1990, we imported only 700,000. And a great part of that comes from the U.S.

And it's not only agriculture. There have been great industrial losses in this period, and they will get bigger. Colombia lost the little industry it had, it de-industrialized. But it's other things, too. For example, medicine prices will increase at very high rates.

We must remember that there are 1,300 pages in this agreement. It covers everything! The FTA is like an economic constitution for Colombia, dictated by Washington in Washington's interests. So, what the FTA does is take away from Colombia any possibility of development. It condemns Colombia to underdevelopment and poverty forever.

Narco News: Is there anything in that agreement that could be salvaged? Does any possibility exist of an agreement with the United States that would be good for Colombia and that you would support?

Senator Robledo: I don't oppose Colombia having international relations. Our counter-proposal to free trade is not isolation. Colombia should engage with the rest of the world. It can improve its relationship with the United States. It can sign agreements with United States. But not free trade agreements.

The thing is that the Free Trade Agreement is a special kind of agreement, which Colombia should not sign with the United States. It was wrong to have passed one with Canada. Another one is with the European Union which, under study, is negative also. Free trade is really an imperialist conception of development and international relations.

Under other circumstances, with other kinds of exchange mechanisms, Colombia can deal with the United States and there's no problem. But it would have to be very different, conceived in another way. This is a Frankenstein monster that can't be fixed just because we put some lipstick on it or touch up a few things here and there.

Narco News: At the time the agreement was being written, did you or other opposition figures have some role? Did you try to propose things that were or were not included in the final text?

Senator Robledo: They created a simulation of participation. The United States has a sort of fill-in-the-blanks form. It makes sure all its interests, and those of the multinationals and monopolies, are represented. Then it churns out the text of an agreement. The same format was also imposed on Mexico, Central America, Chile, Peru and Colombia.

So, the 20 months during which there were supposedly negotiations going on here were nothing more than a farce to deceive the Colombian people with the idea that we were participating in the agreement's design, when it is obvious that the agreement was predefined from day one.

Narco News: In that case, why was its passage in the Colombian Congress so easy?

Senator Robledo: For a long time now, those who govern Colombia have been able to separate their fate from that of the nation. They do well when the rest of Colombia is doing badly. And to great extent they do well because their interests are really identical to those of the multinational corporations. It is these people – lead by Álvaro Uribe, who is especially subservient to foreign interests – who currently have the majority in Congress.

But, if we don't look only at Congress, Daniel, but rather at the rest of the country, Colombia's struggle against the FTA is one of the biggest economic struggles in our history. Every labor federation was against it. The entire indigenous movement, the student movement. The government was really on its own with the FTA.

Even certain business sectors, like the Farmers' Society of Colombia, fought it until the last day. What happened was that on the last day, Uribe forced them to their knees. He told them, here it is, take it or leave it. And he tossed them a few cents, so that the drink he was forcing down their throats would not be quite so bitter.

But the struggle in Colombia was enormous. In fact, there is no FTA today in great part because the Colombian struggle dragged out the negotiation process, and when the time came to ratify it, Bush had lost his majority in the U.S. Congress. There is no FTA today, in part because of the decision made in the United States, but in our opinion a fundamental part was the Colombian people's resistance.

Narco News: And that part is one that few people in the U.S. know about. The story the media tell us is that there are a few small unions in the U.S. that monopolized the debate, and that for everybody else it is a good agreement. Here in Colombia, we know that the unions rejected it, but what about the rest of society?

Senator Robledo: But it was also the entire indigenous movement, for example. There was an indigenous referendum, organized by the indigenous themselves in Cauca. There was a referendum among the rice farmers that we [the opposition] organized ourselves, not the government.

The government never wanted to do anything like that. We said, why don't we convoke a national referendum to decide on the FTA? Because the truth is that the resistance has been strong among the public in general. Even today, opinion polls continue to show around half of the country opposed to the FTA. And we all know how much this government manipulates public opinion.

It wasn't just a few unions. And it wasn't just because of the killings of union organizers. There was an immense resistance movement against this economic idea. I was in Washington when the leaders of the Colombian labor federations spoke to members of

Congress, and those unionists were very clear that this wasn't just a problem of unionist murders. The problem was with the economic model that the Free Trade Agreement imposes, and their position was the same as that of all the different popular sectors in Colombia.

Narco News: In the United States, almost the entire debate is framed around the question of trade unionists. One side says we must not support the FTA because of the murders, and the other says that the murders have been reduced and we should give the TLC to Colombia as some kind of prize. What other issues should those people in the U.S. who have only heard that part of the debate take into account?

Senator Robledo: I would say that we need to explain the central issue to the North Americans. They should oppose the TLC out of a democratic attitude toward the interests of the Colombian people. But also thinking about themselves. Free trade is bad for the people of the United States as well.

Representative Linda Sánchez, a House democratic, told me very precisely, that free trade is good for the oligarchies of Colombia and the United States, and bad for the peoples of Colombia. People's wages in the U.S. are in a very bad state, and have deteriorated since free trade began.

This crisis that is beginning, which might be one of the worst crises in the history of capitalism, is a free trade crisis. Financial deregulation is part of free trade. The free movement of capital and goods is part of free trade.

This crisis cannot be seriously overcome, without major traumas, if we don't strike a blow against the conceptions of free trade. And really, I don't see President Obama trying to bring those down.

Narco News: Yes, how do you see the future of the U.S.-Colombia FTA this year, with an Obama presidency?

Senator Robledo: Let's be clear on this. It is clear that within the Democratic Party, the left wing of that party is opposed to the FTA and uses very similar arguments to ours. But it is also evident that the Democratic Party those who favor free trade are ultimately those who have the final word.

At the same time that the Democrats deny an FTA to Colombia, an identical text was approved with Peru. What they have made clear is that they are not denying an FTA to Colombia, but rather to Álvaro Uribe, because Uribe has not been able to satisfactorily explain the problems of paramilitarism and the crimes against union members. How can they

give Álvaro Uribe a TLC, when so many of the horrors of Colombia's violence lead back to him? But that means that if there are consequences for Uribe, at some point Obama could give Colombia an FTA.

But there is a new factor, and that's the economic crisis. The crisis could strain the U.S. economy so hard that free trade becomes politically undesirable, even among its proponents. And that could tie up the FTA with Colombia even more than it is already. I would say that in the short term, I can't see any possibility of an FTA with Colombia, and in the medium and long term, it will depend on many other things.

Narco News: Colombia exports many products to the United States, with a great deal of freedom. There are very few barriers to Colombian exports. Why do you think this agreement is so important to Uribe that he seems almost desperate to see it passed?

Senator Robledo: I think that it is politically very important. Not giving Álvaro Uribe an FTA is a political punishment, a moral punishment, of uncommon proportions. I don't think there are many presidents in the world that can say they've received a moral sanction of the caliber that President Uribe is receiving. But here, the opposition is silenced, and something so scandalous as Uribe being denied a trade agreement because he can't explain his relationships with the paramilitaries, goes unnoticed.

Narco News: Free trade already exists to some extent between Colombia and the United States. Don't you think that an FTA could be used to impose certain environmental, human rights and labor conditions that, without any agreement, are not being respected?

Senator Robledo: We Colombians cannot ask to be a U.S. colony, but that they treat us with a bit of consideration. First, out of principle; one can't accept being anyone's vassal state. And second, because things always go badly for that vassal. They're not going to treat us with silk gloves.

Many of the "solutions" that will be proposed for this worldwide crisis will be more sacrifices from countries like Colombia. They'll treat us even more harshly. Because U.S. policy is an imperial policy. In the days of Spanish colonialism, they spoke here of "his majesty's gentle yoke." Well, I don't believe that any majesty has a gentle yoke, and that includes the White House.