

Statement by the Mingas Network about the Colombia FTA, May 12, 2011

The Mingas Network* expresses its grave concern over the White House announcement of a plan to clear the way for approval of the U.S.-Colombia FTA. The proposal is limited to an inadequate "Labor Action Plan:" It provides no remedy for the destructive effects of the FTA on Colombian agriculture and food sovereignty nor to the extensive, labor and non-labor related human rights violations. It ignores the impact of the FTA on the situation of indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombians, health care, and environmental protection.

The Action Plan thus does not address the immediate and destructive consequences that the FTA will have upon Colombian agriculture, which will be decimated as US agribusiness floods the Colombian market with cheap, subsidized US food products free of tariffs.

This will cause further loss of agricultural land, the destruction of domestic food production as happened in Haiti and Mexico on account of similar treaties, further displacement in a country with the largest displaced population in the entire world, and will likely drive some desperate farmers into the cultivation of illicit crops as has happened in Mexico under NAFTA.

The agricultural impact of the FTA will be particularly severe in the case of indigenous and Afro-Colombian peasant populations. In the last several years paramilitary vigilantes have murdered, threatened, internally displaced, forcibly disappeared and continue to extort to this day numerous residents of the Afro-Colombian and indigenous ancestral lands. The FTA will make their situation even more precarious.

The White House documents supporting the Action Plan refer to it as a way to "consolidate the advances" made by the governments of Uribe and Santos in the area of labor rights over the last few years. It is hard to reconcile that notion with the actual record: 39 unionists murdered in 2007; 52 murdered in 2008; 47 murdered in 2009, and 52 murdered in 2010. More unionists were killed in Colombia in the last 5 years than in the rest of the world combined.

Mass killing of unionists in Colombia has proceeded even as critics in the United States congress made it clear that their opposition to the Colombian FTA was based precisely on the continuing persecution and murders of labor organizers and other human rights violations. The "Labor Action Plan" does not address extensive human rights violations beyond the attacks on workers.

The "Action Plan" is not tied to the actual FTA, so that if the latter is approved, lack of compliance with the promises of the Action Plan will in no way affect the implementation of the trade deal.

The Free Trade Agreement will make health care --considered by President Obama a "right" for all Americans-- unaffordable to a large proportion of the Colombian population. The FTA will lead to expansion of mining operations in sensitive environments, of timber exploitation which will rip up the Amazon, causing severe ecological damage to the tropical forests and virgin lands of Colombia.

US workers, hard-hit by unemployment and decreasing wage levels, as a result of this treaty would be under pressure to accept even lower pay. The struggle for a living wage would be undermined as workers become exposed to competition with a labor market that is notorious for its extensive labor and human rights violations.

From its inception the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement was conceptualized, written and negotiated behind closed doors by powerful transnational interests and then presented to the public for limited input and only cosmetic changes, violating the basic principles of transparent democratic process.

Under the Action Plan there is no way to guarantee that labor and human rights conditions will actually improve, that violence against unionists will cease, and that impunity will come to an end. This situation will not change because of unverifiable promises made by the Colombian government. The Action Plan provides no remedy whatsoever to the many destructive effects the FTA is bound to have upon the people of Colombia and the country's economy.

This Free Trade agreement would benefit neither the Colombian people nor the American people.

Sincerely yours,

Raul Fernandez

for **The Mingas Network***

The Mingas Network is a group of individuals from across the United States, Canada and Colombia who are concerned with improving labor conditions, promoting sovereignty and strengthening democracy and in Colombia. We are united in our support for social movements and our rejection of all acts of violence in Colombia, regardless of their source.