

Statement by AFL-CIO President John Sweeney
On Colombian Sugarcane Workers on Strike
October 21, 2008

The Colombian government is again violating workers' Fundamental rights by dispatching state security forces to violently assault and arrest striking sugarcane workers who are demanding that they be recognized as workers and that the employers negotiate with them for a decent, livable wage. The government must end its tactics of terror immediately.

For over a month, thousands of Colombian sugarcane workers have been on strike in the Valle de Cauca, Risaralda and Cauca departments because sugar mill owners have refused to negotiate over slave-like work conditions permitted under the exploitive system of associated labor cooperatives. Rather than encourage the employers to negotiate, and to facilitate that negotiation, the Colombian government instead sent in police and armed forces to violently break the otherwise peaceful strike. The Colombian government has repeatedly exposed the workers to attacks from paramilitary groups by implying, untruthfully, that the workers and their unions are somehow under the sway of guerillas. Since the strike began, several workers have been brutally beaten, threatened with death, or fired.

The cane cutters strike is another example of how bad things are in Colombia for trade unionists. In Colombia this year, at least 41 trade unionists have been murdered. The total number of trade unionists murdered in the first eight months of 2008 now surpasses the figure for the entire previous year.

Workers in the United States strongly reject this brutal reaction from the Colombian government. We call on the Uribe administration to: 1- immediately seek an authentic and effective resolution of this dispute, that satisfies the workers' just demands and will be applicable to all of the sugar mill owners in the Valle del Cauca; 2- cease and desist from its violent and unjustified apprehension of strikers and strike supporters; and 3- publicly renounce its false statements that this justified collective worker action is being manipulated by the guerillas.