

Senator Jorge Enrique Robledo
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Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA)

OPEN LETTER TO UNITED STATES SENATORS AND CONGRESSIONAL
REPRESENTATIVES

Bogotá, Colombia
November 13, 2006

Honorable
Senators and Members of the U.S. House of Representatives
United States of America

Dear Colleagues:

There isn't a single organization representing labor, peasants, indigenous people, students, academics and other popular sectors in Colombia which supports the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States. Even the majority of associations of agricultural owners opposed the Agreement until February 27, 2006, when its completion was pushed through by the President of Colombia.

We do not oppose the FTA because of an opposition in principle to international business or relations with the United States. We oppose it because it destroys Colombian sovereignty, annexing our national economy to the US economy. In addition, the FTA denies our country the most important tools for economic development and will lead to the increased impoverishment of almost all Colombians.

The FTA will make the neoliberal economic reforms of the last fifteen years irreversible. Those measures caused enormous losses to the industrial and agricultural sectors, substituted public monopolies for private ones, and led to the worst social conditions in 20th century Colombia. The impact on employment and poverty was such that we have not recovered to the economic levels of 1991, before the crisis, and the country is suffering from one of the most severe conditions of inequality in the entire world. Official studies indicate that with the FTA the growth of Colombian imports from the U.S. will be twice the growth of US imports from Colombia. Colombian exporters will also lose current markets in the Andean region to the United States. This will be the case because Colombia will eliminate its tariffs while the United States, an economy already 129 times the size of Colombia's, will maintain its own enormous subsidies to agriculture. In addition, with the FTA Colombia is practically eliminating health and sanitary barriers to US products, while the United States retains all of its health and sanitary barriers against Colombian products.

Under the conditions imposed under the intellectual property section of the Agreement, Colombia cannot produce advanced industrial goods, and it renounces

any independent progress in science and technology. This chapter will also be the cause of increased illnesses and death among Colombians inasmuch as it will lead to a nearly \$900 million annual increase in the price of medicines, according to a study by the Pan American Health Organization. With regard to telecommunications and arbitration tribunals, the FTA will negatively affect the interests of Colombian enterprises and the Colombian state.

New rules governing investment and government contracts will give the powerful US corporate monopolies unique advantages in Colombia; it is ludicrous to suggest that much smaller and weaker Colombian firms would be in the same advantageous position in the United States under the Agreement. It is especially onerous that the FTA denies Colombia the right to put into the Agreement a balance-of-payments clause, something which is authorized even under IMF rules, and the lack of which may signify catastrophic losses to our country. Thus, the Agreement consolidates the take-over of our financial sector by foreign owners and imposes upon Colombia unaffordable costs if it wishes to exercise control over rates of interest and rates of exchange.

Those who support the FTA claim that US investment will make up for the damages inflicted on the capacity of Colombia to generate internal savings. But they avoid noting that such investment will have to be attracted by the establishment of worse labor and environmental standards, something which the FTA specifically authorizes in articles 17.2 and 18.2. It well known that Colombia has undergone several labor law reforms which cheapened the cost of labor; that in Colombia it is easier to create and maintain an illegal armed group than organize a labor union; and that there is a campaign underway right now to reduce the minimum wage. It is also well known that the current government cares so little about the environment that it fumigated with powerful poisons the forest reserve of La Macarena, a national park.

We reject the FTA also because the destruction of our agriculture will force more Colombians to turn to the cultivation of coca and opium poppies, and because "free trade" leads to the enrichment of a few monopolistic corporations in the United States while the economic situation of its people deteriorates. Those in the Congress of Colombia and those in the Congress of the United States who cherish a truly democratic vision, must struggle to improve relations between our two countries. But frankly, I can tell you that the imperial logic behind the FTA stands in the way of the improvement in our mutual relations.

It is, therefore, one of our duties to reject this Free Trade Agreement.

Sincerely,

Jorge Enrique Robledo
Senator, Republic of Colombia
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