

THE FTA WITH THE E.U.: AS BAD AS OR WORSE THAN THE ONE WITH THE U.S.

Jorge Enrique Robledo, Bogotá, February 19, 2009

The governments of Colombia and the European Union are engaged in talks that will lead to the signing of a free trade agreement. There are many reasons why Colombians, almost all of us that is, will suffer losses as bad as or worse than those negotiated in the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the United States, an onerous agreement that fortunately has not been ratified by the U.S. Congress, because the Democratic Party majority, and Barack Obama's own government, consider the explanations and actions of President Alvaro Uribe's government to be insufficient with respect to the murder of union leaders --49 in 2008, 25% more than in 2007, confirming Colombia as the most dangerous country in the world for labor leaders--, the shocking human rights violations by members of the army and the connection between a number of political leaders who support the Uribe government and paramilitary organizations.

The European Union intends to increase the length of time for patents that generate monopolies and higher prices, over and above the WTO standards and those achieved by the Americans in the FTA with Colombia, whose higher drug costs for Colombians were initially calculated at one billion dollars annually by the Pan-American Health Organization. And the EU also wants Colombia to accept something that transnational capital has not been able to achieve in Europe nor in any other country in the world: prison sentences for any violation of intellectual property rights. If the FTA between Colombia and the United States is a WTO-plus agreement, the one that the European Union wants can be called a WTO-plus-plus.

With great audacity, the Colombian Trade minister, Luis Guillermo Plata, admitted that "he already has some red lines in these negotiations (with the European Union), that are none other than those that are in the FTA with the United States, and Colombia will not go beyond these in this matter." With Colombian spokespersons like Mr. Plata it shouldn't be a surprise that they have agreed to work out the agreement in just four months and that, as happened with the Americans as well, the texts are written up in secret and without taking into consideration the opinions of organizations of workers, peasants and indigenous people.

Just as the United States did with its FTA, the European Union also insisted on negotiating country by country in the Andean region, such that CAN, the integration project of the Andean sub regional countries, will be reduced to an even more meaningless document. The fact that the European Union doesn't call their agreement a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) but rather a Trade Agreement reflects nothing more than a name change intended to confuse the millions of Colombians who reject the FTA with the United States.

As is the case with the United States, the economic differences between Colombia and the European Union are abysmal. For example, their Gross Domestic Product is 80 times greater than Colombia's and their agricultural subsidies come to 70 billion dollars a year. Rather than equality between partners this treaty will set in cement the enormous inequality between the EU and Colombia. The Treaty will award the transnationals of the European Union the right to come to Colombia to swallow up large businesses, natural resources and the domestic market for free, that is, without requiring them to pay any more for this prerogative than Colombians. And the harm that is caused by the free flow of capital in and out of Colombia, the environmental damage and degraded working conditions is also part of the cost of doing the type of business that the European investors want.

It's outrageous that the governments of the European Union and Colombia insist on deepening a policy of "free trade", even though this policy has been discredited for causing what will surely be the worst crisis in the history of capitalism. This confirms that those who govern in the EU and Colombia are prepared to take the suffering of their people to unimaginable depths.

It's clear that the European Union, aware of how much Alvaro Uribe needs an FTA with them so that he can show it off as a moral and political acquittal to Washington, will know how to maximize the pay off for this acquittal in the form of greater concessions to their transnationals, even to the point of surpassing what the United States got in their FTA with Colombia.