
**Solidarity with Colombian workers
Condemnation of Colombian government
ILO Geneva 2008**

Stop smearing trade unionists, TUC tells Colombian Government at ILO

At the ILO in Geneva yesterday (Tuesday) the TUC condemned the murder of 26 trade unionists in Colombia so far this year - seven of them teachers' union activists – including some killed following the peace demonstrations in Colombia on 6 February which the Colombian Government smeared as supporting the terrorists.

TUC member of the ILO Governing Body Simon Steyne called on the Colombian Government “to desist from public smearing of trade unionists” and called for “a commitment to strengthen the ILO Bogotá office’s support for social dialogue and mature industrial relations and for the struggle against impunity.”

Simon Steyne’s speech follows:

Thank you Chair

Despite our grief in the face of nearly 2700 murders of our colleagues, we have resisted the Colombian government and employers’ attempts to limit the context of the discussion solely to the continuing violence. The ILO’s supervisory bodies have shown that, even if there were no violence in Colombia, this would still be the most anti-union, pro-employer government in Latin America. The violence has no bearing on its failure to bring into conformity with the Convention legislation restricting trade union registration and collective bargaining, or promoting pactos colectivos and cooperativos de trabajo asociado. But it has been used as a smokescreen for its neoliberal project and disdain for social dialogue.

But direct and indirect state complicity does have continued bearing on anti-union violence.

On 6 February and 6 March in Colombia and around the world, protests were held demanding an end to all violence from wherever it comes - the paramilitaries, the FARC or the State - and the immediate release of all hostages Carlos Rodriguez, Miguel Morantes and other colleagues of a visiting CUT, CTC and CGT delegation took part in protests in London, which also called for an end to UK military aid (only the UK, USA and Israel provide such support) and instead for a strengthening of humanitarian assistance.

The need to shift from military support to support for the ILO's mandate, for social dialogue and peaceful and equitable development, becomes all the more urgent as ever more politicians linked to the Uribe project are investigated for links with the paramilitaries - the main perpetrators of the anti- trade union violence. More than 60 are under investigation, including the President's cousin, senior figures in the security service, four provincial governors and numerous Congress members and Senators, with half in prison and seven convicted. Indeed, among eight co-conspirators named by paramilitary leader Salvatore Mancuso, apart from Mario Uribe, are the Vice President, a former Defence Minister and three army generals.

The 2006 Jamundi Massacre exemplified Army complicity with narco-trafficking paramilitaries. There, High Mountain Battalion soldiers murdered a US-trained anti-narcotics police squad as they were about to arrest a drugs gang.

The parapolitica scandal strengthens our conviction that military aid to the regime should end, but we agree strongly with the British Government that it is a flagrant breach of the Convention for Colombian Government figures to smear trade unionists by making public announcements accusing them of being terrorists. Such statements are invitations to the paramilitaries to target those colleagues. Several of our 26 colleagues murdered so far this year - seven of them teachers' union activists of FECODE - were killed following the peace mobilisation of 6 February, after which, José Obdulio, senior advisor to President Uribe, claimed the protests scheduled for March had been "convened by the FARC." As the demonstrations, supported by the trade unions, the Liberal Party and the Polo Democrático, condemned all violence and demanded the immediate release of FARC-held hostages, that was a patent calumny.

Further examples of "parapolitica" are the scandals in Cordoba University and Operation Dragon in Cali – both examined by the Committee on Freedom of Association. We urge all members of this Committee to examine those findings and the unfolding scandal as they determine how to react to the Government's Panglossian claims.

We do not ignore progress, where it occurs. The small inroads made into the still overwhelming impunity result in large part from international pressure – not least from this Committee. But those advances are small, often convicting defendants in absentia and never the intellectual authors and they demonstrate the need for a strengthened and independent judiciary. That pressure and careful and regular examination of the case by our Committee must not cease.

Mature industrial relations anchored in laws compliant with ILO standards are a good in their own right, but they also show that differences of interest can be resolved through peaceful negotiation.

Among our conclusions today, therefore, should be

- a repeated demand on the Government to desist from public smearing of trade

unionists; and

- a commitment to strengthen the ILO Bogotá office's support for social dialogue and mature industrial relations and for the struggle against impunity.