

Justice for Colombia



Trade Union Delegation to Colombia

November 2004



Justice for Colombia

Justice for Colombia (JFC) is a coalition of British trade unions and other organisations that support the Colombian people and trade union movement in their campaign for basic trade union and other human rights and in their struggle for peace with social justice. The organisation was started in response to the appalling situation faced by trade unionists in Colombia – the most dangerous place in the world to be a member of a trade union.

Set up in 2001 by a small group of trade unions, JFC almost immediately won the backing of the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) representing around 7 million workers and their Colombian equivalents – the CUT and CTC trade union federations. Since that time many more trade unions and other organisations have affiliated to the campaign and JFC currently has over 40 national organisations affiliated along with many hundreds of trade union branches.

JFC is the leading organisation in Britain working to provide our colleagues in Colombia with urgently needed solidarity and assistance, not only in their struggle for fundamental union rights, decent wages and conditions, but also in the struggle for life itself. We seek to raise awareness of what is happening in Colombia and to apply pressure to bring about change.



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Trade Unions in the Firing Line

Introduction

This report is based entirely on information and comments gleaned from conversations held between the British delegation and a range of trade union, human rights, student, church and community leaders, journalists, Ministers and political representatives, senior government officials and representatives from the British Embassy in Bogotá. Every union leader we met impressed upon us the importance of international solidarity and our campaign against UK military aid, human and union rights violations, and impunity. One union leader told us bluntly that it is harder to kill Colombian trade unionists when foreign trade unionists are watching.

“Professional Agitators”

The British delegation entered Colombia amid signs of growing authoritarianism. British, Spanish and French trade unionists all experienced problems at the airport and four representatives of international union organisations were immediately deported. A security official speaking on Colombian TV, described such visitors as “professional agitators”. This harassment of visiting trade unionists was on a scale not experienced before - even during the dictatorship in the ‘50s – and gave rise to fears that future solidarity visits would be curtailed. We were met at the airport by Wilson Borja, the progressive Congressman and former union leader, who has survived sixteen attempts on his life. A few days into our visit, the Army Major convicted of attempted murder against Wilson walked free from the army bunker in which he was held.

We heard that two days prior to our arrival the military had occupied the public broadcasting TV station and locked out the workers. Leaders from the union centres CUT and CTC claim that the Uribe government have made strikes, collective bargaining and the setting up of new trade unions effectively illegal. So far this year, 50 trade union leaders and activists had been murdered and a culture of impunity persists. Detentions are on the rise and prominent trade unionists, such as oil workers’ union leader Hernando Hernandez, have been smeared as ‘terrorists’.

The week of our arrival, Congress reopened and looked set to vote through a constitutional change that would allow President Uribe to stand for an unprecedented second term. It was also reported that imminent changes to local and regional government funding would force more public spending cuts, including hospital closures. A series

of planned ‘reforms’ to tax, pensions, education and the judiciary also would serve to increase poverty and unequal access to justice. Government claims that the economy will grow by 5% this year were based on assumptions that include the proceeds from large-scale privatisation of state assets that the unions continue to resist - including through a 300,000 strong demonstration held on 16 October. It was argued that US based multinational corporations stood to be the main beneficiaries.

In contrast to public services, defence spending is up by 16% (not including US military aid) and it was reported to us that at least three more battalions were due to receive training from British military advisers. Contrary to official claims, it was argued that ‘paramilitarisation’ of whole villages, departments and regions was taking place alongside the Government’s ‘Democratic Security policy’ (including the ‘peasant soldier’ programme). It is alleged that there is a track record of systematic collusion between government, army, paramilitaries, landowners and drug traffickers. One trade unionist told us that President Uribe’s policy of “large heart, hard fist” amounted only to the latter.

Some background

Colombia has a population of 45 million, of which 60% live below the poverty line and 15% live in absolute poverty. Around half of the population are aged under 30. Barely four in ten secondary

school-age children attend school and child labour is rife. Unemployment, casualisation and the informal economy are all growing. Unlike European countries, Colombia has never gone through an industrial revolution. At various times it has been at ‘boiling point’, but

unlike other Latin American countries, it has never experienced a national revolution.

Following the fall of the dictatorship in the 1950s, the Conservatives and Liberals established a pact in the form of



the 'National Front', which effectively wiped out any ideological differences between them and established a conservative consensus for decades. A 'special relationship' was developed with the US that has tended to take precedence over relations with countries in the region. We were told that the culmination of this approach was that President Uribe is the only South American leader to have supported the US invasion of Iraq and that his 'only friend' in the EU is the UK. The US has economic, political and military interests in Colombia, as well as an interest in the country's socialist neighbours. Colombia was described to us as 'the Israel of Latin America'.

Trade unions and the Left are attempting to build a new political coalition to challenge President Uribe in the next election in two years time. Current discussions are focused on the political parameters of the alliance and who should go forward as the presidential candidate. There is a strong sense of the need for unity.

A previous progressive alliance was drawn together under the banner of the Patriotic Union (UP), founded in 1984/5 after the de-mobilisation of a guerrilla group. Early electoral successes generated a lethal backlash on the part of paramilitaries, in collusion with elements in the state

and army. The entire UP leadership at local, regional and national level – around 350 elected senators, congress men, provincial deputies, councillors, mayors and the Presidential candidate – were systematically assassinated. In total, around 5,000 UP members were killed. This became the subject of a unique claim of 'political genocide' that led to an admission of culpability on the part of the then government.

When more recent negotiations with the estimated 17,000 strong guerrilla movement FARC broke down, the Government turned away from a political solution and instead became intent on a military resolution to the conflict. Observers suggested that while FARC may be beating a tactical retreat in some areas, only a negotiated solution will secure peace in the long term.

However, in the context of the extermination of the Patriotic Union and the absence of any prospect of land reform, it would be naïve to underestimate the guerrilla movement's reluctance to disarm. Human rights lawyers suggested to us that the Government pursued a policy of mass detentions, particularly of agricultural workers, with the express purpose of 'separating popular social movements from the guerrillas' through fear and intimidation.



Bogotá





TUC condemns attempts to prevent trade unionists visiting Colombia

TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber lodged formal protests in face-to-face meetings with Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and Colombian ambassador Alfonso Lopez Caballero about attempts by the Colombian government to prevent British and Latin American trade unionists visiting Colombia.



A TUC delegation led by Deputy General Secretary Frances O'Grady was refused entry into Colombia. After a stand-off at the airport their seven-day day visit was cut short to three, at which point they would be expelled. At the same time, the leading trade unionist in the Americas, International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) Regional Secretary Victor Baez was refused entry to the country, along with three other leading trade unionists from the region.

The delegation was arranged to find out about the harassment and intimidation of Colombian trade unionists which has



Passport stamps tell the story of deportation attempts, followed by the Government climb-down. The delegation meets with Foreign Office officials, joined by the leaders of Colombia's Trade Union Movement, amid intense media interest.

Colombian Trade Union leaders and lawyers argue against the threatened deportation of trade union delegates



resulted in more than 50 murders so far this year and countless death threats, physical assaults and unjustified imprisonments.

TUC General Secretary Brendan Barber said: "This is the first time that the TUC has ever had a problem getting into Colombia. The Uribe Government is picking on trade unions, obstructing attempts to highlight the persecution of Colombian trade unionists and the failure of his government to stop the killings.

"Expelling trade unionists is not what democratic governments do, and the Colombian Government's actions suggest that the global union campaign to expose its human rights abuses is starting to have an effect. President Uribe doesn't seem to like being in the spotlight of international opinion, but if he thinks closing his borders to trade unionists will allow him to carry on in secret, he is wrong."



The delegation to Colombia was: **Frances O'Grady**, TUC Deputy General Secretary; **Nigel Costley**, TUC South West Regional Secretary; **Debbie Coulter**, GMB Deputy General Secretary; **Liam Craig-Best** and **Tom Feiling**, Justice for Colombia; **Jack McGinley** and **Anne Speed** SIPTU, Ireland; **Paul Noon**, Prospect General Secretary; **Ken Penton**, Community Head of Communications; **Sue Rogers**, NASUWT Treasurer and **Keith Sonnet**, UNISON Deputy General Secretary

Action by Colombian trade unionists and international pressure helped force the Colombian government to back-down. Colombian Security Chief returns passports to Frances O'Grady with extended visas allowing the group to complete the programme.

All the union and community leaders we met stressed the need for a political solution but it was also

emphasised that the Government's treatment of trade unionists in areas controlled by guerrillas was quite different to those in areas controlled by para-militaries. A new military offensive against the guerrillas called 'Plan Patriotic', part funded by the US, will inevitably impact severely on all those living and working in the areas targeted. It is expected that the offensive will be stepped up following the re-election of President Bush.

In other cases, it is believed that detentions and other violations are used more selectively in a bid to break peaceful industrial resistance – for

example, the targeting of oil workers who led strike action against privatisation and, more recently, civil servant union leaders opposing budget cuts. Independent reports confirm that human rights violations against trade unionists increase during times of industrial conflict.

It is calculated that from 2002-3, 1,500 trade unionists were detained of which 960 were agricultural workers. Overall, six in ten detained trade unionists are eventually released but we heard of cases where people had been held for years and that some were subject to violence and maltreatment. We were told that those trade unionists who are convicted are often prosecuted on the basis of unsubstantiated information supplied by an estimated 5,000 strong network of paid informants – often demobilised or 're-inserted' paramilitaries or guerrillas – working for military intelligence.

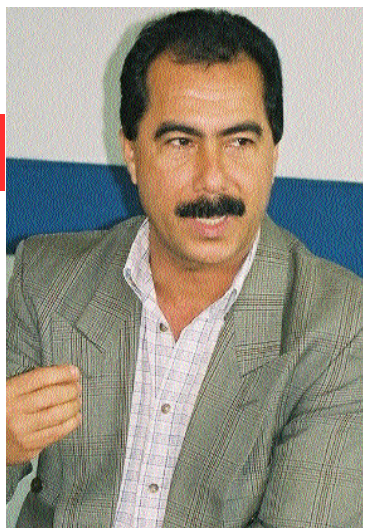
The 1991 Constitution established a national committee for negotiation to provide for 'social partnership dialogue' but meetings are few and far between. However, the key problem is not one of securing contact between Government and



Debbie Coulter, Frances O'Grady and Sue Rogers NASUWT Treasurer ask the CUT leaders how international unions can help.



Boris Montes de Oca CUT General Secretary



Unions, but of securing influence and collective bargaining. We were told that three weeks previously a meeting was held in the Chancellor's office involving all the European member states' ambassadors, and representatives of the Colombian Government, unions and civic society. However, on key issues such as the criminalisation of trade unionists, human rights violations and impunity no progress was made or agreement reached.



There are three union centres, of which CUT is the largest, and CUT alone has 743 member unions. The union movement's ultimate aim is to create one centre, fewer unions and more members. In a country where union activity is routinely met with death threats and intimidation, union membership has fallen to just 6% of the workforce.

Peasants and agricultural workers

We met union leaders in their small national office, which is approached via a corridor riddled with



The first CUT leader to be killed

bullet marks marking the assassination of the previous General Secretary. The current General Secretary, Luz Perly Cordoba, is in jail and two weeks before our arrival was charged with the offence of 'rebellion'. Luz is held in a prison where up to ten women may share a cell that is big enough to accommodate only two. Luz is being prosecuted on the basis of evidence supplied by bodyguards assigned to her by the Government under the state protection scheme that was established for trade unionists who have been subject to death threats. The acting Attorney General told us that it might be a year or more before her case reaches court.

The agricultural workers union, FENSUAGRO, founded in 1976 was born of the peasants' struggle for land reform – and is CUT's second largest affiliate. Early tactics included land occupations and the union continues to campaign for fair access to credit and markets. Land ownership remains concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy plantation owners – often absentee landlords.

The union estimates that eight million peasants live in poverty. One and a half million peasants are landless and a further three million own less than a hectare each. Union leaders told us that 300,000 peasants had been victims of mistreatment and that a combination of forced displacement, human

Plans for aid are discussed as the group joined a peasant market organised by the union.



Justice for Luz Perly Cordoba

Luz Perly Cordoba Mosquera, Secretary General of FENSUAGRO-CUT, was arrested in the night of 18 February 2004 in Bogotá. On the order of the Attorney General's office, Luz Perly Cordoba Mosquera's arrest was followed by raids in the department of Arauca and further arrests. According to Fensuagro, about 75 peasant and agrarian leaders are currently detained.

Luz Perly Cordoba Mosquera, who used to work in the department of Arauca, had to flee the area to the capital city of Bogotá a year ago.

Like many human rights defenders in Colombia, she has been receiving death threats because of her human rights work with farmer's organisations.

She is in jail on a trumped up charge of 'rebellion' Held in a grim Bogotá prison, she has become the representative of the political prisoners. She not only has to fund her legal costs but also pay for her 'accommodation' including food and medical care. The South West TUC plans to launch a fresh appeal linking her plight to the story of the Tolpuddle Martyrs. For information contact Nigel Costley on ncostley@tuc.org.uk



rights violations, and poverty was forcing more into the jungle to grow illicit coca crops. The Colombian government is due to sign a new bilateral free trade agreement with the US, which, it is feared, will only exacerbate the current food crisis and worsen still further the plight of peasants. Total US imports of soya and corn (volume up x18 since 1990) already mean that many peasant farmers face ruin.

Union and human rights violations have included assassinations, mass detentions and displacement, none of which have led to convictions or even investigations. The union opposes the re-election of Uribe who, it believes, has used poor peasants as 'a tool in the war'.

The union is campaigning for bio-diversity and healthy food (highlighting the threat of US food and chemical corporate interests), and respect for peasant and indigenous culture and communities. In the week of our visit the union organised an innovative 'farmers market' in the city centre, with the cooperation of the progressive Mayor of Bogotá and community organisations, to make the case for healthy home produced products in preference to US imports and unfair trade agreements. The union is also arguing for more EU assistance for those peasants forced into the illegal narcotics trade through practical projects to help

them grow alternative crops. While the EU funded 'Peace Laboratory' project had been welcome, it was said that it had largely worked to the benefit of big farmers rather than small farmers, workers and peasants.

In September 2002 the union organised a national agrarian strike and presented the Government with an alternative 'National Plan' but received no response. We were told that a series of regional conferences on the Plan, each attracting up to 10,000 agricultural workers, resulted in scores of people being 'removed' by the army. Seven in ten of all trade unionists who have been assassinated belonged to FENSUAGRO. Ten years ago union membership stood at 60,000. Today there are just 16,000 members although there are signs that the union is beginning to rebuild.

The union faces a number of urgent needs, notably the creation of a regionally networked and staffed human rights department to provide free legal advice (which otherwise is costly), and support to peasants and workers facing widespread displacement, detentions, and violations of human and union rights. They also need assistance to publicise their campaign internationally, for example by launching a website and through solidarity visits.



The group had 24-hour armed guards. With Victor, the coach driver, speed was the best defence, with outriders clearing the way through Bogotá's wild traffic.



Trade Union Women get Organised

The group was able to join hundreds of delegates at the CUT Women's Conference.



Carlos Rodriguez Diaz
CUT President



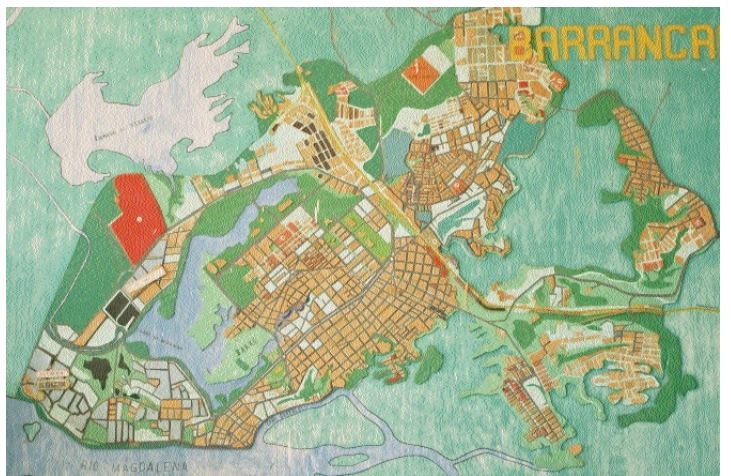
Patricia Buritica
CUT Director Women's Department

Frances O'Grady speaks for the delegation



Barrancabermeja

Barrancabermeja is a grim oil town, an hour's flight from Bogotá. The town is dominated by the state owned oil refinery and the Magdalena River. The surrounding area has been taken over by paramilitaries. Trade union activists, civic leaders and those suspected of links to the guerrillas have been killed or dispersed.



The group was shown the sites of the first massacres and heard how the powerful oil union was attacked for its fight against privatisation.



The visit attracts local media attention.

The Magdalena River and oil industry dominate the town.



Oil workers, women's and community groups

The oil town of Barrancabermeja, is home to one of Colombia's oldest and traditionally strongest trade unions, USO. It is also a centre of the women's social movement against the war, founded just five years ago. The bonds between union and civic society are embodied in the Social Forum – an alliance of progressive organisations and Catholic Church.

In the '60s and '70s the area had been a hotbed of struggles for labour and social rights – rights, we were told, that are 'intimately related'. But following state 'counter-insurgency operations', from the late '80s onwards the paramilitaries gained control of the area through 'terror' and 'a strategy to control political, economic and social spheres'. Large tracts of land were bought up and used for drug crops, ranching, and intensive farming. Six satellite towns in the area were established as paramilitary operational bases and centres for drug trafficking. Massacres of unarmed social movement leaders were followed by displacement in favour of those who 'would cooperate'. Church representatives stressed that the roots of the drugs trade lay in economic inequality with peasants producing such crops from financial necessity and intimidation. Paramilitaries had presented local people with the choice of: 'Join, leave or die'. Only Barrancabermeja escaped total domination, despite an armed assault on the town in 2000.



Barrancabermeja Social Forum planned a long march to Bogotá in support of the sacked oil workers.

While they do not have control, in a town this size everyone knows the paramilitaries who remain and there are fears they will attempt another assault in the near future. It was suggested that para-militaries not only roam the streets but 'sit behind desks' – a reference to sympathy for, and collusion with, paramilitary forces within all levels of the state apparatus. Despite the presence of two army battalions, a police unit, a naval base, a DAS (security police) office and the judiciary, not a single murderer of trade unionists had been convicted. Guerrillas are still present in the swamps and mountains surrounding the town and fighting continues. It was alleged that multinational corporations play an amoral role, ready to pay protection or assist either the paramilitaries or the guerrillas – whichever is on the ascendancy at any given time.

But the immediate crisis facing both the union and the community is the sacking of 253 trade unionists who were among those taking strike action for 25 days against threatened privatisation of the state owned refinery that employs around 6,000 workers. The government declared the strike unlawful and a complaint is currently before the International Labour Organisation (ILO) committee on freedom of association. However, all the Ministers we met made clear that, should the ILO find in the union's favour, they had no intention of reinstating the workers. From 25 November the sacked trade unionists and their families will no longer be entitled to social security. Saddled with huge debts, the union is not in a position to support them. Women highlighted the impact on them – from having no money to pay for younger children's health and education, to their role as mothers of older sons and daughters who had been 'disappeared'. Testimonies from individual oil workers – and a wall full of photographs of assassinated oil worker leaders and activists in the union office – vividly illustrated their plight.

One senior local leader stated that union membership was synonymous with death and that the union faced extinction. During the period of paramilitary control from 2001-03, more than 25 union leaders had been murdered, including two members of the CUT executive, and that three local union associations (health workers, taxi drivers and oil supply workers) had been annihilated. It was claimed that, during this period, para-militaries set up roadblocks just 5-10km from military bases and that the common pattern of army and paramilitary manoeuvres



The group met a wide range of representatives of civic society in Barrancabermeja including the Popular Women's Organisation, a religious group, unions, human rights groups and the President of the local CUT.

"We shall not give birth to sons and daughters for the war."
Posters in the Women's Group office



Monsignor Prieto, *Bishop of Barrancabermeja* explained the importance of the ties between Catholic Church and the trade unions are. "Employers see unions as a stone in their shoe. But the situation here would be much worse without unions."



Jorge Gomez Lizeau *People's Defender* explained the history of the growth of paramilitaries and how they eliminate unarmed opposition. They use terror to impose control, followed by corruption of public funds, theft of gasoline and trade in drugs. Jorge was forced into exile in 1991 after forming a human rights body. He returned ten years later when his town was under threat.



The group visited the offices of the Oil Workers Union. Outside are banners proclaiming that unions are not terrorists. The reception is a gallery of murdered union officers starting with Manuel Gustavo Chacon, the first to die.

The group met union members sacked after a strike against privatisation was declared illegal and the plant taken over by paramilitaries. The sacked workers included Mayra, a dental nurse at the Ecopetrol refinery. Frances promised to take up their cause when we met Government officers.





confirmed operational collusion. In total, it was calculated that 25,000 families had been displaced. In addition, it was claimed that para-militaries, through their relationships with those holding public office, exercised effective control over the award of public contracts.

It was reported that the local transport workers union was now top of the para-militaries target list and that only the previous week a local journalist had been forced to flee the area after exposing collusion between the police and Mayor's office with the paramilitaries.

Oil workers union leaders impressed on us the urgency of financial assistance both for the unions and the local community, and the need to step up in the international campaign of solidarity on impunity, labour and social rights.

Teachers under attack

The 290,000 strong teachers union FECODE is Colombia's biggest union and enjoys 90% density in state schools. Half of all representatives on the CUT



executive are members. The union has a positive and sophisticated strategy for unionising the largely unorganised but growing private sector and aims to merge with other education unions to create a powerful sector based union.

Private school education is expensive and growing. In contrast, virtually no new schools have been built outside Bogotá to provide public education for twenty years, so it is expected that poor children's access to education will worsen still further.

Twenty-seven teacher union leaders have been killed so far this year – fewer than last year – but disappearances and displacements are rising. We were told that the Government is pursuing an aggressive policy of privatisation to pay heavy installments on the national debt and to fund the expanding military.

As a nationwide union, with a presence in rural as well as urban areas, the union plays a key role in spreading the message of unionisation, resistance to privatisation and opposition to the re-election of President Uribe. And so, according to the union, the Government 'aims to break our spine'.



Whitney Chavez Sanchez, leader of the teachers' Union FECODE with Sue and Frances

Students

The Colombian Association of University Students, founded in 1998, is a federation of student organisations based in 30 states and 15 private universities. 30% of Colombia's total population is aged 15-28. Privatisation under President Uribe's 'Revolutionary Education' programme has exacerbated

inequality and served to ring fence higher education for the elite. Now only 30% of higher education is state based and only 3% of those who could go on to study

actually graduate – largely due to financial cost. It was argued that neo-liberalism would have dire consequences for the future of Colombia's economy. Colombia supplies only 1% of Latin America's science and technology graduates, and the region in turn supplies only 1% of the world's total.

Student leaders see universities as a key site for the struggle against privatisation and the promotion of democracy. Thirty student activists have been assassinated, largely on the Atlantic coast where the paramilitary presence is strong. University budgets were described

Gabriel and family, from the Association of University Students. 30 student leaders have been killed in recent years.



as 'cash-points' for the para-militaries as educationalists struggle to retain autonomy over their institutions. The students are campaigning for a truly public education system financed by the state.

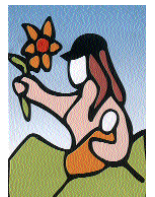
Flower workers

Valentines Day and other celebrations are the worst times of the year as the pressure piles on for Colombia's 88,000 worker-strong flower industry. 65% of the workers are women and many are single parents. They work long hours and risk exposure to dangerous crop sprays and chemicals for which they are paid the minimum wage. Growing flowers is a \$67m p.a. business in Colombia involving around 500

companies that own large tracts of land. Eleven per cent of these flowers end up in the European Union.

SINTRA FLORIST is a new very small union of around just 50 members and has affiliated to CUT. The British

delegation joined a joint union and Cactus NGO community event to promote unionisation. While there have been a series of high profile industrial conflicts over the years, union organisation has proved hard to sustain on a permanent basis. Companies employ a range of anti-union measures from sackings to setting up yellow dog unions.



"La rosa sin espinas, no sería rosa; "A rose without thorns is not a rose"

Flower Workers Union officer opens a community event to launch a new book into the value of trade unions. The event included a local school orchestra.





Wilson Borja

Wilson was the former head of the public service union. He is now Congressman for Bogotá. He has survived some 16 assassination attempts, one nearly killing him. That attack killed a street seller and Wilson's bodyguards wounded one of the attackers. The paramilitaries dragged their injured comrade into their fleeing car only to kill him as they sped off. The incident was a rare example where an arrest was made. A major in the army was found guilty of organising the attack and a few weeks before the visit he was sentenced to 28 years in prison. During the week of the visit the Major 'escaped' from his military compound. Wilson now travels under very heavy protection but is one of Colombia's main opposition politicians.

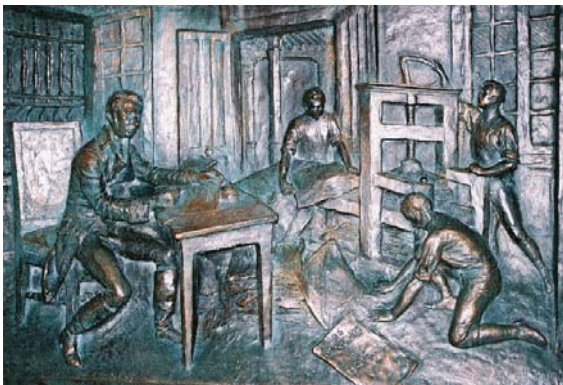
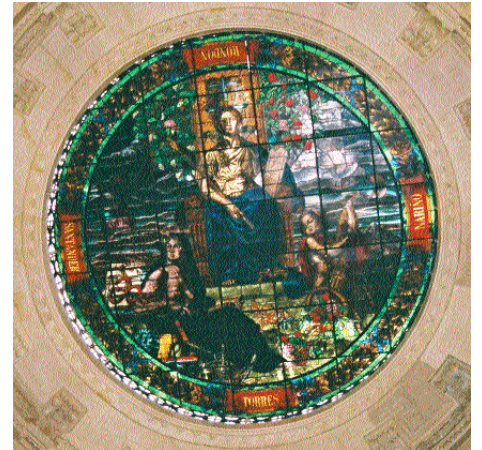


Wilson Borja with Frances (top), Debbie and Sue, and Liam





Visit to Congress seeing the painting of Simon Bolivar, *El Libertador*, the man who led the independence fight against the Spanish. The group met the leader of the President's Congress Party.



The printing of *The Rights of Man* in Spanish



The Presidential Palace

Wilson shows the bust of a progressive presidential candidate assassinated

Meetings with Ministers and senior Colombian Government officials

The British delegation's key objectives in meetings with government ministers – as well as listening to their viewpoint – was to press the case for union rights, human rights, and an end to the impunity enjoyed by those who violate these rights. In addition, we pressed the case for full implementation of the UN's 24 recommendations for Colombia which to date the Government has resisted.

Ministers were keen to stress the differences between Colombia's political and economic context and that of Europe, including financial pressures of debt repayment and the challenge of demobilising paramilitaries and guerrillas. We were told that we should not distinguish between paramilitaries and guerrillas, as 'they are all terrorists' and the Government needed international assistance to defeat them.

It was also claimed, that this government was doing more than any previous regime to tackle human rights violations against trade unionists. It was reported that spending on protection of trade unionists – bodyguards and bomb proofing of union offices – had risen by 9%. The Government was organising workshops and training on ILO labour standards. In addition, the 1991 Constitution provides for workers' rights and freedom of association. One Minister expressed puzzlement as to why it was suggested that these rights had been eroded. The example of the oil workers' strike (and the role of the military) was countered with the argument that in 1992 oil was declared an essential service and therefore it was legitimate to impose a strike ban and to sack participating workers.

Violence was described as a widespread cultural problem effecting, for example, ranchers as much as trade unionists. On the other hand, we were told that 80% of the 1,200 bodyguards employed under the state protection scheme for those facing death threats were assigned to trade unionists - suggesting that violence is not perpetrated without discrimination. It was also asserted that 'half of the killings of agricultural trade unionists' were carried out by the FARC. This did not correspond with the Union's analysis and was a somewhat surprising assertion given that Ministers were unable to provide any evidence of convictions, on which assessments would need to be based. It was nevertheless asserted that convictions were taking place and various figures were claimed. Correspondence we saw between the Social Protection Ministry and the Irish Government claimed that a total of nine convictions had been secured. However, Ministers were unable to explain why none of the families of the victims were aware that those committing crimes had been caught, let alone punished.

All ministers were keen to impress upon us that the total number of assassinations of trade unionists has fallen – a fact corroborated by the unions. However, union and independent analysis also shows that the total number of human rights violations – disappearances, kidnapping, detentions and intimidation of trade unionists – has risen. Bizarrely (or perhaps worryingly) and contrary to independent and union figures, we were told that the one exception to the overall picture was a current dramatic rise in the assassinations of teachers.



Free Press?

The group met Carlos Lozana, Editor of the *Voz*, Colombia's only opposition newspaper. Carlos described the difficulties of producing the paper. Journalists were in special danger and many of the paper's reporters had been killed. He had faced a number of attacks and death threats.

In some parts of Colombia, people being seen carrying the newspaper are at risk.



Meeting with the acting Attorney General

On the waiting room wall outside the Attorney General's office hangs a poster proclaiming that 'effectiveness is our method'. Given that all the Ministers we met had told us that the Attorney General (AG) was responsible for information on murders of trade unionists, we were disappointed (if not surprised) that he was unable to provide the names of any of those alleged to have been convicted. In fact, the AG was unable even to supply figures that specifically identified human rights violations against trade unionists. We were given figures, however, for categories of those sentenced for violating human rights in general. For 2003 by far the biggest category, allegedly, was for members of guerrilla organisations, followed by 12 members of the Army, three policemen, four 'common delinquents' and – the only racial category identified – 'three indigenous people'.

At this stage of the visit we were able to raise with the AG the contents of a document on human rights violations produced jointly by his office and the Social Protection Ministry for submission to the ILO. Following the summary execution of three union leaders in Araucia, and subsequent detention without trial of witnesses to the murders, the TUC had pressed the UK Government to, in turn, press the Colombian government for an independent enquiry. We had received assurances that an independent enquiry was now in progress.

We were alarmed to discover from the document jointly drafted by the AG that the murders of these union leaders had been categorised as deaths not associated with their union activity. The AG had told us that the deaths 'were still under investigation' – so how could the Colombian government have already concluded that the assassinations were unrelated to the victims' union trade union activity?



A visit to the graves of assassinated trade unionists

Neither were we reassured to learn from the AG that: the 'independent investigation' we had called for was being conducted by the AG's 'Human Rights Unit'; that there would be 'more transparency' from January next year; that the case was totally dependent on forensic evidence because witnesses (presumably those who had been detained) were 'too afraid' to come forward; and that while 'four army officers and one civilian' were under arrest,



Sue Rogers NASUWT

progress was stalled because it was not yet clear whether they would be subject to a military or a public prosecution. The British delegation resolved to take this matter up with the Foreign Office on our return.

Meeting with the British Embassy

We were keen to ask British Embassy officials how they saw the current situation, whether they had had any more success than us in eliciting the names of those who Government Ministers had claimed were convicted for murdering trade unionists, whether they shared our concerns about collusion, whether they were taken by surprise by the treatment of trade unionists at the airport and what steps could be taken to protect future solidarity visits and assist Colombian unions.

The Embassy's representatives made a commitment to step up efforts to secure from the Colombian government the names of those convicted. They also agreed to seek more information about what the Head of Das had described to us as a planned 'new improved' entry system, with a view to ensuring it did not serve to restrict free movement of trade unionists.

We were told that, while it was evident (especially in the light of Wilson Borja's case) that there was some collusion between elements within the Army and para-militaries, the Embassy did not believe that this constituted Colombian Government policy. We attempted to find out what criteria – and critically what evidence – the Embassy used in coming to a judgement about whether collusion amounted to 'a few bad apples' or was systemic, particularly given the context of impunity.

We also pressed the issue of UK military aid and exactly what monitoring arrangements were in place to ensure that it did not reach those 'elements' in the Army that collude with

paramilitaries. While officials said that they were unable to share information on military aid for security reasons, they were confident that the arrangements were robust. It was also suggested that, in any case, the nature of aid – for example, land mine removal and human rights training – was benign.

Officials were keen to stress that guerrillas, and not just paramilitaries, were ‘major players’ in the drugs trade and displacement, and that it was hoped that a process of negotiation could secure progress. However, from previous conversations with journalists, we were aware of allegations that the Colombian government was pursuing a deliberate misinformation strategy to talk up guerrilla involvement in a trade overwhelmingly run by paramilitaries. Journalists had also suggested that this was hypocritical given that one Congress candidate was ‘a known drugs baron’ and that the election campaigns of others were funded by drugs trade money.

We asked whether there were any civic organisations in Colombia that supported the continuation of military aid and it was reported that some did.

There was agreement that more practical assistance

was needed for unions and communities and we explained that, from our point of view, any such assistance must be in accordance with the express wishes of CUT and CTC leaders. We were also aware that currently while the UK government provides military aid, it does not contribute to the ILO technical assistance fund for Colombia and that Colombia does not feature in the UK Government, Department for International Development’s programme of assistance.

No support for Coca-Cola Boycott

Included in the Group were Jack McGinley and Anne Speed from SIPTU, the largest general union in Ireland. They had a particular interest in understanding more about the situation facing workers involved in the production and bottling of Coca-Cola. They had a number of meetings with trade union representatives. This included a meeting with SINALTRAINAL, the small union



Jack and Anne meet to discuss the situation for Coca-Cola workers

that has called for a boycott of Coca-Cola – a demand not supported by the main trade union federations in Colombia or over 100 unions representing Coca-Cola workers around the world

(including those in the UK and Ireland).

The boycott call follows murders of trade union activists who worked for companies who had bottling contracts with Coca-Cola. Five were workers at the Carepa plant in Urabá province in between 1994 and 1996. The best documented case is the killing of union leader Isidro Segundo Gil by paramilitaries in 1996, which was followed by the forced resignation and flight of other union activists.

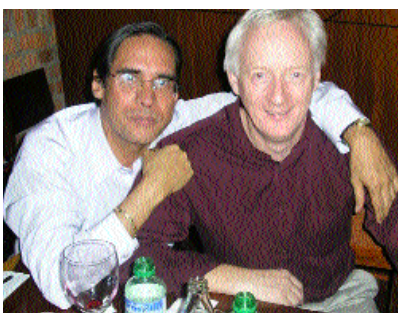
The bottler running the Carepa plant changed its plant management in 1997. Workers at that plant are now represented by a trade union, which has succeeded in negotiating important gains for workers there. These gains were achieved by determined organising and tough bargaining in a very difficult environment, with the support of the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations (IUF).



Beef cooked Colombian style.

Debbie tries the manjarblanco, a runny type of fudge.

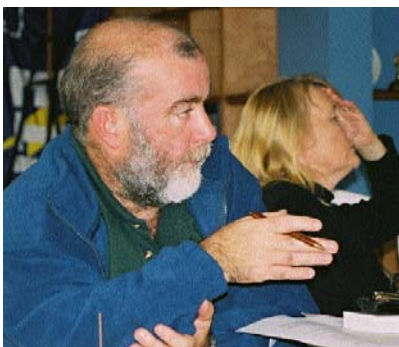
Happy Birthday Nigel with Wilson in Bogotá



The IUF vigorously protested the assassinations to the Colombian government. There are 13 trade unions that represent Coke workers in Colombia and 12 of them do not support the boycott call.

The unions see the boycott as being counter-productive and divisive. There is very little concrete evidence against the company. It is hard to make a convincing and serious case. Even the US Steel Workers Union who have funded a court case against the company in the USA have now withdrawn their support for the boycott.

The TUC and both the TGWU and SIPTU (who represent Coca-Cola workers in UK and Ireland) all oppose the boycott. The IUF responded by saying of the boycott: "The demands do not reflect the concerns of Colombian Coca-Cola workers or the views of the broader Colombian and international labour movements. The boycott call is based on unsubstantiated allegations and empty political slogans. This call for a boycott will



Jack McGinley SIPTU

damage, rather than strengthen, the credibility of all those seeking to secure union rights for all employees in the Coca-Cola system."

"The IUF and its affiliates have consistently

protested the Colombian government's failure to provide protection to all union leaders and activists who request it, and will continue to hold the Colombian government principally responsible. The unions have always called for a full investigation of these crimes and vigorous prosecution of the perpetrators and those responsible for their actions."

Justice for Colombia does not currently support the boycott of Coca Cola.

End UK Military Aid

Only the US, UK and Israel provide military aid to the Colombian regime. The British Government claims that the military aid is essential to waging the war on drugs. The US Government, through *Plan Colombia*, has been open about its fundamental objective: the war on leftist guerrillas. Even if there were no violence, the Uribe Government would still be pursuing a neo-liberal economic, social and industrial relations agenda aimed at destroying the Colombian trade union movement and what little remains of collective bargaining.

The apparent collusion between the state and the paramilitaries has been a principle reason for the campaign to end UK military aid. The British Government will only give details of human rights and ordnance disposal training, declining to comment on the rest for security reasons.

238 MPs have called for the freezing of UK military aid until all the 24 recommendations for Colombian Government action, made by the UN, have been met. Some progress has been made on 12, none on 10 and the Uribe government rejects two more out of hand – one of those concerns the maintenance of military intelligence files on trade unionists.

Whilst the campaign against military aid will go on, the TUC will press the British Government to support the defence of trade union and human rights with financial aid, contacts to trade union prisoners and pressure on Colombia to observe the UN recommendations in full.



Members of the Group meet FENSUAGRO leaders



Frances O'Grady

An indegionous Congressman talks with Tom

Continued Action

On the Group's return to the UK, a meeting was held with the Colombian Ambassador in London. Assurances were given that future trade union visits would not be prevented from entering the country.

The group pressed again for more information on the names of those convicted for trade union murders. A number of specific questions were raised about trade union murders and for the release of Luz Perly Cordoba.

The Group went on to meet with Bill Rammell MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The TUC General Council now has a growing number of members who have been to Colombia and seen first-hand the need for international solidarity. The various ideas made by the trade unions and human rights' groups in Colombia will be taken forward alongside existing projects.

An emergency appeal will be made through Justice for Colombia in support of the 253 sacked oil workers from Ecopetrol. The NASUWT has already pledged £2,000 towards the education and welfare of the children of the workers.

The South West TUC is to prepare a campaign to link the story of the Tolpuddle Martyrs with that of the struggle for trade union rights in Colombia. This will focus on the case of Luz Perly Cordoba and the demand for her release from Prison.

Plans are being made to host visiting speakers from the Colombian Trade Union Movement. Justice for Colombia will also seek support for further exchange visits.

How YOU can help

■ Circulate the emergency appeal to support the oil workers of Barrancabermeja to your branches, workplaces, committees and activists.

■ Support the campaign to free Luz Perly Cordoba. Circulate the appeal to your branches, workplaces, committees and activists.

■ Give generously, cheques made payable to Justice for Colombia.

■ Affiliate to **Justice for Colombia**

■ Invite a speaker from the TUC or Justice for Colombia.

■ Send solidarity greetings direct to Luz Perly Cordoba by writing to her or send her a card to:

Luz Perly Cordoba
c/o FENSUAGRO (Oficina 104)
Calle 17, No 10-16
Santafe de Bogotá, Colombia

■ Email her through her union:
fensuagro_derechosh@yahoo.com

■ Write to your MP asking if they could raise support for trade union and human rights in Colombia in Parliament and with ministers. Justice for Colombia can provide model letters and advice.

■ Protest to the President of Colombia

Dr. Alvaro Uribe Velez
Presidente de la Republica
Palacio de Narino
Carrera 8, No 7-26
Santafe de Bogotá, Colombia
Fax: 0057 1 565 8671

■ Protest to the Colombian Attorney General

Procurador General de la Nacion
Dr. Luis Camilo Osorio
Fiscal General de la Nación
Apartado Aéreo 29855
Diagonal 22B 52-01
Santafé de Bogotá, Colombia
Fax: 0057 1 414 9108
E-mail: anticorrupcion@presidencia.gov.co

Support solidarity exchange visits. Justice for Colombia will be organising further trade union visits to Colombia. Union and opposition leaders from Colombia hope to visit the UK and Ireland. Look out for details.



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