

To Pres. Obama and the United States Congress:

We are people and grass roots organizations who want to see peace come to the war torn nation of Colombia. United States support for the Colombian military has been the channel through which the tools of war and repression have been supplied. We urge the White House and US Congress to take the following Four Steps toward Hope and Change in US-Colombia Relations. To do so would go far toward ensuring stability throughout Latin America, the hemisphere, and the world.

We call on the members of the US Congress and the Obama Administration to use their votes and influence to:

- 1) Reject any attempts to pass a US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement;**
- 2) End military aid to Colombia;**
- 3) Stop the extrajudicial executions and forced displacements of Colombian farmers, unionists, opposition leaders, and indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities;**
- 4) Free Colombia's Political Prisoners and press for a humanitarian exchange for prisoners as a first step toward a just peace.**

As US citizens we are concerned about the waste of US resources represented by over \$5 billion given to the Colombian military in the past 7 years. We are even more concerned that the funding has resulted in atrocities carried out in our names.

As members of the world community, we recognize that US-Colombia relations have international repercussions. When more unionists are killed in Colombia than the rest of the world combined, that is of significance for all workers. And when the US and transnational companies use Colombia as a wedge for disunity and as an outpost toward US political and military dominance in the region, that affects the entire world economy and struggle for political sovereignty and self-determination. Were it not for the pipeline of weapons and military training and assistance from the North, repression in Colombia could not be taken to its current extremes.

In the elections of 2008, the people of the US spoke out forcefully in favor of two notions that rang out like drumbeats: the desire for Change and Hope. In this time of change and hope, it is also time for us to reflect on mistakes so that they can be corrected. The US has been a conduit for a great deal of death and destruction in Colombia; we must use our influence now to bring peace.

What has US military aid to Colombia achieved?

- One million Colombians were displaced during the first 3 years of Uribe's presidency. Today, seven years after his initial election, the Colombian government reports there are over 2.5 million internal refugees while most NGOs place the figure at 3 to 4 million. In 2008 there was a 41% increase in forced displacements, reaching the highest number since 1985.
- Colombia has some 7,200 political prisoners in its prisons, many arrested without due process or on the basis of testimony by paid, and often anonymous, informers. Many of these prisoners were sole providers for their families and/or family farmers and the arrests of such persons represent whole families being displaced and deprived of their livelihoods.
- According to the Colombian Commission of Jurists, 329 civilians were provably murdered by the Colombian military in 2008, a 48% increase over 2007, and the military has killed 997 since 2002. This does not include those killed by the paramilitaries during this time period—a considerably higher number. Of all political killings in Colombia, 80% of these are at the hands of the Colombian military or paramilitaries. Especially targeted are union members and leaders, farmers, and indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities.
- Testifying before the House Education and Labor Committee, José Luciano Sanin Vásquez, Director of Colombia's National Labor School said, "One union worker has been murdered approximately every three days over the past 23 years, which translates into 2,694 murder victims between the first of January of 1986 and December 31, 2008." Last year, murder rates for unionists rose by 25%, with an overall rise of 18% during the entirety of the Uribe administration.

What these billions in military aid have bought is more repression, more destitution and less freedom for the people of Colombia.

Most recently, Colombia has been shocked by a series of events exposing the scandal of the “false positives”. US Rep. George Miller tells us what these “false positives” are: “Another possible explanation for the rising violence is the disturbing phenomenon of extrajudicial killings. This is where innocent civilians murdered by the Colombian Armed Forces are inappropriately classified as casualties of war.” The Colombian government recognizes as many as 1,137 “false positives” while MOVICE, the National Movement of Victims of State Crimes, says that there are 1,400. Documents released by the National Security Archives show that the CIA knew as early as 1994 about the Colombian military’s use of “death squad tactics” and its “body count mentality”. In fact, the release of these documents helped lead to the dismissal of 27 Colombian military personnel, including the Commander of the Army, three generals, and eleven colonels and lieutenant colonels. All the officers involved were trained or otherwise assisted by the US military. Most had trained at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, previously named the Army School of the Americas.

Particularly targeted are union members and rural populations. For the FENSUAGRO union of farmers, farm workers, and aquacultural workers, this means a kind of double targeting. In its 33 years of existence, over 1,500 FENSUAGRO members have been murdered and over 500 have been killed during Pres. Uribe’s presidency. FENSUAGRO members are also among those most affected by displacement and dispossession of land. According to the Consulting Group on Human Rights and Displacement (CODHES) at least 60% of those displaced were farmers. CODHES has called this the “violent recomposition of landholding.”

Estimates put the amount of land stolen by forced removal at a low of 2.6 million hectares and a high of 6.8 million hectares. The theft of land more frequently than not takes place in areas where there are oil and mineral resources coveted by private corporations for development. Populations are also removed to make way for agribusinesses or for the consolidation of territory by narco-paramilitaries. These “economic interests” coincide with this major political and military objective: the dispersal of communities with concentrations of unionists and/or where dissent runs high against the neoliberal policies of the Uribe Administration.

The Uribe Administration has clamored for passage of a US-Colombian Free Trade Agreement with much the same fervency with which it advocates military solutions over a negotiated peace. Why? Because it benefits transnational companies and the Colombian oligarchies that also benefit from these displacements. Companies like Chiquita, Drummond Coal, and Coca-Cola are among those who have been caught paying money to paramilitaries or looking the other way while paramilitaries even come on company grounds to commit acts of violence.

We commend Pres. Obama for speaking out against Colombian labor violations and a US-Colombia FTA during his campaign, and we commend members of Congress who have kept the FTA from passing. However, there are disturbing indications that an FTA could move forward. Even with improved labor and human rights situations in Colombia, an FTA would be devastating to family farmers and sustainable farms in much the same way that NAFTA led to widespread disruption and destruction of Mexican farm communities.

On March 6th, the Colombian National Movement of Victims of State Crimes (MOVICE) is calling for a National Day against the Extrajudicial Killings. The central event for this will be a meeting of families of those killed as part of the “false positive” scandal. In solidarity with this event, as US citizens, as international workers and labor rights advocates, and as lovers of peace and justice, we join together for real hope in Colombia by urging the White House and US Congress to adopt these four steps toward a new era in US-Colombia relations. As we have shown, the US has been a conduit for the tools and the methods of repression; let it now be an instrument of peace.

Organizational Endorsers:

Campaign for Labor Rights

Colombia Action Network
Latin America Solidarity Coalition
Palestinian Farmers Union
Peace and Justice for Colombia, Australia
The Latin American Canadian Solidarity Association
Interconnect
Salt of the Earth Labor College
Pax Christi Maine
Atlantic Canada-Colombia Research Group
Alliance for Global Justice
Venezuela Solidarity Network
Nicaragua Network
El Salvador Sister Cities Project
Nicaragua Center for Community Action
Worker to Worker Solidarity Committee
Respect for Democracy Campaign
Hands Off Venezuela
Task Force on the Americas