



Leo W. Gerard  
International President

September 14, 2006

VIA FACSIMILE

Committee on Finance  
Committee on Foreign Relations  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator:

I am writing on behalf of the 850,000-member United Steelworkers union (USW) to express our grave opposition to the bilateral free-trade agreement with Colombia – an agreement which the Bush Administration has informed Congress it intends to sign in the near future. Our concern with such an agreement is that it would reward Colombia with additional preferential trade status notwithstanding the Colombian government's long-standing complicity with the unprecedented violent persecution of trade unionists.

As it has done for the past several years running, the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) has again, in its most recent annual report of trade union rights world-wide, declared Colombia the most dangerous country in the world. To wit, 70 trade unionists, including 15 women, were murdered in Colombia in 2005. More than 4,000 trade union leaders have been killed in Colombia in the past 20 years. As the U.S. State Department has reported, these assassinations are largely being carried out by paramilitary forces that obtain intelligence, weapons, ammunition, logistical support and even troops from Colombia's regular armed forces. As the State Department reported, these collaborations "often facilitated unlawful killings and sometimes may have involved direct participation in paramilitary atrocities."

Even more disturbing, the Colombian agency known as DAS, which is tasked with protecting trade unionists under threat and which is receiving funds from the U.S. Agency for International Development (U.S. AID), has been maintaining hit lists of trade union leaders for the paramilitaries to target and assassinate.

Meanwhile, as the U.S. State Department reports, only a handful of the thousands of cases of trade union assassinations have been successfully investigated and prosecuted. The situation in Colombia is so grave that the International Labor Organization (ILO) this year took the unprecedented step of agreeing to set up a permanent mission in Colombia in an effort to promote respect for basic labor rights, including the right to life of those workers who dare to form a union.

Our union, the United Steelworkers (USW), gained first hand knowledge of these human rights violations in Colombia when we sent a delegation there in March 2001. Our delegation heard the testimony of scores of workers who had suffered all types of abuses for attempting to engage in lawful union activity – abuses including threats of violence and death, forced exile, kidnapping and torture. Sadly, the horrifying stories we heard back then have been repeated over and over to and through the present time.

For the U.S. to conclude a trade agreement with Colombia in light of these egregious violations would make a mockery of America's long-held commitment to freedom and human rights. **We therefore urge you to take all steps to stop the consummation of the bi-lateral free trade agreement with Colombia.**

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Leo W. Gerard". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Leo W. Gerard  
International President

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