

Pressing for Justice

Lawsuit Filed by USW in Murders of Union Leaders in Colombia Going to Trial in July

"They were shot to death the very first night we were there," Dan Kovalik said.

Kovalik, a Steelworker attorney, was among a delegation of USW activists in Colombia on March 12, 2001, when two leaders of a miners' union were pulled off a company bus by paramilitary forces and shot dead execution style.

Union President Valmore Lacarno Rodriguez was blasted in the head several times in front of frightened co-workers. Vice President Victor Hugo Orcasita Amaya, later found dead by the side of a road, had been tortured and shot.

The men were both leaders of the Sintramienenergetica labor union, which had been engaged in contract talks with an Alabama-based multinational corporation, Drummond Co.

USW gets involved

The murders of Rodriguez and Amaya led to a strike by 1,200 workers at a Colombian mine owned by Drummond and a call by International President Leo W. Gerard for the Colombian government to protect trade unionists in Colombia.

"Trade union rights are human rights and our union will do everything in its power to bring these assassins to justice," Gerard said at the time.

Much has happened since then.

In 2002, union attorney Kovalik used an obscure law, the Alien Tort Claims Act, passed in the 1700s, to sue Drummond on behalf of the labor union and the families of the murder victims. The charges included extrajudicial killing, wrongful death and aiding and abetting.

With opening arguments scheduled in July before a federal court in Alabama, the Drummond case would be the first of its kind to go to trial. Drummond has denied knowledge of the killings and has pledged it will not settle the case.

Tragically, the brutal killings of Rodriguez and Amaya were not unusual. More than 2,000 trade unionists have been killed in Colombia between 1991 and 2006, according to the International Trade Union Federation (ITUF).

"Year after year, Columbia has been on top of the list of countries where trade unionists are killed simply for their legitimate activities in support of workers' rights, leading to the destruction of thousands of lives and devastation of families throughout the country," said ITUF Human Rights Director Janek Kuczkiewicz.

After the Middle East and Afghanistan, Colombia is the largest recipient of American assistance, with more than \$4 billion disbursed this decade alone.

In April, U.S. Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (D-VT) put on hold \$55.2 million in military aid because of claims of collaboration between Colombia's army and paramilitaries, which have been classified as terrorist groups by the State Department.

While the aid does not officially go to the paramilitaries, the State Department has concluded that every year since 2000 the military that the U.S. is funding provides weapons, ammunition, intelligence and logistical support to paramilitaries, and even collaborates with them at times in gross violations of human rights.

International scandal

The case against Drummond is now an international scandal.

In April, a leading opposition senator in Colombia went public with an alleged assassination plot. Senator Gustavo Petro accused a former Army Colonel who has provided security for Drummond of conspiring to kill him.

According to Petro, the public prosecutor's office learned of the plot from one of the would-be assassins, who testified that he met with retired Colombian Army Col. Julian Vilate and others in January to plan the killing.

Vilate, now employed by Drummond, worked for the U.S. embassy two years ago in Bogota, Colombia, between December 2004 and July 2005, when he resigned.

Petro, President Alvaro Uribe's most vocal critic, has taken the lead among Colombian lawmakers in unmasking ties between Uribe's allies and illegal right-wing militias.

Petro and his relatives have received a series of death threats since November, when his denunciations of paramilitary infiltration in Colombian politics spurred probes that have landed eight members of Congress in jail on charges ranging from conspiracy to murder.

Paramilitary commander Salvatore Mancuso (left) of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) recently testified that major companies doing business in Colombia, including coal companies operating in the Cesar region and the U.S. firms Chiquita, Dole and Del-Monte, have been making regular payments to AUC paramilitaries, a designated terrorist group, for years.

AP Photo by Zoe Selsky

Enacting the Employee Free Choice Act would go a long way toward eliminating persistent poverty in America, a blue-ribbon task force has recommended.

The Center for American Progress convened a diverse group of national experts and leaders to examine the causes and consequences of poverty and to make recommendations for action.

The resulting new report outlines a strategy to cut poverty in half over the next decade by, among other things, promoting decent work, opportunity for all and unionization.

"The link between increasing collective bargaining power and reducing poverty is clear," said AFL-CIO President

in 20 lives with income below half of the poverty line.

Poverty imposes enormous costs on society that can be measured in the lost potential of children raised in poor households and lower productivity and earnings of poor adults. Poor health, increased crime and broken neighborhoods all hurt our nation.

Yet in the last six years, the number of poor Americans has grown by an estimated five million people, while income inequality has reached historic high levels.

The richest one percent of Americans in 2005 had the largest share of the nation's income (19 percent) since 1929.

Restoring Hope

Employee Free Choice Act Will Help Reduce Poverty in America



John Sweeney. "Workers who have been able to join in with co-workers in unions make an average of 30 percent more than their colleagues who don't have the benefit of collective bargaining."

Action urged

The report calls for both personal and social responsibility and urges that action be taken at the local, state and national levels.

One in eight Americans now lives below the poverty line of \$19,971 in annual income for a family of four. One

At the same time, the poorest 20 percent shared only 3.4 percent.

The panel recommended a dozen key steps to cut poverty including passage of the Employee Free Choice Act. The pending legislation would require employers to recognize a union once a majority of workers sign authorization cards and would strengthen penalties for violations of employee rights.

It was also suggested that Congress raise the minimum wage, guarantee child care assistance to low-income families, expand the Earned Income Tax Credit

(EITC) and the Child Tax Credit to help millions of low and moderate-income families.

To reduce the high cost of being poor, the panel called on the government to broaden access to mainstream goods and financial services in low-income communities and to expand and simplify the federal Saver's Credit to encourage savings.

Equitable development

The federal government should promote "equitable development" in and around the nation's central cities and promote affordable housing in communities where there are employment opportunities, the report said.

It also called on the government to expand federal tuition grants, to use training and other programs to better connect disadvantaged youth with school and work, and to help former prisoners find stable employment.

Only 35 percent of the unemployed receive unemployment benefits — so that system should be overhauled to better help workers and their families.

The task force suggests the \$90 billion a year in costs could be paid by bringing better balance to the federal tax system and recouping part of what has been lost to excessive tax cuts. The current annual costs of the tax cuts enacted by Congress in 2001 and 2003 is roughly \$400 billion a year.

"We recognize that serious action has serious costs, but the challenge before the nation is not whether we can afford to act, but rather that we must decide to act," the report said.