

Why, “O Canada”, why?



On June 8, 2007, Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced that his government would re-focus foreign policy on Canada's own “neighbourhood”, the Americas region. Canada would build trade ties with governments that shared “our fundamental values of democracy, human rights, the rule-of-law, and good governance”.

When Canada started trade negotiations with the government of Colombia — the worst human rights violator in the “hood” — Canadians were shocked!



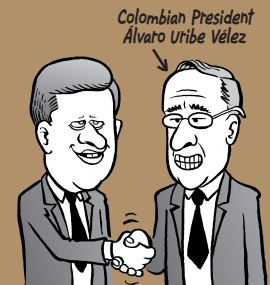
Harper wanted to lend a helping hand to Canadian mining and oil companies. They stand to benefit most from the deal.

He also wanted to support President George W. Bush, who was trying to promote his own free trade deal between the U.S. and Colombia.



Democrats in the U.S. Congress refused to pass the deal. They were worried about the shocking numbers of trade unionists being killed in Colombia, and the Colombian government's failure to investigate and convict the murderers.

Meanwhile, negotiations on Canada-Colombia free trade were secretly completed behind Parliament's back. No-one saw one word of the text...



...until a flashy signing ceremony in Lima, Peru on November 21, 2008!

Should Canada ratify a free trade deal with the worst human rights violator in the Americas?

Top ten reasons why Canada should cancel Harper's “free trade” deal with Colombia



1 Colombia is still the most dangerous country in the world for unionized workers!

More labour leaders are killed in Colombia every year than in the rest of the world combined! Trade unionists are terrorized to put a chill on union organizing. This keeps unions weak and wages miserably low. It benefits businesses' bottom line and keeps Colombia attractive for foreign investment.

Who is being targeted? Prime targets are activists who are trying to organize or join a union and bargain collectively, or who are engaged in industrial disputes or in fighting privatization. They are teachers, prison guards, agricultural, food, and health care workers, and others from almost every sector.

The deadly statistics

- Over the past 25 years, more than 2,685 unionized workers have been murdered
- 474 have been killed since President Uribe came to power in 2002
- Thousands more men and women, rank and file union members and leaders have been threatened or abducted
- 41 unionists were murdered from January to November 2008, an increase of 71% from the year before.



Colombia's Paramilitary Death Squads

They have been called many things: self-defence militias, vigilantes and narco-mafias. But they are most commonly known as Colombia's “paramilitaries” or simply “paras” and they are intimately linked to the government. They have committed heinous crimes like chain-saw massacres to terrorize peasants, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities into fleeing from their resource rich lands. Almost four million Colombians have become refugees in their own country. It is the world's worst humanitarian crisis after Sudan. The paramilitaries stole title to millions of hectares of their victims' land paving the way for foreign investment in mining and oil, and agribusiness growing African palm.

Who is killing these union organizers? Most of the murders are committed by **paramilitary death squads**. Paramilitaries are illegal armies that fund their operations through Colombia's illegal drug trade and illegal contributions from some companies like Chiquita Brands International. The “paras” have been classified as a “terrorist organization” by the Canadian government, along with other armed groups such as the FARC leftist guerillas.

2 Colombian labour law is not up to ILO snuff

A union-busting culture dominates Colombian society. Colombia's labour laws stifle unions and workers' rights. Recently, in order to show it is doing something positive, the Colombian government passed two labour code reforms, one on the right to strike and one on "associative labour cooperatives". But even with recent changes, they still do not come close to International Labour Organization (ILO) minimum standards. Colombian workers face huge legal and bureaucratic obstacles to register a union and to bargain collectively. Some say it's easier to form an armed group than a trade union in Colombia!

Colombia's "labour cooperatives" — not what you might think!

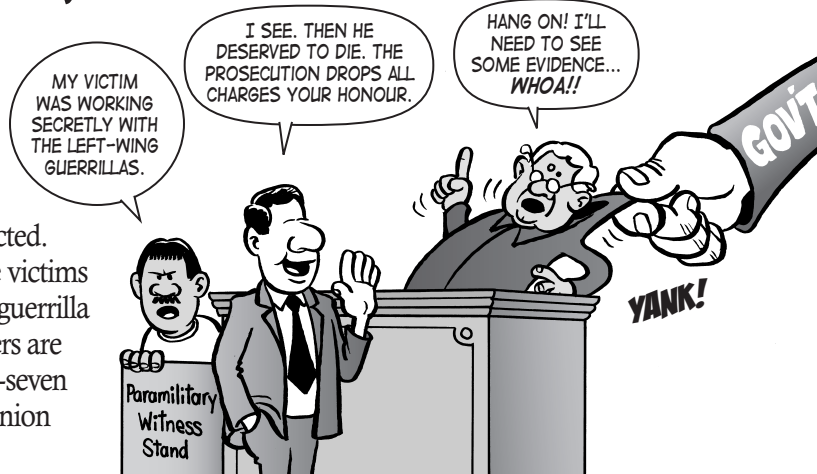
Hundreds of thousands of Colombian workers have no choice but to join "associated labour cooperatives". These are not the worker-owned and -run cooperatives that we know in Canada. These "co-operatives" have been created and are controlled by management. Workers in a particular company are considered to be "associates" rather than "employees" and are not covered by labour laws. Worker-associates are not allowed to strike or bargain collectively and have few benefits. They face unregulated, long hours of work for miserable wages and often unsafe working conditions, especially in rural areas. And they can't bargain a better deal. This affects low-skilled rural workers as well as health care workers, professionals and others.

These anti-union laws, plus the violence and terror directed at unionized workers, have helped keep Colombia's rate of unionization at less than 5%. With its huge informal sector and high unemployment rate (officially 11%), it means that only one in every one hundred workers can negotiate a collective agreement — **the lowest of any country in the western hemisphere!**



3 Impunity for the killers — not enough is being done to bring them to justice

Very few of the crimes against unionized workers and other civilians have been investigated. Even fewer of those responsible have been convicted. This is called **impunity**. The victims are often accused of being "guerrilla sympathizers". Their murders are then not questioned. Ninety-seven per cent of the murders of union activists remain unsolved.



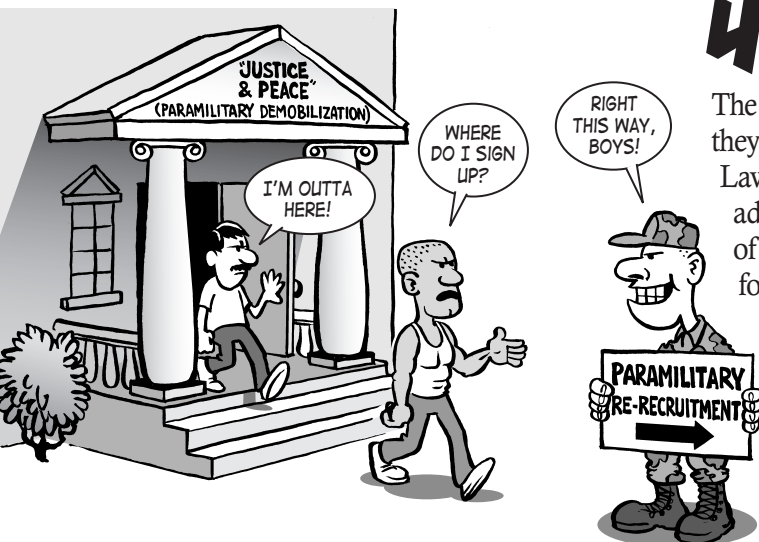
Shady justice for killers of unionized workers

The Colombian government insists it is making progress in bringing the killers to justice. But they are not actually doing very much.

- Some killers were tried *in absentia*, and are still on the loose.
- In nearly all cases, the person tried was the hired gun, not the author of the crime.
- Judges have been named and removed just when they start their investigations.

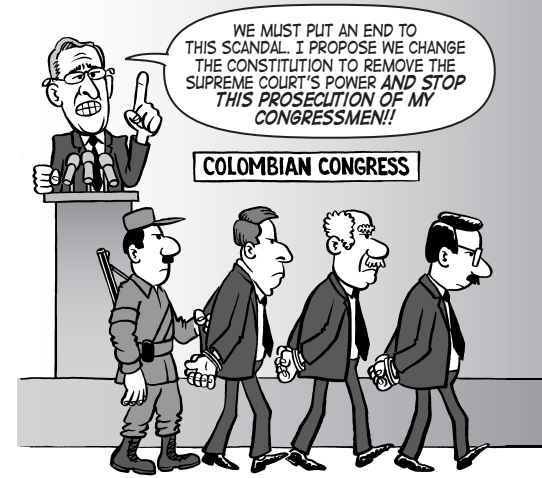
4 No justice, no peace

The government insists that it has "demobilized" the paramilitaries so they are no longer a threat. Under a program called the "Justice and Peace Law", paramilitary combatants were supposed to hand in their arms and admit to their crimes in exchange for reduced sentences. But thousands of the "demobilized" have simply walked away from the program and formed new, deadly groups like the *Águilas Negras* (Black Eagles), who terrorize the poor and anyone who dares to dissent from Uribe's security plan. The Black Eagles even sent a nasty threat to the Canadian Embassy in Bogotá. This is a far cry from Colombians' demands for a process that exposes the truth of paramilitary crimes, delivers justice and ensures reparations to the victims.



5 Shocking government ties to paramilitaries

Today, 62 mafia-like, ex-paramilitary, drug-trafficking, criminal networks control economic activities and political institutions in 23 of Colombia's 31 provinces. Violence and insecurity prevail in the countryside. Colombia's independent Supreme Court (one of the country's few bright spots these days) has launched a series of ground-breaking investigations into paramilitary presence in the Colombian Congress. More than 60 Congress members from Uribe's coalition — 20 percent of the Congress — are being investigated for crimes like collaboration with paramilitaries, getting rich from drug trafficking and collusion in election fraud. Thirty of them have been indicted.



6 Army and government implicated in Crimes Against Humanity

In a suspicious move in August 2008, Uribe extradited 14 jailed paramilitary bosses to the United States on drug trafficking charges, a much lesser crime than their crimes against humanity. These criminals are now, conveniently, out of the way of Supreme Court investigations into their links with Uribe's and his officials' involvement in atrocities. The International Criminal Court of the Hague is looking into these events.

"How will Colombia ensure that the chief perpetrators of crimes against humanity will be brought to trial — including those who have been extradited, political leaders and members of Congress?"

**International Criminal Court of the Hague
Letter to Colombian Government,
August, 2008**

In November 2008, the world was outraged to learn that 27 high-ranking army officers were accused of a horrifying crime known as "false positives". This involves the soldiers' kidnapping and executing innocent civilians, dressing them as FARC guerrillas and claiming they were killed in combat. This practice developed in response the President Uribe's demands for results in fighting the FARC insurgents and offers of bonuses based on a body count. These revelations are just the tip of the iceberg in a series of charges of army involvement with executions, extortion, ties to drug traffickers and other crimes against humanity.

Colombia's security forces are engaged in "widespread and systematic" killings of civilians.

**UN High Commissioner
for Human Rights
November, 2008 Report**



7 Diverse Colombian peoples say NO!

Colombia's unions have said "no" to the NAFTA model because it will cause more unemployment, poverty, and hunger. Signing a "free trade" deal with Uribe will signal that state terrorism and killing trade unionists is okay.

Colombia's parliamentary opposition, the Alternative Democratic Pole (PDA), opposes "free trade" because it will annex the economy to multinational corporations. For example, it will provide new land grabs for Canadian mining companies that get powerful new rights but not responsibilities.

The Indigenous Council of the North of Cauca carried out a popular referendum in 2005 in which 98% said "no" to free trade. In October 2008, tens of thousands of people protested the free trade model, linking it to the death of mother earth.



8 More trade and investment can hurt — not help — human rights

Independent human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch and others warn that this deal could actually undermine the struggle for democracy in Colombia. Without international pressure, the Colombian government will have no incentive to make improvements in human rights.



9 Canada's parliamentary trade committee says human rights assessment first!



In 2008, Parliament's Standing Committee on International Trade (CIIT) undertook an in-depth study called Human Rights, the Environment and Free Trade with Colombia. They even went on an official mission to Bogotá to hear first-hand what people thought. The CIIT report said:

"The Committee recommends that an independent, impartial and comprehensive human rights impact assessment should be carried out by a competent body, which is subject to independent levels of scrutiny and validation; the recommendations of this assessment should be addressed before Canada considers signing, ratifying and implementing an agreement with Colombia."

Recommendation #4 To the Government of Canada
International Trade Committee (CIIT)

10 Barack Obama says YES to workers' rights!

In the final presidential candidates' debate in the 2008 U.S. election, Senator Barack Obama said:



Human Rights before free trade!!!

Colombians want justice, peace, security and prosperity but the conflict and human rights violations continue. A parallel labour side deal will do little, if anything, to guarantee workers their rights or protect their lives. Two years ago, regarding trade with China, Stephen Harper said: **"I think Canadians want us to promote our trade relations worldwide. . . but I don't think Canadians want us to sell out our values, our belief in democracy, freedom and human rights. They don't want us to sell that out to the almighty dollar"**. But that is exactly what the proposed trade deal with Colombia will do.

Tell your Member of Parliament that Canada must:

- Protect our values, our belief in democracy, freedom and human rights and not sell them out to the almighty dollar through a trade deal with Colombia
- Put the Colombia deal on hold until there is effective prosecution of killers of civilians including unionized workers, and enforcement of minimum ILO standards on the rights of workers
- Implement the recommendations of the CIIT report to carry out an independent assessment of human rights violations in Colombia BEFORE ratifying and implementing any deal.

Harper's "Ridiculous" Free Trade Quotes!

On trade with Colombia:



For more information and to find your Member of Parliament visit: www.canadianlabour.ca

