

# Forever Solidarity



**A PUBLIC  
SECTOR TRADE  
UNION REPORT  
ON COLOMBIA**

Four Canadian  
union leaders  
deliver a message  
of concern, hope  
and resistance  
from Colombian  
workers



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DESIGN [workingdesign.net](http://workingdesign.net) a union shop 

#### FRONT COVER

Boys playing near shacks of La Onda a slum where displaced families live in the hills above Medellin.

#### BACK COVER

Grandmother and child at La Onda.



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## INTRODUCTION

### Examining Colombia's human and labour rights record

In July 2008, four top Canadian public sector union leaders toured Colombia for one week. What they saw and heard inspired them to prepare this booklet so that they could share their observations with others in hopes of spreading more understanding of the perils facing the working people of that South American nation.

Having seen the harm that unregulated corporate exploitation was doing to the majority of Colombian families, the Canadian union leaders promised to deliver a message of concern, solidarity and resistance to their one million members, the Canadian government and all Canadians.

This booklet and other actions are part of living up to that promise. It includes the leaders' personal commentaries and observations after meeting with many people in Colombia and hearing their concerns about the harm free trade with Canada will do to the Colombian people. The hope of the people they met inspired the leaders as did the growing movement of resistance they witnessed.

During their tour, the leaders focused on examining human and labour rights, working conditions, and the impacts of privatization in the absence of labour and human rights guarantees. They raised concerns with representatives of many sectors of Colombian society, including the Colombian Minister of the Interior and other government officials, the Canadian ambassador and embassy officials, leaders of the United Central of Workers (CUT) and trade unionists at all levels, members of the opposition Polo Democratico Alternativo, leaders of the indigenous movement, several non-governmental organizations, groups representing Afro-Colombian peoples and other displaced peoples, as well as media reporters and ordinary citizens.

Although it was a first trip to Colombia for three of the four leaders, their unions are not newcomers to the struggles of Colombian working people. All four have been

The hope of the people they met inspired the leaders as did the growing movement of resistance they witnessed.

FOUR LEADERS  
ARRIVE IN  
BOGOTÁ FOR A  
WEEK-LONG TOUR



What the leaders saw convinced them of the need to speak out even more boldly and clearly against the free trade deal.

involved in international labour solidarity work with trade unions there for several years. They have cultivated union relations through projects funded by their international solidarity funds, through worker-to-worker visits both to and from Colombia, and through regular letter-writing campaigns and other methods of support for a labour movement under siege by its own government.

Why the leadership tour? Having completed the follow-up work from a 2006 membership tour of Colombia, including a video of the experience, the Frontlines group advised the leaders that a free trade agreement between Canada and Colombia was nearing completion. All the unions were opposed to the signing of such an agreement, especially in light of Colombia's appalling human and labour rights record. The leaders were well aware that more trade unionists have been murdered there than anywhere else in the world.

To strengthen the arguments against the free trade deal and to build on the union solidarity that had already been established, the leaders decided to see what Colombia's government has done in the South American country since President Alvaro Uribe Velez came to power in 2002. What they saw convinced them of the need to speak out even more boldly and clearly against the free trade deal.

The leaders were asked repeatedly to act as the voice of ordinary Colombians in opposing the deal until the government of Alvaro Uribe Velez showed that it had addressed the ongoing repression of trade unionists and other activists and guaranteed their protection. This booklet serves as that voice.

## Canada's public sector union leaders

The four leaders are John Gordon, national president of the Public Service Alliance of Canada, George Heyman, international vice-president of the National Union of Public and General Employees, Denis Lemelin, national president of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, and

Paul Moist, national president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees. They were accompanied and assisted on the tour by Louise Casselman, the PSAC's Social Justice Fund Officer, Barbara Wood, a CUPE member and executive director of CoDevelopment Canada, and Ron Verzuh, CUPE's international solidarity officer and director of CUPE's Global Justice Fund.

## Defending public services

The Frontlines project began as a joint initiative of CUPW, PSAC and CUPE. It sponsored the first tour in 2004, bringing five public sector trade unionists and activists to Canada. This provided opportunities for Colombian and Canadian public sector workers to learn from each other about their struggles to stop privatization. In 2006, the Frontlines project, along with the BCGEU, sponsored two rank-and-file

delegations to Colombia. In 2008, the Frontlines project organized the leaders' tour. The intention of the project is to support frontline public sector workers and their unions through continuing visits, monitoring and presenting recommendations and critiques of governments in Canada and Colombia and ongoing project work, particularly in the areas of human and labour rights education.

## Free trade will hurt, not help Colombians

On July 18-25, 2008, we visited Colombia on behalf of one million Canadian public sector workers. Our mission was to see for ourselves whether our opposition to the Canada-Colombia free trade agreement was justified. What we saw and learned confirmed that we are right to oppose this deal and to speak out against it on behalf of Colombian workers and their families.

We met with many sectors of Colombian society [as listed in the introduction]. We met with the poorest of the poor families displaced from their homes by paramilitary groups to benefit transnational companies, some of them Canadian, wanting to expand agriculture production, mining and other business interests. We were told that more than 4 million people, 10 per cent of the population, have been displaced without reparations.

We sat with single mothers and grandmothers who have no drinkable water, no sewage, no electricity, little money for food, and no chance of their children ever going to school. These citizens, largely from rural areas, must beg for a living on city streets.

In particular, we visited the slums of Cali, known as Agua Blanca (White Water) and the hillside shanty town of La Onda high above Medellin. There we saw abject poverty created by political and corporate decisions in far-off countries, decisions that have been condoned by the Colombian government and that often fuel the armed conflict that has plagued the country for 50 years.

Our conclusions were hardened by the final report of the Permanent People's Tribunal following two years of hearings in six sectors of the Colombian economy, including the public sector. The report condemned the Colombian government and transnational corporations for countless violations of human and trade union rights. It also called for an end to impunity for those who commit "crimes against humanity".

In the extraordinary case of indigenous peoples, the report cited widespread acts of genocide. Twenty-eight indigenous groups are in "imminent danger of physical and cultural extinction" and 18 of the communities have less than 10 members. They "are suspended between life and death." The report went on to cite a horrifying list of human and labour rights abuses that is shocking the world.

Colombia continues to be the most dangerous country on earth for trade unionists and civil society activists. By mid-2008 alone, 41 trade unionists have been assassinated [as this booklet was being prepared]. Colombia has no meaningful legal framework that permits free collective bargaining. The result is that more

Colombia continues to be the most dangerous country on earth for trade unionists and civil society activists. By mid-2008 alone, 41 trade unionists have been assassinated. Colombia has no meaningful legal framework that permits free collective bargaining. The result is that more than 95 per cent of the public sector workforce has no enforceable collective bargaining rights.

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In spite of a very tragic situation ongoing for many decades, a potent resistance to injustices continues as well as a firm decision to work to overcome the culture of conflict and of war and to promote the transformation of society to create a true constitutional state of law.

To sign a free trade agreement with Colombia as long as trade unionists are at risk and free collective bargaining and other labour and human rights continue to be violated can only contribute to an increase in the “crimes against humanity” that were documented by the tribunal.

The Commons Standing Committee on International Trade recognized this in its June report, recommending that Canada “not sign and implement a free trade agreement with the Government of Colombia” at this time.

In its June 2008 report, the respected members of the tribunal, chaired by Nobel Peace laureate Adolfo Perez Esquivel, said that “in spite of a very tragic situation ongoing for many decades, a potent resistance to injustices continues as well as a firm decision to work to overcome the culture of conflict and of war and to promote the transformation of society to create a true constitutional state of law.”

We join the members of the tribunal in committing “to convey to the world and to give voice to the feeling of optimism that is shown in the spirit of struggle shown and which can only lead to immense hope.”

In our view, the Canada-Colombia free trade agreement can only convey the opposite of hope for the majority of the 45 million Colombians. It must not be implemented.

**John Gordon, George Heyman, Denis Lemelin and Paul Moist**

LEADERS  
MEETING WITH  
INDIGENOUS LEADER  
AIDA QUILCUÉ  
IN LA MARIA  
PIENDAMO, CAUCA.



## COMMON OBSERVATIONS

### Seeing the human impact of a corporate laboratory

At the end of each day of the leaders' tour, they summarized what they had observed and learned from the groups and individuals they met. These collective observations were reviewed by the leaders and then posted daily to their unions' web sites.

On the final day of their visit, the leaders issued a joint statement at a news conference in Bogota warning of the harm that a free trade agreement would do to the Colombian people. On their return to Canada, they issued a similar news release to all Canadian media, and a more in-depth opinion article was offered to selected media.

Preceding the arrival of three of the leaders, Denis Lemelin, national president of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers, attended a forum of indigenous groups in Valledupar and a session of the Permanent People's Tribunal in the Sierra Nevada. His observations are presented first below followed by the leaders' collective daily observations.

#### Indigenous peoples describe displacement process

Our first stop was at the forum of indigenous people in Valledupar in northern Colombia where we joined about 500 people representing indigenous groups from South and North America and Europe. Some non-governmental and religious organizations were present as well as two indigenous women from Canada. We heard several presentations.

The president of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC), Luis Evelis Andrade described the struggle of indigenous peoples in the Colombian socio-political context. Neither pro-government nor pro-guerrilla, he asserted the claims of indigenous peoples to their ancestral lands and their right to development.

Professor Gustavo Moncayo talked of his fight for the release of his son who was kidnapped 11 years ago by the guerrilla group known as the FARC. For some time, he has been pressuring the Colombian government to work towards a peace settlement with the guerrilla movement, but his pleas have fallen on deaf ears, further endangering the lives of his son and other hostages. Professor Moncayo has crisscrossed the country, denouncing the government of Alvaro Uribe and his links with the paramilitary groups. It is a story that clearly shows the courage of the people who are against the ruling regime.

JULY 17/08

Another presenter described the situation of the Sami people who live in the northern regions of the Nordic countries and Russia. An Argentinean lawyer explained the struggle of indigenous peoples in the context of international law. Others representatives spoke of the devastating impact of the residential school system on Canada's aboriginal population.

We also visited Atanques, a village in the Sierra Nevada, to attend a hearing of the Permanent People's Tribunal on the genocide of aboriginal peoples in Colombia. When we arrived, the villagers welcomed us warmly. They had prepared everything: meals and beds.

The next day, an indigenous governor opened the session and Father Javier Giraldo, well known for his stance in favour of indigenous peoples, introduced the tribunal. Afterwards, the different indigenous peoples told their stories. In each case, the historical facts were the same: they were chased away from their lands by the colonizers and have been fighting for their survival ever since.

Nowadays, there is a speeding up of the process. The indigenous peoples constitute 4 per cent of the population but 8 per cent of the displaced people. Every means are used to expel them: pressures, threats and murder. It was clear that neo-colonialism is firmly entrenched in Colombia.

We heard presentations about the relation between transnational corporations and the displacement of indigenous groups. The Uribe government is handing over protected lands and parks to the international tourist trade to set up so-called eco-tourist sites, causing wide displacement of aboriginal peoples.

In one example, the Tairona peoples (La Guajira) were chased from their lands to allow the transnational tourist agency, Aviatur, to establish eco-tourism. A similar

DAY 1 LEFT: COLOMBIAN UNIONISTS AND THEIR FAMILIES WELCOMING THE LEADERS IN BOGOTA.

DAY 2 TOP RIGHT: MEETING WITH FENALTRASE LEADERS AND MEMBERS IN MEDELLIN.

DAY 2 BOTTOM RIGHT: MEETING WITH STAFF MEMBERS AT THE NATIONAL LABOUR SCHOOL IN MEDELLIN.



situation is developing in Taganga near Santa Marta in the north where about 900 fishermen are being forced from their village to make room for luxury hotels for international tourists.

Among the various analyses of the socio-economic situation, Professor Hector Mondragon explained how the transnationals operate. Human rights are being replaced by the rights of the transnationals who have given themselves a new world constitution: They now control much in Colombia: Monsanto (fumigation), City Bank (financial capital), General Dynamic (military control), Philip Morris (tobacco, coffee, and beverage) Morgan Chase and Exxon Mobil.

The pervasive presence or influence of transnationals has encouraged greater violation of human rights and collective rights, he explained. World capital's new laws protect it in all situations: legal extraterritoriality, legal security and special laws to assist in control local populations.

### Canada's public sector union leaders arrive in Bogota

Canada's public sector union leaders arrived at Bogota airport to join Denis Lemelin and begin their week-long labour tour to learn about the potential impact of a Canada-Colombia free trade deal on Colombian workers and their families.

The leaders were greeted by members of the National Union of Postal Workers (STPC) and the Association of Public Employees of the Human Rights Ombudsman (ASDEP), among others.

The welcoming party, including family members of the Colombian trade unionists, displayed a handcrafted banner with all four Canadian unions named on it. Balloon-topped umbrellas provided protection from the evening rain.

### Leaders briefed on human and workers' rights in Colombia

Before visiting the displaced persons community of La Onda in Medellin, the leaders attended two intensive presentations. Their conclusion: Despite government claims to the international community that much has improved, things are worse than ever in Colombia.

The leaders met first with the National Federation of Public Sector Workers (FENALTRASE), including members of the Association of Workers from the Justice System (ASONAL), controller's office and health care unions.

"Thousands of people have been disappeared and union persecution is ongoing," FENALTRASE regional president José Mariano Guerra told the leaders. Despite the repression, "through unity at a global level we can be much stronger," he added. He is also a lawyer for victims of repression.

A young union leader explained that she had just received a letter from her employer threatening to fire her for organizing workers into the union. Threats against trade

JULY 18/08

DAY 1

JULY 19/08

DAY 2

DAY 2 TOP LEFT:  
LEADERS ON BRIEF  
WALKING TOUR OF  
MEDELLIN.

DAY 2 TOP RIGHT:  
YOUNG COLOMBIANS  
GATHERING  
SIGNATURES TO  
ALLOW PRESIDENT  
ALVARO URIBE  
TO HOLD THE  
PRESIDENCY FOR A  
THIRD TERM.

DAY 2 BOTTOM LEFT:  
TEENAGE GIRLS  
DANCING IN TWO-  
ROOM SCHOOL AT LA  
ONDA.

DAY 2 BOTTOM  
RIGHT: LEADERS  
VISIT DISPLACED  
COMMUNITY OF  
LA ONDA IN HILLS  
BEHIND MEDELLIN.

union leaders have forced many to request security measures including armed guards, bullet-proof vests and vehicles with polarized windows. In reality, very few trade unionists are eligible for such security measures though hundreds are systematically targeted for harassment, kidnappings and assassinations.

Norberto Rios Navarro, academic director at the National Labour School (NLS), also gave the leaders an in-depth briefing. Several international unions support the NLS, including the Canadian Labour Congress.

With President Alvaro Uribe's sudden rise in popularity, due to the release of some high-profile hostages being held by guerrillas, among them former presidential hopeful Ingrid Betancourt, conditions might favour Uribe's attempt to reform the constitution so that he could run for a third term.

Rios also explained that Uribe supports the creation of thousands of workers' cooperative associations (CTAs). The law to establish CTAs emerged in 1988, but has gained momentum under Uribe. Critics say they eliminate unions and do away with legitimate collective agreements, particularly in the municipal services and health sectors. Several other government measures are further weakening a union movement already suffering from massive limits on collective bargaining and union organizing, they added.



JULY 20/08

DAY 3

## Leaders visit displaced Afro-Colombians in Cali

Canada's public sector union leaders visited Agua Blanca, a poor barrio of 1.5 million people on the outskirts of Cali. Agua Blanca is home to thousands of Colombia's 4 million displaced people. Forced off their lands by massacres, threats, and the conflict, rural Colombians seek refuge in the cities where they are faced with rampant unemployment, poverty and common crime. What the leaders saw was maddening and heart-rending.

The people of Agua Blanca, many of them living in squalour, make up more than half the 2.5 million population of Cali. As one goes deeper into the neighbourhoods, the tiny streets become almost impassable by car and in some parts of this community of the displaced, they become running sewers.

Children run unsupervised everywhere since there is no school for them to attend. There is little potable water, electricity or other services for the makeshift shacks. As the children grow older they often become users of a low-level cocaine extract called basuco. Gangs roam the streets after dark.

The leaders entered one dilapidated brick structure to find one room divided by a curtain. Eighteen people live there. The single mother and her children were nervous to be bringing attention to themselves as they are recent newcomers to the settlement and are still seen with some suspicion by others.

The deeper into Agua Blanca one goes, the poorer are the displaced families. In one wooden structure, the leaders spoke with an elderly woman. Paramilitary death squads had murdered her spouse and she and her children and grandchildren were told to leave their rural community.

It was a too-familiar example of companies, some created by former paramilitary leaders, pushing people off their land to make room for African palm production,

DAY 3: PSAC'S  
JOHN GORDON VISITS  
AGUA BLANCA, A  
LARGE COMMUNITY  
FOR DISPLACED  
AFRO-COLOMBIANS  
NEAR CALI.



mining, eco-tourism and other money-making operations. There is no compensation. The families of Agua Blanca arrive with nothing and have little hope of finding work. Some call the process ethnocide, the systematic destruction of communities.

**EARLIER IN THE DAY**, the leaders learned from a human rights lawyer that Afro-Colombians are the poorest of the displaced people. For years, they have been victims of discrimination and violence from armed groups on all sides of the conflict, the armed forces, the paramilitaries and the FARC guerrillas.

“First, the paramilitaries pushed them out of their rural homes,” the lawyer said. “Then, when they looked up to heaven for help, they saw helicopters fumigating the land with herbicides.” The aerial spraying is supposed to be used to eliminate coca plants (from which cocaine is made), but it is also a way to force communities to move off the land.

In a graphic description of the brutality of the death squads, the lawyer said “they would cut up the bodies, put them in bags and float them down river. No one was allowed to touch the bags. When the river narrowed, the body parts would be strewn on the shore” as a terrifying reminder of the paramilitaries’ terrorizing tactics. The same thing would occur along the roadsides.



**DAY 3 ABOVE:  
CHILDREN OF AGUA  
BLANCA HAVE  
LITTLE HOPE OF  
ANY EDUCATION OR  
FUTURE.**



**DAY 3 RIGHT:  
GOVERNMENT  
ORGANIZED  
MARCH AGAINST  
THE FARC IN CALI.**

Another Afro-Colombian told the leaders that the paramilitaries patrolled the waterways and controlled access to the only route for the locals to get food. "If you had a bag of rice on the way down river and it was not there when you returned, they would accuse you of giving it to the guerrillas." They have "privatized the rivers and contaminated them with fertilizers and other chemicals," said another.

**THE LEADERS ALSO MET** with staff and volunteers for NOMADESC, a non-governmental organization supported by CUPE, NUPGE and the British Columbia Government Employees' Union, a NUPGE affiliate, and CoDev. They work with the people of Agua Blanca and other displaced communities, providing legal accompaniment, human rights training and other services as well as acting as their voice and helping to mobilize resistance.

"We go out in the streets to make our position clear to people." NOMADESC leader Berenice Celeyta told the Canadians. "We have in common with you many problems with the proposed Canada-Colombia free trade agreement. No one has been consulted in these communities and there has been no respect shown for black or indigenous Colombians and others who have been displaced by the government-backed machinery that moves in to plunder the land."

"Here in Colombia it is prohibited to think differently from the government," Celeyta added. "If you dare to think differently, you become a target of persecution." As she spoke, a massive march, orchestrated by the Colombian government passed by the NOMADESC offices. Many of the participants joined the march for fear of losing their jobs if they refused. Others were openly supportive of the Uribe government, and still others marched in the hope of ending the violence plaguing their country.

Another black Colombian put the situation facing his community this way: "We are descendant from the slaves of 400 years ago. Now we are slaves again. Our children can never go to university, never have organized recreation, and they have no future."

DAY 3: BRIEFINGS  
WITH NOMADESC,  
A GROUP SPONSORED  
IN PART BY SOME OF  
THE UNIONS  
ON TOUR.



JULY 21/08

DAY

4

## Indigenous peoples feel the blows of Colombian policies

The leaders visited La Maria Pendiama, an aboriginal reserve about two hours drive outside Cali. The route was punctuated by several military checkpoints.

About 100 residents joined the Canadian leaders for a discussion about the situation they face under the government of Alvaro Uribe, including the methods his government has promoted to curtail their freedom.

At the open-air meeting, Luis Evelis Andrade Casama, president of the National Union of Indigenous Peoples (ONIC) led the presentations with a strong denunciation of those methods. "Uribe is trying to force a neo-liberal model on us," he said. "He talks of liberty as a concept that favours private property owners, but what about the rest of us?"

"Uribe is preoccupied with the possibility that the dispossessed, like us, will rise up," he added. "He has no respect for the basic rights and freedoms guaranteed in a democracy. He has invented what we call 'sausage' laws where all the good stuff goes to the rich."

A free trade agreement with Canada is motivated by the mining sector, he said. "We think the Canadian government wants a free trade agreement because of mining. We need help from the Canadian mining unions to confront this problem."

The people of Cauca province are mobilizing to take back their land. They are worried that free trade will destroy their environment even further and that they will lose their water rights.

"We will lose a lot more land under free trade," said one presenter. "We have already lost our rights. Free trade would be detrimental to us." "Our basic fight is about the new economic model being forced on us, particularly the privatization of water," said another.



DAY 4: FAMILIES LISTEN TO LEADERS AS THEY ADDRESS INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY NEAR CALI.

The union leaders pledged to tell Canadians that the situation is worse here than Prime Minister Stephen Harper has led them to believe. What the leaders saw and heard contradicted his apparent view that human rights problems are not a major concern.

"A free trade agreement would benefit a small number," said one indigenous presenter. "It won't help us get more rights. It won't help us to be aboriginal people in an indigenous nation." "This country has been kidnapped," another presenter said. "We need to say 'No' to the large-scale extractive industries." "A strategy of repression needs a strategy of resistance to defend our lives," another added.

EARLIER, the leaders heard from CRIC, the indigenous regional council in Cauca that was organized in 1971 to protect small indigenous communities and defend aboriginal rights. The CRIC representative spoke of their lands being flooded without compensation, ancestral culture being erased, and the many social problems bred by poverty. "Big monopolies are threatening the rights of all the ethnic peoples of the territory," he said. "But we are resisting by occupying large farms that were once our lands."

Since the 1980s, with the coming of more privatization, the big mining companies needed more water, he explained. A dam was completed in the region in 1984. It flooded aboriginal land, but the indigenous people were never compensated. The Spanish multinational company in charge of the dam promised better services, but they never materialized. The CRIC continues to press the government to fulfill those promises.

CRIC leader Aida Quilcué charged the Uribe government with lying to the international community about Colombia. "The historic process of extermination has been made permanent by this government," she said. "It's like slavery has come back."

DAY 4 LEFT: YOUNG PEOPLE TAKE NOTES DURING INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY CONSULTATION WITH LEADERS IN CALI.

DAY 4 RIGHT: INDIGENOUS WOMEN PREPARE MEAL FOR LEADERS VISITING ABORIGINAL RESERVE NEAR CALI.



JULY 22/08

DAY 5

DAY 5 LEFT: CUPE'S PAUL MOIST MAKES POINT ABOUT FREE TRADE TO CANADIAN AMBASSADOR IN BOGOTA.

DAY 5 RIGHT: LEADERS SHAKE HANDS WITH CANADIAN AMBASSADOR AFTER DISCUSSION ABOUT FREE TRADE.

## Canadian ambassador meets public sector union leaders

In Bogota, departing Canadian Ambassador Matthew Levin engaged in a two-hour exchange with the leaders on differing views of what he termed the "Colombian reality".

While there was agreement on many of the problems facing the country, they couldn't agree on the proposed Canada-Colombia free trade agreement.

"Free trade will not help raise the tide for poor people and the oppressed in Colombia, one leader told the ambassador. "Free trade won't improve human rights, especially for the millions of displaced people," said another. "Free trade must be fair trade that respects people's rights," said another. "Canadians need to hear the other side of the Canada-Colombia free trade story," said a fourth.

"Our view is that a free trade agreement can't resolve the deeper problem of violence in Colombia," Levin said. "The conflict hasn't served to fix the problems of poverty, lack of social justice and exclusion. Instead, it has created polarization, intolerance and a lack of confidence." And the regions most affected by the conflict are where "pre-economic, almost feudal, relationships exist."

"We are also concerned about the massive displacement of people," Levin added. "Our global peace and security fund is trying to encourage the truth and justice process. Our current focus is on children and youth that have been excluded from formal education due to violent displacement.

"Canada's engagement must be balanced and multifaceted," Levin said. "It can't just be about trade and economics." But until the country can put the 50-year-old conflict behind it, it will only exacerbate the problems.

On corporate social responsibility: "That question is not going away. We are being told to work on it more." But he argued that Canadian companies treat employees in Colombia as they do those in Canada, a point the leaders vigorously disputed based on their discussions with Colombian trade unions.



On the Colombian economy: "The government knows that the Colombian reality is not ideal. There is poverty, violence, lack of access to services." He agreed that a round table discussion on Canadian extractive industries did not produce "the expected outcomes from the investors," but noted that embassy officials have been asked to examine more closely the issue of corporate social responsibility.

On the murder of trade unionists: "No one would question the severity of the violence against trade unions in Colombia....The point of the free trade labour cooperation side agreement is to hold partners to the rule of law." He acknowledged that the killers act with impunity.

On a labour side agreement: News reports had recently revealed that the side agreement includes a proposal for the Colombia government to pay a fine when labour rights are violated. Those opposing the trade deal have argued that this amounts to having to pay a fine when a trade unionist is murdered. "The government doesn't agree with this," Levin said.

**LATER IN THE DAY**, the Canadians met with a group of national trade union leaders to discuss privatization, the lack of collective bargaining rights, and the impact of cuts to public services. They represented the municipal sector, health and social security, postal services, the office of the human rights ombudsman and others.

The two-hour session yielded a list of complaints against the Uribe government, including his push to privatize, destroy unions, threats to the lives of trade union activists, and the abysmal state of free collective bargaining.

"We are now dealing with a situation where our young people go to work without pay as baggers in supermarkets," said one union leader. To be paid, they must ask for a tip from the customer. "Uribe has worked hard to disappear trade unions from our country," said another.

DAY 5: LEADERS OF NATIONAL  
PUBLIC SECTOR UNIONS MEET IN  
BOGOTA TO DISCUSS PRIVATIZATION  
AND FREE TRADE.



JULY 23/08  
DAY 6

“What we are seeing is the formation of a national Gestapo,” explained another leader. Through Uribe’s policy of forgiving and forgetting the crimes of the paramilitaries he has given them control over lucrative segments of the economy and inserted them in all of the state institutions. This has created a paramilitary economy and a paramilitary state.

One leader thanked CUPE for teaching her about pay equity. “Pay equity is now central to our bargaining with municipalities,” she said. A member of the Jose Alvear Restrepo Lawyers’ Collective laid out the raw statistics: 4 million displaced (1.7 since Uribe came to power), 15,000 disappeared, 3,000 kidnapped, 20,000 political assassinations over the past 20 years (12,500 since Uribe was first elected), 6,500 arbitrary detentions in the past six years.

As for trade unionists: 2,600 assassinated (one every three days since 1986, 467 under Uribe), 194 disappeared, 7,200 attacked, 58 murders admitted by paramilitary leaders, yet those responsible get away with murder in 97 per cent of the cases.

“It is the state that is killing the trade unionists,” he concluded. Another presenter added that “most of the time the assassinations occur around a labour conflict.”

## Permanent People’s Tribunal condemns Colombian government

After two years of hearings, the Permanent People’s Tribunal delivered its final judgment on Colombia’s human and labour rights record to a crowd of over 2,000 people in Bogota. The tribunal findings confirmed what the Canadian leaders had witnessed and heard during their tour.

The tribunal was to report on the six sectors of the economy it had studied: food production, mining, biodiversity, oil, public services, and the genocide of indigenous peoples. But soon after it got started, it was interrupted by a dozen hooded students at the National University’s León de Grèiff auditorium.

DAY 6: LEADERS  
ATTENDING  
PERMANENT  
PEOPLE’S TRIBUNAL  
IN BOGOTÁ.



They took over the meeting momentarily causing Argentinean Nobel Peace laureate Adolfo Perez Esquivel and the other judges to move off stage while they delivered their their own list of judgments and demands. The dramatic theatrical interlude drove home the deep sense of outrage that they and others share. They expressed the collective anger at the Uribe government and its support of the armed conflict. Their masked faces also underlined the danger for anyone who dissents.

When the tribunal resumed, the audience heard the full extent of the terror the Colombian people have faced. It is an “economic laboratory”, the damning report said, and the result has been thousands of deaths and disappearances, millions of displaced people, the destruction of the environment and the trade union movement, and a wholesale selloff of the country to transnational corporations.

The tribunal held dozens of corporations responsible for these “crimes against humanity” and pledged to send its findings to the International Criminal Court and the governments of more than 100 countries where the transnationals operate. But it reserved its strongest indictment for the Colombian government.

The Uribe government’s “Democratic Security Doctrine” has paved the way for mass exploitation, allowing corruption to run unchecked, the tribunal said. Sixty members of the Congress and Senate are being investigated for illegal activities, including involvement in paramilitary death squads. Among those being investigated is Uribe’s own cousin.

The government consciously facilitated the creation of a paramilitary system to assist with the control of the population through massacres, assassinations, threats and harassment. This has allowed the massive displacement of people to free up large portions of land for the growing of coca to supply the \$6 billion annual cocaine-exporting business. It has also decimated social movements in Colombia, including the trade union movement.

DAY 6: BODY ART  
OUTSIDE TRIBUNAL  
HEARINGS  
COMMENTS ON  
HUMAN RIGHTS  
ABUSES AND THE  
LENGTHY ARMED  
CONFLICT



The Uribe government is complicit in the murder or displacement of thousands of rural peasants, Afro-Colombians and aboriginal peoples. With nowhere to go, the displaced populate the large cities, living in slums with few services. The tribunal also charged the government with the near genocide of 18 indigenous communities.

The companies act with impunity from far-off world capitals while the Uribe government does their dirty work, the tribunal said. They expropriate the land with the help of the paramilitaries, slash, burn and poison to grow cash crops like African palm, grapefruit and bananas for export, leaving no room for domestic food production. In the process, the land and waterways are contaminated with herbicides and other chemicals.

The global financial institutions are equally guilty for having promoted privatization as an economic miracle worker, the tribunal noted. It also cited World Bank reports that there is \$2.8 billion in state corruption in Colombia.

The mass privatizing of most public services and the near annihilation of trade unions has left workers with no hope of ever earning a living wage under the current system of so-called worker cooperatives and contract employees, the tribunal said.

“Impunity is the rule here,” Esquivel concluded, shouting “no more impunity for any crime against humanity.”

**EARLIER THAT DAY** in two separate meetings, the leaders had met with the acting director for the United Nations Human Rights Commission, Javier Hernandez and the Uribe government-appointed People’s Defender Dr. Volmar Perez Ortiz.

The high commissioner spelled out some of the reasons why Colombian trade unionists have been getting killed in greater numbers than anywhere else in the world. The majority of the violence is associated with labour disputes. Some is also linked to the lucrative drug trade which has an influential role in the Colombian economy.

**DAY 6 LEFT:  
LEADERS MEET  
WITH GOVERNMENT-  
APPOINTED PEOPLE’S  
DEFENDER.**

**DAY 6 RIGHT:  
STUDENT PROTESTERS  
MAKE STATEMENT  
ABOUT TRIBUNAL  
FINDINGS.**



Dr. Perez Oritz described the work of his office in trying to protect the country's most vulnerable people, many of them listed in the tribunal's report. The leaders asked about the safety of local defenders, many of them young students working in the most dangerous parts of the country. When Maria Eva Villate, national president of the Union of Workers for the People's Defender, suggested that they could develop a plan for ensuring their safety, the People's Defender agreed. She credited the Canadian leaders' presence with helping to get the agreement to proceed. (Villate and her union have been working for several years with the PSAC to strengthen the rights of public sector workers.)

**IN THE EVENING**, the leaders visited the new headquarters of the National Union of Postal Workers (STPC) to see a presentation on the impacts of the privatization of the postal service. They learned how the union has been rebuilding from the ground up. Unique in its approach, the STPC has created a foundation for political and social action and a social service arm to assist unemployed postal workers and their families. (The STPC has had a long-standing solidarity relationship with CUPW and the PSAC in Canada.)

### Leaders say free trade will hurt, not help Colombia

Free trade with Colombia will lead to worse human and labour rights abuses and further devastation of communities at risk, the Canadian leaders said at a news conference in Bogota on the eve of their departure from Colombia.

Here is the statement the leaders read to several Colombian media reporters following a meeting with leaders of the United Central of Workers (CUT), one of three central labour bodies:

"We have met with many sectors of Colombian society, including government officials, the United Central of Workers (CUT) and other trade unions, opposition leaders, non-governmental organizations, groups representing indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples as well as the Canadian ambassador.

"We also were present to hear the final report of the Permanent People's Tribunal following two years of hearings in six sectors of the Colombian economy. The report condemned the Colombian government and transnational corporations for countless violations of human and trade union rights.

"Our overwhelming conclusion is that a free trade agreement will not help the Colombian people. It will only exacerbate an already horrifying list of human and labour rights abuses that are shocking the world.

"Colombia continues to be the most dangerous country on earth for trade unionists and civil society activists. Since the beginning of 2008, 32 trade unionists have been

JULY 24/08

DAY 7

assassinated. We have also observed that Colombia has no juridical framework that permits free collective bargaining.

“On our return to Canada, we will tell our one million members, our government and all Canadians that it is unacceptable to sign a free trade agreement with Colombia as long as trade unionists are at risk and free collective bargaining and other labour and human rights continue to be violated.”

**EARLIER**, leaders met with several senators from the opposition party, Polo Democrático Alternativo (PDA), including Senator Alexander Lopez, a long-time labour activist who attended a CUPE human rights conference in 2003 in Toronto.

The senators were united in their opposition to a Canada-Colombia free trade agreement. “We don’t believe in free trade period,” said one. “It’s simply a bad way to develop healthy relations between two nations.” Another said: “Free trade is a new form of colonization and the Polo rejects it.”

They called on the leaders to help them stop the destruction of a 400-year-old village by the Canadian mining company Goldfield. The company wants to mine the gold they have found underneath the village, and the Colombian government could let them do it. Other comments made by the Polo Senators included:

**On labour cooperatives:** “They destroy worker-employer relations.” The senators cite what is happening to sugar cane workers and court workers among others.

**On privatization:** Postal workers went from 3,000 to 300 and many teachers’ jobs are going the same way; 83 hospitals have fallen into private hands.

**Yearly statistics:** 5,000 people die in the armed conflict; 26,000 die in the social conflict; 20,000 children die of hunger; 3 million children have no access to education. “The president hides these realities.”

**On Uribe and labour relations:** “Uribe is trying to destabilize labour relations because labour is in the forefront of opposition to his government.”

**On Uribe and the Polo:** “Uribe’s intention is to falsely accuse our members and to put us in jail.”

DAY 7 LEFT: LEADERS MEET SENATORS FROM THE POLO DEMOCRATICO ALTERNATIVO OPPOSITION PARTY.

DAY 7 RIGHT: LEADERS MEET WITH LEADERS OF THE CUT, ONE OF COLOMBIA’S THREE CENTRAL UNION ORGANIZATIONS.



THE CANADIAN GROUP ALSO MET with CUT President Tarsicio Mora and CUT executive members. The CUT had 1.5 million members at its founding, Mora told the leaders. It now has 460,000.

“Colombia may be the only country in the world that does not have a labour minister,” he said. The Ministry of Social Protection is now responsible for labour as well as several other segments of society.

**On organizing unions:** “It is easier to form a paramilitary gang than it is to form a trade union in this country.”

**On the leaders’ public opposition to the free trade agreement:** “A great help to all Colombians.”

**On the leaders’ visit:** “Your presence here is a clear demonstration that we are not alone.”

In vivid contrast to these meetings, the leaders also met with Dr. Fabio Valencia Cossio, Colombia’s Minister of the Interior and Justice, and a deputy minister from Social Protection which is responsible for labour.

The minister was quick to laud a tripartite declaration on improving the labour situation, but he was equally quick to argue that trade and investment come before labour rights improvements. He called it a “chicken and egg question”: investment or labour rights?

Valencia painted a rosy picture of the Uribe government’s achievements - lower unemployment, fewer assassinations, higher investment confidence, and stronger economic growth. He stressed that it was not possible to compare Colombia to Canada or Europe. “The government is fighting terrorist organizations on the right and the left,” he said, and “the drug problem cuts through all other questions.”

But the Canadian leaders weren’t buying it.

“When will Colombia begin to respect the basic conventions of the United Nations’ International Labour Organization?” asked one leader. “From what we have learned,

DAY 7 LEFT: LEADERS WITH CUT PRESIDENT TARSICIO MORA IN BOGOTA.

DAY 7 RIGHT: LEADERS MEET WITH COLOMBIA’S MINISTER OF THE INTERIOR AND JUSTICE AND A REPRESENTATIVE FROM THE MINISTRY FOR SOCIAL PROTECTION, RESPONSIBLE FOR LABOUR ISSUES.



95 per cent of Colombian workers do not have an enforceable collective agreement. Until that happens, we cannot accept a free trade agreement.”

The minister was clearly upset when he learned that the leaders’ group would return to Canada with an anti-free-trade message.

“We don’t believe free trade will improve human rights,” one leader told the minister. “There is a major difference between free trade and fair trade. Fair trade means respecting human and labour rights. Free trade is only about investment.”

## Colombia city worker tours Canada

While the leaders were touring Colombia, the Frontlines group, sponsored a month-long Canadian tour by a young Colombia municipal worker. A nationwide tour was organized during which she met with politicians, union leaders, municipal

workers and others. At each of those meetings, she described what you have read here. She noted her own experience being under threat from paramilitary groups for her outspoken trade unionism. Her visit strengthened her resolve to fight for a better, safer Colombia. But it also strengthened the ties of international solidarity between the labour movements of the two countries.

## To find out more

There are many web sites that provide wide coverage of the current situation in Colombia and the ongoing issues discussed in this booklet. In addition to the sites of the four unions that published this booklet, here are a few others:

<http://upsidedownworld.org/main/>

<http://www.world-psi.org/>

<http://www.labourstart.org/>

<http://www.ituc-csi.org/>

<http://canadianlabour.ca/en/international>

<http://www.commonfrontiers.ca/>

## Praising the resistance of the Colombia people

The union leaders agreed on daily postings to their respective web sites, but they also made the following personal comments on their return to Canada.

Denis Lemelin | CANADIAN UNION OF POSTAL WORKERS

### Heroic struggle of Colombian people deserves our support

If you've read each of the daily commentaries about our Colombia solidarity tour, you've noticed the difficult environment facing the Colombian workers, our brothers and sisters in the labour movement, indigenous communities, displaced people and the vast majority of the population. We ought to pay them tribute.

In a country ruled by paramilitaries, armed groups and drug traffickers, the Colombian people resist tirelessly. In a country where the government systematically abolishes labour laws and where impunity is the rule, Colombians stand up for their rights every day.

As one example amongst many others, I want to emphasize the struggle of our brothers and sisters from the National Union of Postal Workers of Colombia (STPC). For years, they've campaigned against the privatization of the Colombian post office. They fought the liquidation of ADPOSTAL and are currently fighting to organize the whole postal sector. Their dedication to the labour cause is boundless.

In Colombia, if you don't agree with the ruling class, you become a "terrorist" and are faced with the frustrations, threats and arbitrary treatment from the government and armed groups. At the point of the gun, one-track thinking reigns supreme.

But in spite of all this, Colombians resist heroically because they believe in social justice and in human and labour rights. They believe another world is possible and necessary. The people in struggle in Colombia deserve our undivided admiration and support.

Let's show our solidarity.

Paul Moist | CANADIAN UNION OF PUBLIC EMPLOYEES

### We salute the courage of Colombia's trade unionists and other activists

As I reflect on our tour of Colombia, I realize what a profound impact it has had on me to witness the courage of the trade unionists and human rights activists we met. I was

In Colombia, if you don't agree with the ruling class, you become a "terrorist" and are faced with the frustrations, threats and arbitrary treatment from the government and armed groups. At the point of the gun, one-track thinking reigns supreme.

struck by how the state has stacked itself against the union movement, indigenous people, Afro-Colombians and others, how they are pursuing a neo-liberal agenda and leaving most citizens behind.

I am appalled at Stephen Harper signing a free trade deal with a government that so openly violates human and labour rights, and I feel good about CUPE's work in Colombia and believe that this must continue.

From various briefing sessions, we learned that over 4 million people have been moved off of their land and forced to live in barrios adjacent to major cities. Over a million Colombians have simply disappeared in the past three decades; their families do not know where they are or what happened to them.

We further learned that only private sector workers can unionize in Colombia. Only 5 per cent of the public sector is unionized. With a workforce of 18 million, only about 5 million are unionized. Of these, only 200,000 are covered by collective agreements as we know them in Canada.

When we visited barrios in the hills around Medellin, we saw the shantytowns that house hundreds of thousands of displaced Colombians living in abject poverty. We met with community leaders in a small schoolhouse and they shared their stories about being forcibly removed from their land and their desire to escape the paramilitaries. They told us how there was no work. They said the real jobless rate is at 50 per cent.

When we visited an aboriginal community, we heard about mining companies, including Canadian firms, who want access to aboriginal land so they can expand their operations. All who spoke were adamant that the Uribe government's economic model - free trade agreements to expand investment in Colombia - would result in water privatization and further displacements of aboriginal people.

The aboriginal leaders spoke of their desire for more trade union rights in Colombia as being critical to creating the kind of society they want, one that puts people first. Again, I was struck by the solidarity between labour and aboriginal people. They spoke of their "indigenous vision being beyond aboriginal people."

Only 5 per cent of the public sector is unionized. With a workforce of 18 million, only about 5 million are unionized. Of these, only 200,000 are covered by collective agreements.

CUPE'S MOIST WITH PUBLIC SECTOR UNION LEADER DENISE MORENO AND PAY EQUITY BOOKLET.



When we met with trade union leaders, we learned that all health care, social security and pensions have been privatized in Colombia. Some 98 per cent of hospitals are now private. About 45,000 health care workers lost their jobs in this process. In these three areas alone, a total of 135,000 workers have lost their jobs.

When we attended the Permanent People's Tribunal, we heard the judges "declare and condemn the lack of labour rights in Colombia. All ILO conventions, including #87 and #98, are ignored, allowing the total systematic violation of labour rights." In their powerful conclusion, they said "It amounts to the annihilation of the trade union movement in Colombia."

When we met with the Minister of the Interior, we never did get an answer as to how a nation can sign on to ILO conventions that respect free collective bargaining rights and then not enable those rights through a legislative framework.

Needless to say the minister did not like this line of questioning, which is fine; however, he could not have left the meeting with anything but an understanding that we don't support the FTA and we don't support trade deals between Canada and any country that refuses to support free collective bargaining.

When we met with the left-opposition party, they offered some chilling statistics: 66 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line, with 26 per cent of the people living in "abject poverty". Some 3 million children live outside the education system, which leads to a multi-generational certainty of a life in poverty.

These are just some of the shocking and disturbing aspects of Colombia that we witnessed during our brief tour.

George Heyman | NATIONAL UNION OF PUBLIC AND GENERAL EMPLOYEES

### We were shocked by the contrasts we saw in Colombia

Colombia is a beautiful country, rich in natural and cultural resources, but these riches are shared only by a privileged few. On my first visit, I was shocked by the paramilitary violence that maintains these deep social divisions. On this, my second visit, my initial shock was replaced by a greater awareness of the complex and systemic attack on human and trade union rights that maintains the Colombian power structure.

The path to greater democracy, equality and respect for rights will be long and difficult. The impunity enjoyed for so long by those who routinely and violently suppress Colombians who speak out will not be easily surrendered. Those of us who support the freedom to speak out and organize must help by insisting loudly that respect for labour and human rights have to be concretely demonstrated, with results, before Canada or other countries legitimize Colombian repression by signing a free trade agreement. The proposed agreement will not benefit working Colombians and is not wanted by the Colombian people we met.

The left-opposition party offered some chilling statistics: 66 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line, with 26 per cent of the people living in "abject poverty". Some 3 million children live outside the education system.

We were shocked by the contrasts we saw. Incredible wealth and comfort counterpointed by the extreme poverty in service-less communities on the outskirts of Cali and Medellin, filled with people forcibly displaced from their rural homes.

We were shocked by the contrasts we saw. Incredible wealth and comfort counterpointed by the extreme poverty in service-less communities on the outskirts of Cali and Medellin, filled with people forcibly displaced from their rural homes.

The solemn statement by Colombia's Interior Minister - that the Uribe government is committed to ending violence against trade unionists - contrasted with much evidence of government complicity in these same threats and violence. The threats, and the average rate of one trade union activist murdered every three days for the past 22 years, are clearly intended to dissuade union organizing and pave the way for increased privatization. Less visible, but an essential element in the fabric of repression, are the laws the government has passed which force privatization and de-unionization and fly in the face of internationally accepted union freedoms and rights.

It is tempting, when you hear the endless stories of violent repression, to think that surely it cannot be quite this bad. Surely such repression cannot be so entrenched. Yet the fundamental themes of violence, repression, intimidation, forced relocation and murder of indigenous and Afro-Colombian people to gain access to their rich lands was repeated by the United Nations' Acting High Commissioner, the Permanent People's Tribunal, which investigated the situation over two years, and the Canadian embassy.

The complicity of the Colombian government in all of this is widely acknowledged. At the very least it is complicit through lack of meaningful action to curb right-wing violence and at worst through demonstrated connections with various right-wing organizations.

CUPW'S LEMELIN SPEAKS WITH UN ACTING HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS JAVIEZ HERNANDEZ.



We met trade unionists active in the face of death threats who must travel to meetings with bodyguards, Afro-Colombians trying to assert their constitutionally guaranteed rights, indigenous people struggling to protect their culture and communities.

We met trade unionists active in the face of death threats who must travel to meetings with bodyguards, Afro-Colombians trying to assert their constitutionally guaranteed rights, indigenous people struggling to protect their culture and communities in the face of routine violence and forced removal, and human rights advocates who work to unite all Colombians to build a just and equitable democracy. All of these people, in spite of decades of repression, few resources and incredible obstacles to organizing, have demonstrated unbelievable commitment, determination and hope. They are generous and welcoming. They believe that the huge risks they face in speaking out are outweighed by the possibility of building a fairer and safer nation.

Against this backdrop, the Canadian government, led by Stephen Harper, says we can help Colombians best by opening up trade. He trusts the Uribe government's word that they are working to improve human and trade union rights. Harper is either uninformed or, more likely, ideologically disposed to ignore the plain facts in order to open up investment opportunities for mineral and energy companies. These are not Canadian values and certainly not labour values.

We must and will raise our voices of opposition to free trade with Colombia under the current circumstances, to the Uribe government's burying of human and union rights, and in support of the Colombian people victimized by decades of violent repression.

We will raise our voices louder and louder, with the same conviction and belief in a better future demonstrated to us by many brave and committed Colombians, until they win back their rights.

PSAC'S JOHN GORDON PRESENTS FLAG TO PUBLIC SECTOR UNION LEADER MARIA EVA VILLATE.



John Gordon | PUBLIC SERVICE ALLIANCE OF CANADA

## People stood and called out the names of the dead and missing

Our front line tour got off to a great beginning. When we arrived at the Bogota airport in the late evening of July 18, we were greeted by a welcoming party of trade unionists from the STPC (postal workers' union), ASDEP (Union of the People's Defender's Office) and their families, holding a handmade banner welcoming our four unions - CUPE, CUPW, NUPGE and PSAC.

An even more heart-wrenching time for me was when I visited the Afro-Colombian community of Agua Blanca outside of Cali. I sat with a family in a tiny shack that they had built on the side of a hill; it was made from tin, canvas and some wooden boards – 18 people lived in this hut.

The next seven days were long and packed with meetings with leaders from the labour movement, indigenous leaders, national labour school, and displaced peoples' groups, including the Afro-Colombian community of Agua Blanca. We also met with the minister of the interior, the Canadian ambassador and the office for the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights.

In all of those meetings, we continually heard of the struggles of workers who bravely stand up and speak out in a society that is ruled in large part by the paramilitary groups that are linked to the drug trafficking industry. We heard time and again of union leaders who have been killed or have gone missing.

One very emotional moment was when we attended the Permanent People's Tribunal to listen to its final judgment on Colombia's human and labour rights record, chaired by 1980 Nobel Peace Prize winner Adolfo Pérez Esquivel. All around the packed auditorium of the León de Greiff Auditorium of Colombia's National University, people would stand and call out the names of the dead and missing to which the audience would respond, "Presente, Presente, Presente" to indicate that they were present in spirit.

An even more heart-wrenching time for me was when I visited the Afro-Colombian community of Agua Blanca outside of Cali. I sat with a family in a tiny shack that they had built on the side of a hill; it was made from tin, canvas and some wooden boards - 18 people lived in this hut.

We spoke with the grandmother who told us that she had arrived there only a few months ago, and the house was her daughter's who had been there for about three years. She went on to tell us that her husband had been murdered by the paramilitaries who had forced them off their land.

While the children were running around, playing a variety of games and having fun, we were reminded by the adults that even though they seem happy at that moment, what they see at night - gangs, drugs, etc. - has already had a significant impact on their minds. There are no schools for them and the future does not look bright.

It was a startling and eye-opening visit that has had a lasting impact on my understanding of Colombian reality.

NUPGE'S HEYMAN  
SPEAKS WITH CBC  
RADIO REPORTER  
AT BOGOTA NEWS  
CONFERENCE.



## What you can do

With the unstable political situation in Canada coupled with the economic instability facing all countries, this is no time to consign our own economy and that of Colombia to the uncertainty of a free trade agreement.

The Canadian Labour Congress is continuing its campaign against the deal as are the four public sector CLC affiliates responsible for this booklet. Your support in the fight against free trade is more critical than ever.

Please write to your member of Parliament. Tell them to protest the Harper government's unilateral deal. Ask them to force a debate in the House of Commons that will allow full disclosure of what the

deal will mean for Colombians. You can also write to the Colombia president to express your concerns.

**Dr. Alvaro Uribe Velez**

**President of the Republic of Colombia**

**Cra. 8 No.7-26**

**Palacio de Narino**

**Santa Fe de Bogota, COLOMBIA**

**[auribe@presidencia.gov.co](mailto:auribe@presidencia.gov.co)**

**Fax: (571) 566-2071**

In addition, the web sites listed on page 28 and others offer many opportunities to send letters or sign online petitions informing various leaders and organizations about your concerns regarding Colombia.



## CONCLUSION

### Preserving forever the solidarity of Canadian and Colombian workers

Thousands of sugar cane workers went on strike to strengthen wage demands. The cutters have watched their wages steadily diminish. The Canadian leaders supported the strikers and the dispute ended in a small victory.

The leaders' personal and joint commentaries speak for themselves. They are opposed to the free trade agreement negotiated by the Harper government. They favour fair trade with Colombia when and if the Uribe government has made the country safe for trade unionists and other activists to live in a political climate that welcomes democratic dissent.

The leaders are aware that the Uribe government is attempting to secure an unprecedented third mandate to govern by obtaining the required signatures on a petition that would trigger a referendum to change the constitution. In light of what they saw and heard, the leaders oppose the continuation of the current government, especially given that 60 elected officials are under criminal investigation.

What the leaders witnessed was a population of displaced peoples who will never see the petition and who have no voice to speak out against a government that has been complicit in their displacement and their impoverishment. They further witnessed a people's tribunal that provided documented evidence of that complicity and condemned the "crimes against humanity" that the Uribe government has wrought by turning Colombia into a veritable corporate laboratory.

During their visit, the leaders were able to assist with some immediate concerns. For example, their presence at the Office of the People's Defender strengthened the union's bid to provide protection for members working in the most dangerous parts of the country.

When they met with the minister of the interior, their presence solicited an immediate order to provide protection for a trade unionist who has had his life threatened as have so many other union leaders.

When they spoke with indigenous peoples, they agreed to ask aboriginal leaders in Canada to work more closely with the indigenous leaders of Colombia. When they saw the slums where displaced peoples, mostly women and children, now are forced to live in their millions, they agreed to tell the world what they saw.

The leaders were asked by the groups they met to act as their voice in Canada, to tell Canadians what is really happening to their country and to call out for justice and a democracy free of paramilitary death squads, corporate wrongdoing, civil war, and the deadly drug trafficking industry.

The people of Colombia want justice. They also want to see an end to the corporate takeover of their country and to the consequent sacrifice of their children's futures.

They want to live in peace and have an opportunity to make a decent living in workplaces that do not shun trade unions.

The Frontlines tours to and from Colombia have strengthened the ties of international solidarity between the labour movements of the two countries. It is hoped that this booklet will do the same and that it will help to preserve forever the solidarity of Canadian and Colombian workers.

## Since the leaders' tour

Much has happened since the leaders' tour. First and most damaging was Prime Minister Stephen Harper's signing of a free trade agreement with Colombia at the APEC meeting in Lima, Peru, late in 2008. Despite repeated warnings, including a damning report from the House of Commons Standing Committee on International Trade released shortly before the leaders' tour, the prime minister supported the deal.

Meanwhile thousands of sugar cane workers went on strike to strengthen wage demands. The cutters have watched their wages steadily diminish. The Canadian leaders supported the strikers and the dispute ended in a small victory. In fact, as the leaders had learned during their tour, there are few opportunities to exercise what North Americans accept as the basic right to strike. Such occurrences are also rare because there is little that could be described as free collective bargaining in Colombia.

At the same time, the indigenous peoples in some parts of Colombia came under increased pressure from paramilitary death squads wanting to force them off their land and silence dissent. They mounted a march and rally to protest the invasion of their lands and the constant threats to their lives and livelihoods. The leaders had seen how families are displaced and moved to city slums, so they also supported the indigenous protest.

As these events were unfolding in Colombia, the leaders made presentations to their members, other trade union leaders, the Canadian Labour Congress and at events organized by non-government organizations. Their message was clear: do not sign a free trade agreement because it will harm the Colombia people.

A federal election momentarily sidelined the ongoing battle to have the free trade agreement stopped. The election was followed by the global economic crisis while at the same time Canada was hit with a serious political crisis that has not been resolved. It could result in yet another federal election early in 2009.

All of these developments have had an influence on the deadly situation that faces Colombian workers and their families every day.

The leaders were asked by the groups they met to act as their voice in Canada, to tell Canadians what is really happening to their country and to call out for justice and a democracy free of paramilitary death squads, corporate wrongdoing, civil war, and the deadly drug trafficking industry.

**DELIVERED AT BOGOTA, COLOMBIA  
JULY 23, 2008**

## **Conclusion of Permanent People's Tribunal Final Report**

As conclusion to this session, held in Colombia over more than two years, the Court feels the need to thank everyone who has made this event possible, especially all the individuals who, with dignity and courage, have presented charges based on solid evidence and the records of the facts, which have allowed reconstruction of what happened, through their words renewing the suffering and pain caused by dramatic events.

The Court expresses its profound concern for the position of vulnerability in which those who fight for human rights in Colombia find themselves and, in particular, for those who have sought this session or have served as witnesses or commentators. Of special concern is the threat to the lives and rights of individuals who have played their role as citizens committed to dignity, freedom, and rights of all Colombians, with courage and integrity of conduct.

The Court, recalling the brutal murder of Eduardo Umaña Mendoza, who had upheld the charges before the TPP [Tribunal Permanente de los Pueblos - Permanent Peoples' Tribunal] with rigorous legal professional behavior and moral integrity in the memorable session on impunity in Latin America (Bogotá, 22-25 April 1998) believes that everything that might affect reporters and witnesses in these hearings from now on must be considered the direct responsibility of the Colombian Government.

The Court also has to thank all those attending the hearings for their ongoing, polite, and informing presence, as representatives of communities and peoples, as part of a widespread, committed movement in the fight to prevent any impulse to forget, upholding the demand for justice and for truth for victims, and to have human rights taken seriously by institutions.

The Judges have learned from this presence and from the extraordinary citizen participation that has accompanied the performance of the work of the court, that when a movement to fight against injustice and inequality arises, international catalogs of rights and national Constitutions stop being mere recitals of rights on paper and become instruments for recovery of personal and societal rights and for democratic change.

When a movement to fight against injustice and inequality arises, international catalogs of rights and national Constitutions stop being mere recitals of rights on paper and become instruments for recovery of personal and societal rights and for democratic change.

Finally the Court puts on record the profound impact on it of learning that, in spite of a very tragic situation ongoing for many decades, there continues a potent resistance to injustices and a firm decision to work constantly to overcome the culture of conflict and of war and to promote the transformation of society to realize a true constitutional State in law.

The Court commits to convey to the world and to give voice to the feeling of optimism that is clear from the fighting spirit shown, which can only lead to immense hope.

The Court, as a consequence of the importance and consequence of demands for justice that have accompanied the presentations, to encourage courts and justice workers to implement the contents of the law and to achieve an effective right to justice, resolves to remit the record, opinion, and recommendations not just to government institutions and to transnational companies who have been considered in this finding, but also, so that they might act accordingly within their jurisdictions, authorities, and functions, to the following individuals and institutions:

Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court; Economic and Social Council of the United Nations; United Nations Council on Human Rights, special Reporters competent in this matter, and special Reporter for the independence of magistrates and judges; European Court of Human Rights; InterAmerican Human Rights Court and Commission; Presidents of the Constitutional Court, of the Supreme Court of Justice, Attorney General, Prosecutor General, and Colombian People's Defender; Governments of the member States and the Commission and to the parliament of the European Union.

## Recommendations

to the Government of Canada

from the House of Commons Standing Committee  
on International Trade

**Recommendation**

**1**

The Committee recommends that the Government of Canada should not sign and implement a free trade agreement with the Government of Colombia until the Canadian government has taken into account the recommendations contained in this report, including those of the dissenting reports.

**Recommendation**

**2**

The Committee recommends that the Government of Canada maintain close ties with Colombia without signing a free trade agreement until there is confirmation that the improvements noted are maintained, including continued improvement as regards displacement, labour law and accountability for crime, and until the Colombian government shows a more constructive attitude to human rights groups in the country.

**Recommendation**

**3**

The Committee recommends that the Government of Canada draw on the work of the organization Rights and Democracy to give an independent body the mandate to conduct studies regarding the impact on rights and the environment when it is negotiating economic agreements with countries at risk, as in the case of the agreement with Colombia.

**Recommendation**

**4**

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 levels of independent scrutiny and validation; the recommendations of this assessment should be addressed before Canada considers signing, ratifying and implementing an agreement with Colombia.

**Recommendation**

**5**

The Committee recommends that any trade agreement with Colombia ensure that separate deals on labour and the environment exceed the template of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in order to set a higher standard for future negotiations.

**Recommendation**

**6**

The Committee recommends that any trade agreement with Colombia must be accompanied by legislated provisions on corporate social responsibility and reporting mechanisms to monitor the implementation of universal human rights standards by Canadian entities investing in Colombia.

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**Recommendation**

7

The Committee recommends to the Government of Canada (a) that any trade agreement with Colombia include a compliance and enforcement mechanism for both the environment and human rights, comparable to the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) model, exceeding the template set by NAFTA; (b) that such mechanisms must be independent and objective, receiving adequate funding to complete their tasks and include a built-in inflation escalator; (c) that they should include a process that ensures public monitoring and input through such mechanisms as citizenship submissions.

**Recommendation**

8

The Committee recommends that the Government of Canada develop new social responsibility standards for corporations as regards compliance with universal human rights standards. Non-compliance with these basic standards could lead to Canada imposing penalties on these corporations.





“ We are descendant from the slaves of 400 years ago. Now we are slaves again. Our children can never go to university, never have organized recreation, and they have no future. ”

– AFRO-COLOMBIAN COMMUNITY LEADER