

INTERFAITH WORKING GROUP ON TRADE AND INVESTMENT

A WASHINGTON-BASED WORKING GROUP WITH REPRESENTATIVES FROM A RANGE OF FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS COMMITTED TO ASSERTING A STRONGER PRESENCE OF COMMUNITIES OF FAITH IN PUBLIC POLICY DISCUSSIONS ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND INVESTMENT.
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RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS OPPOSE COLOMBIA FREE TRADE AGREEMENT

In recent months, it has become evident that the Administration intends to submit the pending U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement to Congress for approval. Free trade proponents in Congress are pressuring the President to submit the agreement sooner rather than later. We believe that it would be a mistake for President Obama to advance the agreement in its current form. Members of Congress must make this clear to the President and should voice their intention to reject the agreement if it is advanced.

As representatives of religious institutions and faith-based organizations with extensive global relationships, we have deep concerns about the current situation in Colombia. The conditions of instability, inequality, impunity, violence, and poverty are profoundly troubling. Colombia is in the midst of a dire humanitarian crisis. Moreover, these problems are likely to be further exacerbated by the free trade agreement. The Administration's "Action Plan" agreement with the Colombian government does not do enough to protect workers' rights and fails to address broader human rights concerns. Given the history of unfulfilled promises and unimplemented commitments in Colombia, we insist that real, substantial, and lasting improvements in conditions on the ground are necessary before a trade agreement can be approved.

Specifically, we have concerns about the following areas:

Violence against trade unionists and human rights defenders in Colombia remains unacceptably high. Despite both promising rhetoric from the Santos Administration in Colombia and frequent claims by Americans that violence against trade unionists and human rights defenders in Colombia has been on the decrease, disturbing levels of violence in fact persist. Between 2005 and 2009, more trade unionists were killed in Colombia than in the rest of the world combined. Between June and October 2010 alone, 33 human rights defenders were killed. Impunity is widespread, with prosecutions lagging far behind incidents of killings and threats. As a presidential candidate, Barack Obama indicated that he would oppose the U.S.-Colombia FTA unless the human rights conditions were improved. The Action Plan agreement represents a step in this direction, but it is insufficient. We urge President Obama and members of Congress to stop the progress of the agreement until there are major improvements in human rights and labor conditions in Colombia.

Agriculture provisions in the agreement will accelerate displacement and push people into illicit crop production. Land inequality in Colombia is among the highest in Latin America, and this unequal distribution lies at the heart of Colombia's conflict. Colombia's five million internally displaced people represent the world's largest displacement crisis. This situation will only be exacerbated by the FTA, which is likely to accelerate land expropriation to benefit agro-export crops. The experience of Mexico under NAFTA has demonstrated the impact of agricultural provisions that will lead to a reduction of income for already poor farmers. Small-scale farmers in Colombia are projected to lose an average of 16% of their income as a result of the FTA. Simply put, this loss will

be devastating. Struggling families will find it even harder to produce enough food to survive, and many will find illicit crop production their only option. This shift will undermine even the alternative development projects the U.S. has advanced in recent years.

Investment provisions will allow foreign investors in extractive industries to displace poor Colombians and undermine Colombian national sovereignty. The situation of displaced people in Colombia is aggravated by violent and illegal land seizures by paramilitary and guerrilla groups who profit from the sale of these lands to unscrupulous companies. The U.S.-Colombia FTA will exacerbate this crisis by encouraging mining and other extractive industry projects that would push communities off of their lands. These disastrous effects have been demonstrated by companies that have already invested in extractive industries such as mining and palm oil extraction. Colombia has seen increased inequality, food insecurity, environmental damage, displacement of indigenous communities, and marginalization of small-scale mining and traditional livelihoods. Moreover, the investor-state dispute process in the FTA will allow foreign investors to challenge Colombian efforts to ensure public safety, public health, and environmental protection.

We support the efforts of the President and members of Congress to work with the Colombian government to make improvements. However, the recent “Action Plan” agreement does not do enough to improve labor rights, protect trade unionists and human rights leaders, and strengthen the rule of law in Colombia. The Santos Administration has offered promising rhetoric, but we have yet to see that language translated into concrete action. Without meaningful improvements in the area of human rights, a free trade agreement with Colombia should not even be on the table.

We must also remember that the agreement will exacerbate the problems in Colombia, rather than remedy them. It would be foolish to secure meaningful progress on human rights and inequality in Colombia only to implement an agreement that will undermine these achievements. As people of faith, it is our firm belief that international trade and investment agreements should advance the common good and be evaluated in the light of their impact on those who are most vulnerable. This agreement as it stands will increase the poverty and instability that underlie Colombia’s violent conflict. For these reasons, we urge the President not to submit the agreement to Congress. If he does, Congress should reject it.

Endorsed by the following members of the Interfaith Working Group on Trade and Investment:



American Jewish World Service



Center of Concern



Church World Service



Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach



Conference of Major Superiors of Men



Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns

Medical Mission Sisters
Alliance for Justice



Mennonite Central Committee
U.S. Washington Office



Missionary Oblates of Mary
Immaculate, Justice Peace and
Integrity of Creation Office



NETWORK: A National Catholic
Social Justice Lobby



Presbyterian Peace Fellowship



Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),
Office of Public Witness



Sisters of Mercy of the Americas –
Institute Justice Team



United Church of Christ,
Justice and Witness Ministries



United Methodist Church, General
Board of Church and Society



Witness for Peace