

INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS

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Colombia : Unions appeal to Europe and ILO

Brussels, 25 May 2005 (ICFTU OnLine):

In the run-up to the International Labour Conference and the trade negotiations between Europe and Andean countries, Colombian unions denounce anti-union repression and worsening work conditions.

By André Linard / InfoSud

Colombian unions of all political persuasions are firmly relying on the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to send their government a clear message when the International Labour Conference opens on May 31 in Geneva. "In 2003, we were not able to secure the sending of a Commission of Enquiry, but on this occasion we are counting on the ILO and European member states to act with greater justice," asserted the 6-person Colombian delegation during its visit to Brussels during its European tour (Germany, Netherlands, France, Great Britain, Belgium, Spain, Luxembourg, Italy, Finland and Sweden). The trip was organised at the beginning of May with the backing of the ICFTU and the WCL.

At this point, it is difficult to forecast whether the balance of power within the ILO Committee on the Application of Standards will tip in favour of a better result during the forthcoming ILC. The Colombian unions, backed by the entire workers' group, will renew their efforts to secure a "special paragraph". "Although this measure is a symbolic gesture without any legal force, employers are bitterly fighting against it, backed by the frenzied diplomatic campaign being waged by the Colombian government," said the delegation. Yet there is no doubt that the trade union rights situation Colombia warrants such a measure, as demonstrated by the delegation's report and comments: "From 1 January to 20 April 2005, 16 trade union leaders were murdered and many others suffered serious violations of their most basic rights: 123 death threats, 2 attempted murders, 6 forced displacements, 40 arbitrary arrests, 23 cases of harassment and 4 abductions." Colombia thus remains "the most violent country in the world for social and trade union leaders".

Social repression

Social repression is becoming increasingly harsh according to the members of the delegation. "The government has no regard for the trade union movement; the Labour Ministry has been merged with the Health Ministry to form the new Ministry of Social Protection," explains Héctor Amadeo Rodriguez of the CTC. "We are witnessing a legislative offensive against workers. Working hours have been made more "flexible" and employers are increasingly using part-time contracts or temporary contracts, even in the public sector, to avoid having to pay social security contributions for these workers." The delegation added that whilst the Constitution recognises workers' basic rights, the situation in practice is quite different.

Beyond the plight of trade unionists, the overall social situation is dramatic, both for workers and the population in general. "20 million out of the 45 million inhabitants form the economically active population," points out Ramón Eli Támaro, international relations secretary of CUT. "Sixty four percent of these people are unemployed. Only 50,000 workers benefit from a collective agreement." According to the government, unemployment is much lower, but its figures include the 16 million jobs in the informal economy. "In our view, these are stop-gap jobs," says Mario de Jesus Cardona Marín of CGT, adding that "workers are dismissed just 3 or 4 months before they are due to retire and lose all their rights".

As a result: "60% of the population live in poverty, that is 24 million people, and 10 million of these live in absolute poverty," explains Ramón Eli Támaro.

The trade unionists explained that the turning point came at the beginning of the 90's, with the policy of "flexibilisation" and the liberalisation of the economy. "Industries disappeared under the stress of foreign competition, which was technologically more advanced. Public companies were merged and privatised, leading to major job losses. Today, the country imports 13 million tonnes of foodstuffs, as compared with 700,000 tonnes in 1990," remarked Ramón Eli Támaro. "Agriculture has lost 400,000 direct jobs. Since then, young people have had no choice but to join the army or the paramilitaries. Alongside all those displaced by the war are all those who are displaced by poverty, moving to the south to grow coca," points out Mario Cardona.

Faith in Europe

Colombian unions have since been relying on external pressure on their government to change things. Not only that of the ILO, but also the European Union, which is involved in concluding trade agreements with Colombia via the Andean Pact. "Europe can also play a key role by demanding the application of the ILO Conventions that Colombia has signed," explained the delegation. The European Economic and Social Committee is scheduled to visit Colombia in July. The delegation, which has great faith in Europe's "social sentiment and concern for human rights", also hopes to see the formation of an "Andean Community Trade Union Committee".

The ICFTU represents 145 million workers in 231 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. ICFTU is also a member of Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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