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INTERNATIONAL TRADE UNION CONFEDERATION (ITUC)

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Colombia: Sugar cane harvesters demand rights at work

Brussels, 25 September 2008: The sugar industry in Valle del Cauca Department is currently in a difficult situation as a result of the strike by 10,000 sugar industry workers through the Cooperativas de Trabajo Asociado (CTA). The strike has already lasted a week, yet the attitude of employers and the government has not changed.

Various actions and measures have been taken with both the Asociación de Cultivadores de Caña de Azúcar (ASOCAÑA) and the government with a view to reaching an agreement and preventing the strike, but they were inadequate. On 5 September, over 5,000 workers tried to talk to President Álvaro Uribe upon his arrival in the city of Cali, but Uribe did not want to listen to them. The political, economic and social impact of this disaster is almost without precedent.

Asocaña paid for radio and television adverts urging the population not to participate in the strike, thus violating the right to freedom of association and the right to unionise. On 15 September, more than one hundred workers sustained injuries after being subjected to violence by the police, the Mobile Riot Squad of the national police force and the sugar engineers' private security forces.

One of the main problems in this conflict is the refusal of sugar cane companies, which are subsidised by the Colombian government, to grant their workers minimum labour rights. According to the law, every Colombian worker is entitled to a direct contract, a stable job, recognition and pay for sick days, education and housing benefits, holidays, clear and fair methods of weighing the sugar cane and compensation in the form of pay for the long hours and difficult conditions with which they work, among other things.

In a letter to the Colombian authorities, (http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/protesta_situacion_de_corteros_de_cana - setiembre.pdf), the ITUC requests that President Álvaro Uribe do everything in his power to ensure that the State's monitoring bodies, the national public prosecutor's office, the attorney-general's office and the ombudsman's office act as quickly as possible to find and prosecute those who perpetrated violent acts against workers and that the Ministry of Work and Asocaña respect workers' fundamental labour rights.

"The Colombian government must fulfil its constitutional duty to defend, protect and promote workers' rights," said Guy Ryder, general secretary of the ITUC. "The situation of sugar cane harvesters is unendurable and a solution must be found immediately."

UITA website: http://www.rel-uita.org/sindicatos/la_rebelion_corteros.htm

The ITUC represents 168 million workers in 155 countries and territories and

has 311 national affiliates. <http://www.ituc-csi.org>
<http://www.youtube.com/ITUCCSI>

For more information please contact the ITUC Press Department on +32 2 224 0204 or +32 476 621 018.

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