

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE COLOMBIA-U.S. BILATERAL TRADE AGREEMENT SUBMITTED TO THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRADE, OF THE WAYS AND MEANS COMMITTEE, BY THE COLOMBIA SUPPORT NETWORK

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The proposed Colombia-U.S. “Free Trade Agreement” (FTA), if passed by the U.S. Congress and implemented by the two countries, will have several negative effects upon Colombia. Among these are the following:

1. The Colombian government has failed to provide adequate protection for unionized workers and their leaders. While President Obama expressed concern about the large number of union workers being murdered in Colombia—a large number of them by paramilitaries hired by U.S.-based companies, such as Drummond Coal and Chiquita Brands—insufficient steps have been taken to reduce these killings, which continue unabated. And very few murders of union members result in convictions. Without a strong commitment to ending this union-busting-through-murder phenomenon and impunity for these crimes, violence will continue to threaten workers seeking to protect themselves and their employment from employers’ repressive actions. And the U.S. should press Colombia to outlaw a procedure permitting Colombian employers to sponsor “cooperatives” as an alternative to labor unions. These “cooperatives” are associations which eliminate a direct employment relationship between the workers and the employer, who is then able to avoid providing benefits to the workers and whose wage payments to them are often scandalously low.

2. Colombian campesinos, small-scale farmers with very limited economic resources, will suffer the loss of their traditional markets. Subsidized food crops from the United States will undercut prices in Colombia for such products, leaving the campesinos with nowhere to market their products, such as corn, rice and other staple products. This will increase poverty in rural areas, already a very serious concern, since hundreds of thousands of campesinos were forced off their lands during the Presidential terms of Alvaro Uribe Velez from 2002-2010. Colombia has some 4 million internally displaced persons, and the FTA will only add to this problem.

3. Some larger Colombian agricultural producers, such as those of cotton and sugar cane, may find imports from the U.S., subsidized by the U.S. government, threatening their markets, for example for cotton and sugar.

4. Colombian manufacturing businesses will face increased competition from the entry of U. S. manufacturing concerns into the Colombian market on a preferential basis. This combined with intellectual property protections allowed to the U.S. companies will likely force some Colombian businesses to close. For

example, Colombian pharmaceutical manufacturers may find it impossible to compete and to market their products successfully.

5. Indigenous peoples in Colombia are very concerned that intellectual property provisions relating to patent rights may have the effect of cutting off their access to traditional medicines, a fundamentally important part of their culture.

6. Preference for products produced in the United States may result in the decline and disappearance of traditional Colombian products. Thus favorable treatment for wheat may undermine local growing of quinoa and other traditional cereal crops.

7. As products from the U.S. take market share from local Colombian products, the advertisements for such products will become ever more pervasive, leaving native Colombian culture and mores ever more difficult to preserve.

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