



STRONGER TOGETHER

CONGRESS

Irish Congress of Trade Unions

29 October 2009

EU-Commissioner Baroness Catherine Ashton
200 Rue de la Loi
B 1049 Brussels
Belgium

Dear Commissioner,

We write in relation to the current 'Free Trade Agreement' (FTA) negotiations between the EU and Colombia. We are deeply concerned that instead of helping to resolve the atrocious human rights situation in Colombia such an agreement will appear to legitimise it.

The proposed agreement would give special trade benefits to a government that has done little to respect workers' rights and has repeatedly failed to implement their international obligations – including ILO core labour standards and the repeated recommendations made by the Bogota office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The Colombian regime has dedicated substantial resources to a public relations campaign to convince the international community that the situation is improving. However, a basic examination of the facts demonstrates that this is not the case – for example, contrary to the claims made by the Colombian authorities, the reality is that the killings of trade unionists in Colombia are increasing (by 25% in 2008 compared to the previous year) and the country clearly remains the most dangerous place in the world in which to engage in trade union activities.

Similar trade agreements between Colombia and Canada, Colombia and the EFTA group of countries and Colombia and the United States have all been delayed owing to human rights concerns, with President Obama himself publicly citing anti-trade union attacks as the principle reason for his opposition to the deal. For the EU to press ahead with such an agreement would send completely the wrong signal, damage the international consensus around this issue and demonstrate an astonishing lack of regard for human and workers' rights.

The assassinations of trade unionists in Colombia continue at a rate unseen in any other country. According to the International Trade Union Confederation's Annual Report, of 76 trade unionists assassinated in 2008, 49 were Colombians. The country's three trade union confederations, the Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT), the Confederación General del Trabajo (CGT) and the Confederación de Trabajadores de Colombia (CTC), are alerting us and providing documentation that refutes claims by the Uribe Government that the situation is under control. In fact, already in 2009, the toll is more than 30 assassinated trade unionists. And those responsible for the murders – sometimes including members of the state security forces – continue to act with almost complete impunity.

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The Irish Congress of Trade Unions, along with all twelve Irish Members of the European Parliament, asks the European Commission to immediately suspend the negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement with Colombia. It must be made clear to the Colombian authorities that the EU and its Member States do not condone the current situation in the country.

We call for the launch of an open EU investigation into Colombia's labour and human rights performance as permitted under the regulation governing GSP+.

Yours sincerely,

David Begg
GENERAL SECRETARY

This letter has the full support from all twelve Irish Members of the European Parliament.

They are:

Gay Mitchell, Jim Higgins, Sean Kelly and Mairead McGuinness of Fine Gael and European People's Party (Christian Democrats).

Brian Crawley, Pat the Cope Gallagher and Liam Aylward of Fianna Fail and the Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats of Europe

Proinsias De Rossa, Nessa Childers and Alan Kelly of the Labour Party and the Group of the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats.

Joe Higgins of the Socialist Party and the Confederal Group of the European United Left – Nordic Green Left.

Marian Harkin (independent), member of the Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats of Europe.

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