

Colombia failing on workers rights: Report
By ESTEBAN MANRIQUEZ
24 JULY 2012

Colombia has not fully complied with the Labor Action Plan agreed to with the U.S. in the lead up to the Free Trade Agreement, said U.S. labor union federation AFL-CIO Tuesday.

The report claims the Colombian government “has made little progress in addressing the needs of workers and their unions... many key commitments remain unfulfilled, and workers report no noticeable changes in their ability to exercise fundamental labor rights.”

Workers across the economy, including in the five priority sectors identified by the Labor Action Plan (palm, sugar, mines, ports and flowers), continue to experience the following on a regular basis: Unwanted indirect employment relationship (both cooperatives and other forms of sham subcontracting used for core, permanent work), which prevent workers from exercising their rights to free association and collective bargaining;

Unilaterally determined salary and benefit schemes imposed by employers to dissuade workers from joining a union (“pactos colectivos”);

Lower pay and benefits and worse working conditions than they would receive if they were free to organize and bargain; and

Threats of death and violence against themselves and their families for attempting to exercise the very rights the Labor Action Plan aims to protect.

In an interview with Colombia Reports, AFL-CIO representative Celeste Drake emphasized the importance of political agitation as a mechanism for promoting fair industrial relations laws and argued the report provides hope for workers.

Drake refused to give an exact timeline for the changes she hopes will occur in Colombia, however she stressed changes, “cannot be done overnight...as this is a long term issue and needs a multi-year solution.”

In April of 2011, the Colombian and U.S. governments negotiated the “Labor Action Plan”, which was a prerequisite to securing the Free Trade Agreement.

Drake argued that workers' rights advocates should lobby national governments rather than target particular corporations. In her view, the U.S. can be a “very influential player...they can act as an enabler by providing logistical support, expertise and by applying diplomatic pressure.”

Colombia has historically been a dangerous place for unionists and workers' rights activists. In 2011, at least 76 union workers around the world were killed, with more than half the deaths occurring in Latin America, including 29 in Colombia.

A study by the United Nations Development Programme warned that Colombia has one of the worst rates in the world concerning freedom of association and labor rights, with a record of more than 2,800 killings of trade unionists and members between 1984 and 2011.

The National Union School (ENS), a labor rights NGO and think-tank, reported 480 acts of violence or intimidation against workers and unionists in 2011, including 29 homicides, and instances of torture, kidnapping, disappearances and forced displacement.

AFL-CIO is an umbrella federation for U.S. unions, with 56 unions representing more than 12 million workers. They also promote workers' rights abroad. Drake told Colombia Reports that Colombia remains an important commitment for the organization and will continue to document the situation.

Copyright © 2012 Colombia news