

Trading Away Human Rights?

16 December 2009

On the 20th June this year, Rafael Antonio Sepulveda Lara was killed for his Trade union activities in San Jose de Cucuta, Norte de Santander in Colombia. Rafael is the latest statistic in a long running death toll of men and women striving to democratise workplaces in a very hostile environment. Colombia is the most dangerous place in the world for trade unionists – a fact that is undisputed. Over 60% of all trade unionists killed in the world last year were killed in Colombia. The Colombian authorities argue that the situation is improving. However, the reality is somewhat different.

2007 saw 39 trade unionists assassinated in Colombia.

2008 saw 49 killed. A 25% increase.

By mid-June this year, a further 21 trade unionists had been murdered. A total of 109 killed since January 2007. All of them were killed because of their trade union activities. Those responsible for the murders – sometimes including members of the state security forces – continue to act with almost complete impunity whilst a large number of the murders are not even being investigated by the Colombian authorities.

This is the main reason why the Irish Congress of Trade Unions has given priority to Colombia in our international Trade Union Solidarity work. In order to assist us in this task, our Global Solidarity Committee took the initiative to establish an Irish branch of the trade union network “**Justice For Colombia**”

Despite being condemned by many international organizations, trade unions and human rights defenders around the world, this appalling situation continues. The situation has been a particular focus for the International Labour Organisation which unfortunately does not have any teeth to enforce its Conventions on trade union rights. For this reason it is the strongly held trade union view (both within and outside of Colombia) that influencing trade agreements offers some potential for leveraging the Colombian government. One such agreement is currently being negotiated between the EU and Colombia and it is our strong contention that to continue to negotiate on this agreement in the absence of any real moves by the Colombian authorities to stop the murders of trade unionists there is at best turning a blind eye way and at worst, colluding with the Colombian authorities. The Free trade Agreement would give special trade benefits to a government that has repeatedly failed to implement their international obligations including basic human and trade union rights. The message has to be clear; Crimes against human rights must not be rewarded by the granting of trade privileges.

We have had a measure of success in persuading the body politic of the need for such a strong stance. All twelve Irish Members of the European Parliament have co-signed a letter to former EU Trade Commissioner Baroness Ashton asking her to suspend the negotiations with Colombia. The Senate also passed a cross party motion in support on December 15th.

These developments have attracted front page news in Colombia, where the Colombian Minister for Foreign Affairs commented “that it didn’t matter because Ireland is such a small and insignificant country”. Which begs the question why the Colombian Authorities felt the need to issue a [statement](#) to discredit independent trade unions in Colombia (CUT, CGT and CTC - and the National Trade Union School) by sending incendiary information from a completely unrepresentative trade union to European Union Members of Parliament

Disappointingly, despite the support of all the Irish MEPs and some TDs, our own Minister for Foreign Affairs, Micheal Martin seems reluctant to adopt the position of the MEPs and many TDs and Senators in the Oireachtas, Replying to parliamentary questions on the issue he seemed to accept a recent statement by the Colombian Foreign Minister who “confirmed that this is a priority issue for Colombia and that every effort was being made to address the position in the context of a difficult security situation”. More promisingly – he stated that he “will be in contact with the EU Trade Commissioner to underline our interest in an effective human rights clause being included in the agreement” Nothing however about suspending the negotiations until trade unionists stop being killed..

Everyone who cares about human and trade union rights should pressurize him to put these concerns above those of commerce and to adopt a position that would be more in line with other major trading blocs such as the US and Canada,

where similar agreements with Colombia are on hold because of human rights concerns.

It is high time for Europe and the world to act and finally let the Colombian authorities know that while these appalling human rights violations continue they cannot be accepted as respected members of the international community.