

# ***INTERFAITH WORKING GROUP***

## ***ON TRADE AND INVESTMENT***

A WASHINGTON-BASED WORKING GROUP WITH REPRESENTATIVES FROM A RANGE OF FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS COMMITTED TO ASSERTING A STRONGER PRESENCE OF COMMUNITIES OF FAITH IN PUBLIC POLICY DISCUSSIONS ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND INVESTMENT.  
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**October 12, 2011**

### **RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS OPPOSE COLOMBIA FREE TRADE AGREEMENT**

As representatives of religious institutions and faith-based organizations with extensive global relationships, we have deep concerns about the current situation in Colombia. The conditions of instability, inequality, impunity, violence, and poverty are profoundly troubling. Questions have arisen persistently about Colombia's record on human rights. Moreover, these problems are likely to be further exacerbated by the free trade agreement. Many members of Congress as well as the Administration have made clear their intention to work with the Colombian government to improve conditions, and these efforts are important. However, the agreement itself is likely to undermine progress along these fronts and contribute to increased poverty and instability.

Specifically, we have concerns about the following areas:

**Violence against trade unionists and human rights defenders in Colombia remains unacceptably high.** Despite both promising rhetoric from the Santos Administration in Colombia and frequent claims by Americans that violence against trade unionists and human rights defenders in Colombia has been decreasing, disturbing levels of violence in fact persist. Between 2005 and 2009, more trade unionists were killed in Colombia than in the rest of the world combined. Between June and October 2010 alone, 33 human rights defenders were killed. Moreover, impunity is widespread, with prosecutions lagging far behind incidents of killings and threats. As a presidential candidate, Barack Obama indicated that he would oppose the U.S.-Colombia FTA unless the human rights conditions were improved. The fact is that they have not. We urge President Obama and members of Congress to heed this commitment and oppose this agreement until there are major improvements in human rights and labor conditions in Colombia.

**Agriculture provisions in the agreement will accelerate displacement and push people into illicit crop production.** Land inequality in Colombia is among the highest in Latin America, and this unequal distribution lies at the heart of Colombia's conflict. Colombia's five million internally displaced people represent the world's largest displacement crisis. This situation will only be exacerbated by the FTA, which is likely to accelerate land expropriation to benefit agro-export crops. The experience of Mexico under NAFTA has demonstrated the impact of agricultural provisions that will lead to a reduction of income for already poor farmers. Small-scale farmers in Colombia are projected to lose an average of 16% of their income as a result of the FTA. For small-scale farmers, this loss will be devastating. Struggling families will find it even harder to produce enough food to survive, and many will find illicit crop production their only option. This shift will undermine even the alternative development projects the U.S. has advanced in recent years.

**Investment provisions will allow foreign investors in extractive industries to displace poor Colombians and undermine Colombian national sovereignty.** The situation of displaced people in Colombia is aggravated by the violent and illegal land seizures by paramilitary and guerrilla groups who profit from the sale of these lands to unscrupulous companies. The U.S.-Colombia FTA will exacerbate this crisis by encouraging mining and other extractive industry projects that would push communities off of their lands. These disastrous effects have been demonstrated by companies that have already invested in extractive industries such as mining and palm oil extraction. Colombia has seen increased inequality, food insecurity, environmental damage, displacement of indigenous communities, and marginalization of small-scale mining and traditional livelihoods. Moreover, the investor-state dispute process in the FTA will allow foreign investors to challenge Colombian efforts to ensure public safety, public health, and environmental protection.

We applaud and support the President and those in Congress who have committed to work with the Colombian government to make improvements. These efforts are important, and we urge all parties to apply leverage to achieve concrete steps to improve labor rights, protect trade unionists and human rights leaders, address issues of displacement, and strengthen the rule of law in Colombia. The Santos Administration has offered promising rhetoric, and we are hopeful that it will be followed by meaningful action. Without these improvements, a free trade agreement with Colombia should not even be on the table.

We must also remember that the agreement will exacerbate the problems in Colombia, rather than remedy them. It would be foolish to secure meaningful progress on human rights and inequality in Colombia only to implement an agreement that will undermine these achievements. As people of faith, it is our firm belief that international trade and investment agreements should advance the common good and be evaluated in the light of their impact on those who are most vulnerable. This agreement as it stands will increase the poverty and instability that underlie Colombia's violent conflict. **For these reasons, we urge members of Congress to vote NO on the U.S.-Colombia free trade agreement.**

*Endorsed by the following members of the Interfaith Working Group on Trade and Investment:*

American Jewish World Service  
Center of Concern  
Church World Service  
Columban Center for Advocacy and Outreach  
Conference of Major Superiors of Men  
Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns  
Medical Mission Sisters Alliance for Justice  
Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Justice Peace/Integrity of Creation Office  
NETWORK: A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby  
Presbyterian Church (USA), Office of Public Witness  
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas - Institute Justice Team  
Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur JPIC Office  
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries  
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society  
Witness for Peace