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Big Labor Can't Handle the Truth About Colombia

by James M. Roberts

Members of Congress who oppose the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement (TPA) are hurting the very people they claim to be protecting--workers and their families in the United States and Colombia. Not surprisingly, Big Labor is the driving force behind the opposition to freer trade. To counter the Bush Administration's push for a floor vote on the TPA by April, AFL-CIO Executive Linda Chávez-Thompson led a "fact-finding" mission to Colombia in mid-February, which included Communications Workers of America President Larry Cohen and United Steelworkers counsel Dan Kovalik, to "gather information to inform the debate over the proposed trade agreement."^[1]

Contrary to the propaganda of special interests, the U.S.-Colombia TPA would help the economies of both countries. Failure to ratify would damage the United States' reputation in the region, would hinder progress in the war on drugs, and could push Colombia toward the embrace of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. Congress should put national security ahead of partisan politics and ratify the U.S.-Colombia TPA.

Selective Deafness

Although the AFL-CIO leaders met with some anti-TPA union leaders and government officials in Colombia, including President Álvaro Uribe, they went out of their way to avoid any encounters with the heads of the many trade unions that represent 80,000+ Colombian workers in export industries (e.g., cut flowers, mining, petroleum products, coffee, textiles, sugar, and bananas). These representatives fervently favor the TPA and the new investments and jobs that it would bring. Apparently, the Big Labor visitors did not want to risk hearing anything from pro-TPA Colombian labor leaders that might contradict their pre-ordained conclusions. It seems that U.S. unions don't want facts to get in the way of their publicity stunts.

A History of Violence

Colombia has a tragic history of violence dating back to 1948, when a ruthless Cuban sociopath named Fidel Castro joined other Latin leftists in fomenting urban riots and rural violence that became known as the Bogotazo and La Violencia, respectively. Their intention was to overthrow the democratic government that had ruled Colombia for 150 years. At the time, a multilateral meeting was being held in Bogotá that led to the creation of the Organization of American States. A protest event, bankrolled by Argentinean strongman Juan Perón, was attended by many of the rioters, including the young Comrade Castro. The

riots claimed thousands of lives, including Colombian soldiers and revolutionaries, as well as innocent bystanders.[2]

Colombia's civil war in the 1950s, coupled with Castro's call to revolution in the 1960s, created new insurgent groups like the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). In the 1980s, the Colombian government failed to stop the rise of Pablo Escobar's Medellín Cartel and other murderous narco-traffickers, leading some on the Right to form "paramilitaries" that waged war against drug traffickers, the FARC, and the chaos generated by the political Left.

In the 1990s, FARC pursued the overthrow of the government of Colombia but also turned to the lucrative businesses of drug trafficking, kidnapping, and extortion. The combination of FARC, drug traffickers, and paramilitaries nearly destroyed the Colombian state. Cooperation between U.S. and Colombian administrations--first by Presidents Andres Pastrana and Bill Clinton and then by Presidents Álvaro Uribe and George W. Bush--led to the rollout of "Plan Colombia" in 1999. This bold, multi-year commitment to rebuild the Colombian state has helped the government to recover control of territory and extend security to the towns and the countryside. More than 30,000 paramilitaries have disarmed, the FARC is on the run, and violence is down significantly.

Despite the progress of Plan Colombia, the culture of violence continues, and the U.S. is Colombia's largest export market for cocaine. Ratification of the TPA would help Colombia to strengthen the government institutions that fight the scourge of illicit drugs.

President Uribe's Successes

Big Labor's script for stopping the Colombia FTA calls for heavy emphasis on the history of violence against Colombian labor leaders and alleged impunity granted to their assailants by the government. However, the number of murders of trade unionists has dropped by 75 percent since President Uribe took office, with only three killings so far in 2008.[3] As a result of successful efforts to reduce crime and boost economic growth, President Uribe's approval rating is near 70 percent. As reported in Reuters, "The Colombian government has tripled spending on protection for unionists, human rights activists, and other at-risk individuals and established a special unit to prosecute crimes against trade unionists." [4]

In fact, a large percentage of attacks against leaders of public-sector unions had nothing at all to do with the victim's union affiliation. Many of the crimes ensued from "normal" motives (i.e., robbery) but are categorized as "anti-union violence" by leftists to further their anti-globalization, protectionist agenda. The best way to change Colombia's culture of violence is to develop a large, well-educated middle class. The TPA would move Colombia in that direction by integrating its economy into the globalized market, thus increasing its prosperity and economic growth.

Surrendering to Chávez

If Congress listens to the AFL-CIO and votes down the U.S.-Colombia TPA, it will deliver a potential knock-out blow to President Uribe, the United States' best friend in the region. A failed TPA will lead Colombians and people from other countries in Latin America to conclude that the U.S. is not a reliable partner. Effectively, it would be a vote of "no confidence" in the Colombian people, which would be a public relations bonanza for Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and the FARC narco-terrorists he is trying to legitimize in order to undermine the Uribe government. Chávez aims to rule the "Gran Colombia" that was (briefly) headed

by Simon Bolivar 200 years ago, and Colombia is the jewel in would-be Emperor Hugo's crown.

A defeated TPA would put at risk the considerable progress made by Plan Colombia, into which Congress has poured hundreds of millions of dollars since 1999. Chávez would be emboldened to increase his already extensive collusion with the Colombian drug cartels, which are now on the run. The cartels are increasingly redirecting their products through Venezuela to Europe (through West Africa) and to the U.S. (through Haiti and the Dominican Republic--destabilizing them along the way).

If the TPA fails, perhaps the biggest losers would be the constituents of Members of Congress. Colombia currently has duty-free access to the U.S. market through the Andean Trade Preference Act. Defeat of the TPA would deny U.S. businesses the same access to the Colombian market.

Partisan Politics Vs. National Security

The U.S.-Colombia TPA is much more than a simple trade agreement: It is the sealing of a strong alliance between two long-time friends. More than 60 years ago, Colombia sent troops to assist in the allied effort in the Korean War; it was the only South American country to do so. The defeat of the TPA would be a tremendous loss of face for President Uribe and the entire Colombian nation, as well as a devastating blow to U.S. prestige and influence in the entire Andean region.

The AFL-CIO says that Colombia will just have to be patient "until 2009" for a "new" TPA to be negotiated and signed.[5] Big Labor clearly hopes that a Democratic administration will be taking power in Washington next year. Practically speaking, there is no way that a new TPA could be ready for implementation before 2010. Meanwhile, every day Colombia will continue to face oil-wealth-funded, multi-pronged assaults and challenges from Hugo Chávez and his Chavista followers both inside Colombia and in neighboring countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia. The AFL-CIO wants President Uribe to cool his heels until the end of his term in 2010, but neither Colombia nor the United States can wait for these problems to be addressed.

The timing of the opposition suggests that Big Labor is putting partisan politics ahead of national security. The Left's real agenda could be sheer protectionism or the raw partisan desire to deny a "legacy" victory to President Bush and the center-right government of Colombia.

Conclusion

Congress should ratify the U.S.-Colombia TPA as soon as possible. Congress should also restore the cuts made to Plan Colombia's military budget in fiscal year 2008. With the agreement ratified, the Bush Administration and U.S. businesses could begin a new chapter in U.S. economic engagement with Colombia and the region.

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[1] James Parks, "AFL-CIO Fact-Finding Delegation Heads to Colombia," AFL-CIO Weblog, February 11, 2008, at <http://blog.aflcio.org/2008/02/11/afl-cio-fact-finding-delegation-leaves-today-for-colombia/> (February 19, 2008).

[2] Brian Latell, *After Fidel: Raul Castro and the Future of Cuba's Revolution*, (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), pp. 101-106.

[3] Hugh Bronstein, "Colombia Trade Deal Dead This Year, U.S. Unions Say," *The Washington Post*, February 12, 2008, at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/12/AR2008021201744.html.

[4] Doug Palmer, "Labor Leaders to Visit Colombia as Bush Presses for Vote," *Reuters*, February 7, 2008, at www.reuters.com/article/domesticNews/idUSN0739641220080207 (February 19, 2008).

[5] Hugh Bronstein, "Colombia Trade Deal Dead This Year, U.S. Unions Say."