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## Congress should not pass the flawed Colombia trade pact

by Tony Avirgan

The lame-duck Bush administration is trying to link support for an auto-industry rescue loan to Congressional passage of the stalled Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA). The loan is a good idea.<sup>1</sup> The Colombia trade agreement is a very bad one.

*The New York Times*<sup>2</sup> editorialized that the Colombia trade pact should be passed because doing so would benefit American companies and workers. The *Times* stated that Colombian assassination of trade unionists “is still too high, but has dropped sharply.” The *Times* is woefully misinformed. The latest report from the authoritative Escuela Nacional Sindical (ENS, National Union School) disputes the claim that assassinations of Colombian trade unionists are declining.<sup>3</sup> According to the ENS, there were 32 assassinations of unionists in 2007, and 41 assassinations of unionists in the first eight months of 2008. This is the continuation of a dismal human rights record that has seen 2,683 unionists assassinated in the past 22 years. During that time there have been few prosecutions, and those that have occurred have been only of low-level triggermen. There has been no effort to investigate and prosecute those orchestrating the crimes behind the scenes. To pass the Colombia Free Trade Agreement now would give a U.S. stamp of approval to this ongoing violence and impunity.

However, even if there were no human rights problem in Colombia, the Colombia Free Trade Agreement would still be a bad idea. The United States is about to change governments. President-elect Barack Obama has said that his administration will not advocate trade agreements similar to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) or the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) because he understands that such agreements favor multi-national corporations at the expense of working people. These pacts have a better record of increasing U.S. investment overseas than they do of increasing U.S. exports or creating employment in the United States. The Bush government’s Colombia Free Trade Agreement is based on the NAFTA/CAFTA model. *It would be foolhardy to have a lame-duck administration force a lame-duck Congress to pass a trade agreement on this discredited model.*

Supporters of the Colombia FTA argue that it will benefit U.S. investors and corporations operating or desirous of operating in Colombia. Yet, a U.S. multi-national, Chiquita Brands International, was found guilty in a U.S. court of providing financial support to Colombian death squads that target social activists and union leaders. In these circumstances, does Colombia really need more U.S. investment?

The Global Policy Network ([www.gpn.org](http://www.gpn.org)) is currently engaged in a project, along with the ENS and other Latin American partners, to bring together trade unions, NGOs, and parliamentarians to identify the elements of a trade policy favorable to working families in the United States and abroad. The new trade model will be presented to the Obama-Biden transition team before the Jan. 20 inauguration.

Congress should not reward a regime in Colombia that continues to permit a reign of terror against union leaders, social activists, and workers. And the Bush administration should not endanger

hundreds of thousands of U.S. auto-industry jobs in order to secure passage of a bad trade pact—they are wholly separate issues. The Obama administration will have the leverage to bring about real change in Colombia and negotiate a trade agreement that helps workers and businesses in both nations.

## Notes

1. See EPI Policy Memorandum #134, [\*An investment, not a bailout: The \\$25 billion rescue loan being considered for automakers would help maintain an essential industry, along with 3 million critically needed jobs\*](#) (Nov. 14, 2008).
2. See *The New York Times* editorial “Pass the Colombia Trade Pact,” from Nov. 18, 2008.
3. See Escuela Nacional Sindical’s *Violaciones Del Derecho A La Vida, A Libertad Y A La Integridad Fisica De Los Sindicalistas en Colombia*, informe de 1 de enero a 20 de octubre 2007-2008.

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