

The human rights situation in Colombia is one of the most serious in the Americas: Since 1988, Colombian human rights organisations have registered an average of 3000-4000 political assassinations and/or forced disappearances each year. This figure represents more political killings or disappearances each year than the entire number registered during the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile.

One of the sectors hardest hit by repression are trade unionists. According to a recent report by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), more than 1,800 Colombian trade unionists have been murdered in the past decade. This means an average of one trade unionist is murdered every two days. A number of other union leaders -- in particular, those who have been most active in challenging the government's neo-liberal economic reforms and the privatisation of dozens of the country's state-run companies -- have also been brought before "faceless" judges on charges of terrorism. Many others have become internal refugees after having received death threats by paramilitary death squads. Those who remain do so at great personal cost and risk.

In the midst of this human rights nightmare, the international community -- including until recently, the Canadian government -- has remained largely silent with regards to Colombia's human rights record. In contrast to the general awareness among Canadians of the situation in Central America, most Canadians know little or nothing about Colombia. At the same time, bilateral trade between Canada and Colombia has been expanding. Today, Colombia is Canada's fifth largest trading partner in the Americas. Some of the Canadian companies presently in Colombia are Bell Canada International, TransCanada Pipelines, InterProvincial Pipelines, Northern Telecom, Bell Textron Helicopters, Bombardier and McCain Foods.

Recommendations following the trade union delegation include:

- Exchanges between trade unions in Canada and Colombia;
- Support to Colombian refugees from the Canadian trade unions;
- Researching Canadian connections to the conflict in Colombia;
- Initiating a "Clean Flowers" Fair Trade campaign;
- Strengthening the women's section of the national trade unions' congress;
- Supporting indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities;
- Supporting peace initiatives;
- Providing sectoral solidarity.