

TRADEJUSTICE NEW YORK METRO

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NEWS RELEASE

TradeJustice Activists Disrupt Waldorf-Astoria Reception for Death Squad-Linked Colombian President to Protest Colombia NAFTA Expansion

New York, NY – Today at approximately, 1:30 PM, two activists from TradeJustice New York City Metro disrupted a Council of the Americas-sponsored reception for Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Velez to denounce Uribe's support for a free trade agreement between the US and Colombia that critics believe will exacerbate human rights and environmental catastrophes in the war-torn South American nation. Activists the reception, in the Waldorf-Astoria's Jade Room and shouted, "No Free Trade Agreement with Uribe's death squad government! Over 100 union organizers have been killed in the last 2 years in Colombia! Uribe is lying about demobilizing the death squads! The free trade agreement will mean more Afro-Colombian communities displaced for oil palm plantations and more indigenous people displaced for oil pipelines!" The disruption was supported by a street picket.

The US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement has been widely condemned by human rights groups, labor unions, environmentalists, AIDS activists, animal rights advocates, family farm organizations, peace groups, religious leaders, and advocates of Colombia's Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities.

The agreement will allow US agribusiness to dump genetically engineered, industrially produced, factory farmed, government subsidized crops and animal products onto Colombia's market, displacing family farmers and driving them to coca production for the global cocaine trade. This will fuel US aerial fumigation programs that have poisoned people, wildlife, and the Amazon rainforest.

State-investor provisions in the agreement give corporations the right to sue the US and Colombian governments for unlimited sums in international tribunals for enforcing their environmental and labor laws, despite Colombia's abysmal record on these issues. Colombia has the highest rate of unionist assassinations on the planet, the work of right-wing paramilitary death squads with close ties to the Uribe administration. Despite Uribe's rhetoric of ending impunity towards unionist killings, there have been more killings so far this year than in all of last year.

Colombia's Amazon rainforests and Andean cloudforests have been subject to exploitation by oil corporations, spilling vast amounts of oil into the sensitive Amazon rainforest, creating a conflict flashpoint for the decades long Colombian civil war, and leading to the displacement of Colombia's indigenous communities.

Colombia has the 2nd highest rate of internal displacement on the planet after the Sudan, the result of mass-displacement of Afro-Colombian communities, as terror groups seize lands for lucrative oil palm plantations for the biofuels market. The free trade agreement encourages corporate investment in projects like biofuels, while allowing corporations to circumvent environmental laws through the state-investor provisions.

Intellectual property rules in the agreement will allow corporations to enforce patent protections that will limit access to generic drugs while maintaining prices on brand name drugs that will make the Colombian poor unable to afford life-saving medications.

Free trade agreements have failed to deliver their promised benefits, contributing instead to an increasing concentration of wealth while contributing to unemployment and lower wages for family farmers and working people. A majority of Republican and Democratic voters now oppose NAFTA-style policies. President Uribe is aggressively lobbying the US Congress to pass a free trade agreement in December, when voters will no longer have the power to hold the outgoing Congress accountable for their votes on an unpopular trade agreement.

According to Phil Josselyn, "NAFTA caused massive industrial job flight as corporations saw an opportunity to outsource jobs to unionbusting sweatshops to paying living wages or providing safe working condition. A nation where thousands of trade unionists have been assassinated for demanding rights for workers is paradise for greedy corporations that want cheap labor and will mean more outsourcing and layoffs for US workers."

Uribe's closest allies are implicated in the "Parauribismo" (Uribe paramilitary) scandal, with over 62 members of Congress official suspects. 33 elected officials, including Mario Uribe Escobar, President Uribe's cousin and former President of Congress, were in jail awaiting trial. The scandal revealed close ties between government officials and the right-wing AUC, including accusations that Uribe helped plan a paramilitary massacre in 1997, charges Uribe denies.

TradeJustice New York Metro is a coalition of peace, environmental, labor, human rights, animal rights, AIDS activist, and Colombian and other Latin American community organizations opposed to free trade agreements in the NAFTA model.