

ANOTHER COLOMBIAN TRADE UNION LEADER DISAPPEARS

Just days after President Bush said the Colombia Free Trade Agreement would “strengthen a courageous ally in our hemisphere,” the president of the Public Servants Union of Bogota, Guillermo Rivera Fuquene, disappeared.

The union leader’s disappearance takes place against a background of continuing harassment, threats and attacks against trade union leaders in Colombia, despite assurances by the government of President Uribe that the situation of workers and trade union activists in Colombia is improving.

“During the 16 months since the Colombia Free Trade Agreement was signed, my administration has worked closely with the Congress to seek a bipartisan path for considering the agreement,” Bush said on April 7. “We held more than 400 consultations and meetings and calls. We led trips to Colombia for more than 50 members of the Congress.”

Apparently the trips did not include visits to any of the relatives of murdered Colombian trade unionists. Since 1985 more than 3,000 union leaders and activists have been murdered, according to the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions.

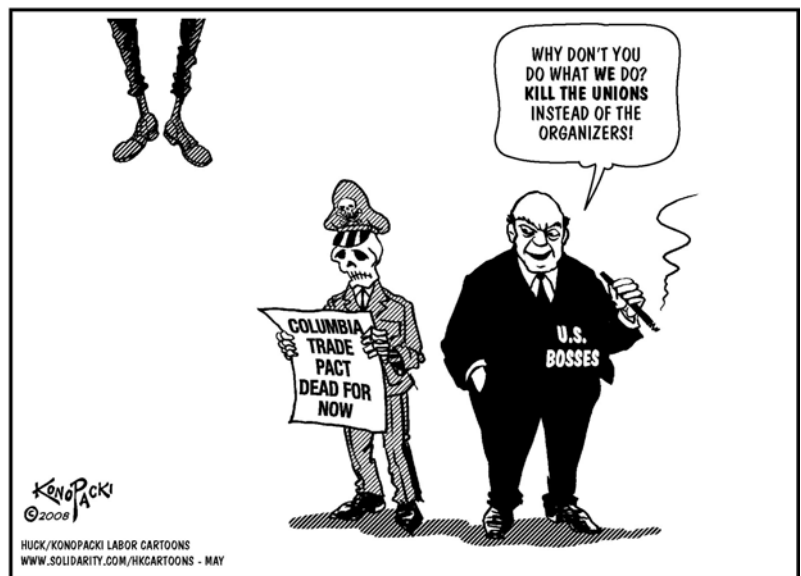
On March 6, over 200,000 people participated in the “March Against State Terror” in Colombia. The organizer of the march and four other human rights spokespeople were killed, along with four trade union leaders.

The recently-assassinated union leaders, according to a report in the Colombian weekly *El Espectador*, were:

- Carmen Cecilia Carvajal, teacher. Killed 4 March, in Ocaña, Norte de Santander.
- Leonidas Gómez Roza, member of the bank workers union. Killed on 5 March, in Bogotá.
- Gildardo Gómez Alzate, teacher and activist. Killed 7 March, in Medellín.
- Carlos Burbano, vice-president of the Hospitalworkers Union, Asociación Nacional de Trabajadores Hospitalarios. Killed 11 March, San Vicente del Caguán, Caquetá.

President Bush has said the Colombia Free Trade Agreement “will advance America’s national security interests in a critical region. It will strengthen a courageous ally in our hemisphere.” But news reports have repeatedly linked Colombia’s US-backed military with paramilitary groups suspected in the deaths of unionists and human rights activists.

A second cousin and confidante of President Uribe, Mario Uribe, was taken into custody in Colombia on April 22 on charges of allegedly promoting illegal far-right militias, according to the Associated Press.



More than 30 current or former members of the 266-member Congress, the vast majority of them allies of President Uribe, have been arrested for allegedly backing and benefiting from the right-wing paramilitaries. Among those in jail is Uribe’s former chief of domestic intelligence, Jorge Noguera, who allegedly gave the paramilitaries a “hit list” of labor and opposition leaders.

So much for President Bush’s “courageous ally in our hemisphere.”