

# Workers and unions in Colombia oppose free trade agreement now pending in U.S. Congress

By DENNY SCOTT

A delegation of seven U.S. citizens traveled to Colombia, South America, the first week of November under the sponsorship of Witness for Peace to investigate worker rights abuses and the position of Colombian worker groups on the Colombia-U. S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA).

Four union members in the delegation were from Oregon and Washington — Mike Pieti, executive secretary of the Carpenters Industrial Council, John Walsh, Local 767M Graphic Communications/Teamsters, Kari Ball, Service Employees International Union, and myself.

The delegation quickly learned that large segments of Colombian society oppose the Colombian-U.S. FTA. The view heard over and over was that the FTA, if approved by the U.S. Congress, would further consolidate the power of the transnational corporations operating in Colombia and cause even more repression of worker rights, and more dislocation, higher unemployment, and higher rates of poverty.

The mayor's office in Cali, Colombia's third largest city, opposes the FTA. The government of Colombian President Alvaro Uribe is closely tied to the global corporate interests that have rushed to Colombia to take advantage of its vast array of natural resources — oil, minerals, gold, coal, emeralds, bananas, sugar, coffee, water, and fertile soils.

The delegation came to the conclusion that there is a concerted, systematic and brutal plan in place to repress workers and to push wages to the lowest sub-poverty levels possible. The government, for example, enacted a bill in 1990 which allows companies to establish worker "cooperatives." It is a "co-op" in name only. The Colombian ver-



Oregon delegation member John Walsh (center) has lunch with dock workers in Buenaventura, Colombia. Walsh is a member of GCIU Local 767M.

sion of "co-op" means that every worker is an "owner-operator" who must pay his or her own social security payments to the government to qualify for a pension. Colombian co-ops are designed to allow corporations to undermine and destroy worker organizations.

The delegation, for example, met with dock workers in Buenaventura, one of Colombia's major ports on the Pacific Ocean. The port is being transformed into a mega-port that will allow transnational corporations to send vast quantities of raw materials to destinations around the globe.

The port was privatized in 1993 and, with that came a new set of rules under the "co-op." When the port was owned by the government, about 8,000 workers were hired directly by the port authority. Now, workers are considered "owner-operators" under the co-op system. Wage rates have remained the same for 16 years, and the normal

workday is 12 to 14 hours, but workers are usually paid for only eight hours.

The delegation was informed that the hourly rate of pay is officially about \$1, but dock workers rarely achieve that level because of the unpaid hours worked. A complaint only means that a

worker won't be called for work the next day by the co-op.

It's much like the brutal "shape-up" system longshoremens in this country overcame in the 1930s when the docks were unionized.

The dock workers in Buenaventura said that there have been 45 deaths on the docks since privatization, and very little has been done to prevent future deaths and injuries. Widows are left with no life insurance and are forced into begging and destitute poverty. Dock workers loading dusty coal are given one dust mask a month that is useless after for four or five days of use.

Another complaint heard repeatedly was that large plants are being closed and the companies have no responsibility to assist impacted workers or their families. There are no unemployment benefits available. These companies are, in fact, reopening plants in the tax-free zones to cut costs even further and workers in tax-free zones are prohibited from joining a union. This movement is expected to accelerate if the free trade agreement is approved.

Finally, leaders who have the courage to speak out against abuses run the risk of being assassinated or disap-

pearing at the hands of paramilitary groups. More trade unionists are killed in Colombia than in the rest of the world combined. Many workers the delegation interviewed had been threatened, and all of them knew of fellow workers who had been killed.

It is common, they said, for a company to label a worker leader as a "guerrilla" and that is the signal for the paramilitary to assassinate that person. This is verified by confessions that came out in the amnesty program put in place in an effort to disarm the guerilla groups and paramilitary groups. In exchange for reduced sentences, members of paramilitary groups testified that they were given names and photos of union leaders to be eliminated, and then given full access to the company property.

The systematic program put in place to crush worker rights, and the deliberate assassination of union leaders are strong and compelling reasons for the U.S. Congress to reject the Colombia-U. S. Free Trade Agreement.

*(Editor's Note: Denny Scott is a retired Carpenters Industrial Council union official.)*

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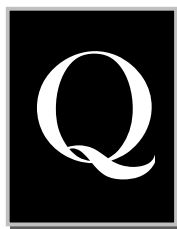
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