

EDUCATION & LABOR COMMITTEE

Congressman George Miller, Chairman

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**Chairwoman Woolsey Statement at Subcommittee Hearing On
“Protection and Money: U.S. Companies, Their Employees, and
Violence in Colombia”**

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Below are the prepared remarks of U.S. Rep. Lynn Woolsey (D-CA), chairwoman of the House Education and Labor Subcommittee on Workforce Protections, for a joint subcommittee hearing on “Protection and Money: U.S. Companies, Their Employees, and Violence in Colombia.”

This hearing today illustrates that – whether we sit on the Education and Labor Committee or the Foreign Affairs Committee, or in my case on both – what goes on with workers in Colombia, especially those employed by U.S. companies, has a huge bearing on the decisions we make in Congress.

After all, since 2000, the U.S. has provided over \$5.5 billion in assistance to Colombia – more than any other country in South America – to curb drug trafficking and assist the government in eliminating the influence of the country’s homegrown paramilitary and other terrorists groups.

And we are currently re-negotiating a free trade agreement with Colombia.

And it is essential that five basic labor rights, as outlined in the International Labor Organization Declaration, become part of that agreement.

Against this backdrop is a four-decade long civil war in Colombia, involving left-wing guerillas, right-wing paramilitaries and the government.

These groups are funded by drug trafficking and extortion. And trade unionists in Colombia have found themselves at the center of this battle.

Due to past ties some union groups have had with left-wing guerillas, trade unionists have been targeted by the paramilitary groups, who have murdered them at an alarming rate.

According to the State Department, more than 4,000 union members have been killed in the last 20 years.

Last year alone, Colombian labor groups report that over 70 unionists were killed.

And those who are not killed are often threatened, attacked or kidnapped.

Many of these crimes are never even investigated, and the vast majority have gone unsolved.

One of the recent victims was Carmen Cecilia Santana Romana. She was a 28-year old mother of 3 and a national trade union official.

Colombia is the most dangerous country in the world for trade unionists. Which is a shame, because before 1990, Colombia's trade unions were among the strongest in Latin America.

And while paramilitary groups have been supposedly "demobilized" under a peace agreement with the Colombian government in 2004, these groups are still in operation, committing horrendous acts of violence against the workers and citizens of Colombia.

What is equally disturbing is that the influence of these groups reaches high into the Colombian government. And U.S. companies were also involved with these violent groups.

Chiquita has admitted that it paid paramilitary groups and paid \$1.7 million in protection money over a seven year period.

It paid a \$25 million fine, which some say was too lenient given the seriousness of the company's actions.

Drummond has also admitting to paying paramilitary groups at its mining operation in Colombia.

But it is beginning to appear that the involvement of Chiquita, Drummond and other companies might have gone much further.

Today, we will explore the extent of their involvement with these groups, including whether they were complicit in the deaths of their own union employees.

I think this is going to be a very tough hearing, and we will hear disturbing evidence of gross violations of human rights.

But the hearing is necessary for the truth must come out.

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