
EDUCATION & LABOR COMMITTEE

Congressman George Miller, Chairman

Thursday, February 12, 2009
Press Office, 202-226-0853

**Chairman Miller Statement at Committee Hearing On
“Examining Workers’ Rights and Violence against Labor Union
Leaders in Colombia”**

WASHINGTON, D.C. – *Below are the prepared remarks of U.S. Rep. George Miller (D-CA), chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, for a committee hearing on “Examining Workers’ Rights and Violence against Labor Union Leaders in Colombia.”*

Today this committee meets to examine whether ongoing violence and weak labor protections are impeding the ability of Colombian workers to exercise their fundamental human rights.

Sadly, Colombia has been the most dangerous place in the world to belong to a labor union for the last two decades. In some recent years, there have been more labor killings in Colombia than in all of the other nations of the world combined.

According to the National Labor School, a leading Colombian think-tank, almost 2,700 trade union members have been killed in Colombia over the past twenty years. And, the number of labor union members killed last year jumped by more than 25 percent over 2007 levels.

It remains difficult to know who is responsible for most of these deaths because so few cases have been investigated, let alone prosecuted.

The Colombian Commission of Jurists tells us that the impunity rate for these crimes still remains at a staggering 95 percent.

At Colombia’s current pace of investigations and indictments, it would take several decades to get through the backlog.

This means that thousands of killers continue to escape justice.

We will hear testimony today that many labor killings have been perpetrated by right-wing paramilitary death squads, whose leaders have acknowledged targeting union leaders.

According to reports, many of these killings have been carried out by the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia – or A.U.C. Although the right-wing paramilitary group was supposedly disbanded a few years ago, the demobilization process appears to be unsuccessful.

Some former A.U.C. paramilitary fighters appear to be now operating within organized criminal gangs.

When I was in Colombia last year, union leaders told me they are increasingly receiving death threats from a new deadly gang called the “Black Eagles.”

Another possible explanation for the rising violence is the disturbing phenomenon of extrajudicial killings. This is where innocent civilians murdered by the Colombian Armed Forces are inappropriately classified as casualties of war.

These “false positives” have taken the lives of thousands of Colombian citizens, including union members. We will hear testimony today of a case where the Colombian Army killed three unarmed labor union leaders and then altered the crime scene in order to make it look like the victims had engaged in armed conflict.

There is concern that some anti-labor violence stems from decisions made by Colombian business and political leaders.

For instance, paramilitary leaders have admitted accepting money from a broad array of Colombian and multinational corporations.

And, President Uribe’s former director of national intelligence has been accused of turning over ‘hit lists’ to right-wing paramilitaries containing the names of union leaders under government protection.

While Colombian prosecutors have made some modest progress very recently in securing some convictions in these labor-homicide cases, important questions still remain.

First, do these investigations and convictions actually find out the truth behind the murders?

We will hear testimony today that prosecutors often accept motives without investigating the real underlying motive.

And, prosecutors too often investigate with pre-conceived and incorrect theories of the case.

One young woman, who is testifying today, intervened in her deceased father’s investigation. She will tell us that her intervention was because prosecutors were

advancing a false theory that her father's death was a result of a "crime of passion" stemming from an adulterous affair.

Indeed, ongoing complaints about the publication of inaccurate motives has led the Colombian Attorney General's Office to stop issuing public reports regarding motives in these cases.

Second, are prosecutors conducting thorough and systematic investigations aimed at holding all those who are responsible for both the planning and executing the labor killings?

Some legal observers say that prosecutors are shortchanging investigations after only securing convictions against the "material author" of the crime. The material author is likely to be the low-level person who pulled the trigger and not one of the "intellectual authors" who either ordered, planned or paid for the killing.

Finally, today's hearing will inquire about additional obstacles that prevent Colombian workers from exercising their fundamental rights. The International Labor Organization has identified significant areas where Colombia's labor laws are non-compliant with core international labor standards.

By raising these questions today, I hope that we can begin to find solutions to ensure that the backlog of murders are fully adjudicated and that Colombian workers have basic labor rights to which all workers should be entitled.

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