



## US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement 3 years on-the Long Road to Solidarity by Avi Chomsky

Posted on April 15, 2014 by Avi Chomsky

When Barack Obama was running for president in 2008, he told the AFL-CIO convention that he would oppose the US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement promoted by then-president Bush “because the violence against unions in Colombia would make a mockery of the very labor protections that we have insisted be included in these kinds of agreements.” Labor advocates cheered.

Once in office, though, Obama advocated for a Labor Action Plan to overcome what he saw as the obstacles to Congressional ratification of the Agreement. He and Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos signed the LAP on April 7, 2011, and Congress ratified the FTA a year later.

Colombian opposition to the agreement was always deeper and broader than that in the United States. Violence against unionists became the main opposition slogan in the US, but it was always a slender issue to base a campaign on. The argument implied that the FTA was overall a good idea that would benefit Colombians, and was used to pressure the

government to improve its labor policies so it could get the FTA as a reward.

In Colombia, though, the National Network against the FTA (RECALCA) framed its argument very differently. The FTA, it argued, would bring about the collapse of Colombia's domestic agricultural sector by dumping subsidized US corn, beans, rice, and milk products. Most Colombian products already entered the US duty-free, but the FTA would gradually reduce Colombia's protections on domestic manufacturers. The Agreement would undermine Colombia's entire national economy.

This month, on the third anniversary of the signing of the LAP, RECALCA, the Colombian National Union School and the major labor federations released a report entitled "Three Years of Non-Compliance with the Obama-Santos Labor Action Plan." Meanwhile, Colombian small farmers protested that the importation of 30,000 tons of beans from the United States had caused the price to drop 41%, and joined plans for a national agricultural strike. <sup>(1)</sup>



The AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center's Colombia representative still adheres to the old policy of taming Colombia's radical unions and encouraging them to follow the AFL-CIO's business unionism approach.

The history of AFL and later AFL-CIO involvement in Latin America has been a checkered one. Closely aligned with Cold War US foreign policy, the federation's American Institute for Free Labor Development sought to marginalize the left and promote anti-communist, bread-and-butter unions there. In Colombia, this frequently meant dividing and undermining attempts at union solidarity, paying off anti-communist unions and leaders, and pushing

unions to abandon leftist and nationalist politic

Since the 1990s, the Cold War stance has been gradually replaced by a new vision of solidarity. While still emphasizing the importance of “free unions”—for decades a euphemism for anti-communism—the new Solidarity Center that replaced AIFLD claims among its goals that “workers band together as part of an international movement for democracy and social justice.” However, the Center continued to be funded by the State Department through USAID and the National Endowment for Democracy. And the Center’s Colombia representative, Rhett Doumitt, seemed to adhere to the old policy of taming Colombia’s radical unions and encouraging them to follow the AFL-CIO’s business unionism approach. As revealed in cables released by Wikileaks, Doumitt met regularly with US Embassy officials to report on his analysis and attempts to influence Colombia’s unions.

In 2008 the Embassy fretted about the influence of what it saw as “radical, left-wing Marxists” in Colombia’s labor unions. Doumitt appeared to concur, as in a meeting “he complained of a ‘Stalinist’ approach taken by Communist and other hard-left labor leaders within the CUT” in their attempts to maintain the confederation’s independence and block an affiliation with the Social Democratic International (later ITUC). At the same meeting, Doumitt “complains that the politics of the labor movement in Colombia impede positive, practical advances on labor issues.” He noted that “in the April 22 monthly ‘labor dialogue’ meeting with President Uribe, the confederations focused discussions on the investigations of the Colombian congressmen associated with the parapolitical scandal. Still, Doumitt says the unions have made progress in moving away from their traditional polemic cold war perspectives.” In September 2008, Doumitt discounted unions’ protests about paramilitary violence, and the National Union School’s data showing paramilitary responsibility, and repeated the government’s claim that “recent murders of unionists are largely related to common crime.” When port workers struck in mid-2009, “Doumitt told us that his office considered a port strike ‘premature’ and had been advising port laborers to adopt a less confrontational strategy. ... The Solidarity Center-through its USAID-funded ‘Trade Union Strengthening in Colombia’ program-will assist the port laborers in developing “more sophisticated” demands and in negotiating with the GOC.”

Since the AFL-CIO refuses to open its archives on AIFLD, continues to rely on State Department funding for its Solidarity Center, and has no democratic membership oversight of its foreign policy initiatives, much of Latin America’s left continues to be suspicious of its motives and activities there. <sup>(2)</sup> While Colombian unions across the political spectrum clearly welcome the federation’s support on the issue of violence against the labor movement and the failure to implement the LAP, there is still a long road to travel towards real international labor solidarity

1) See Aviva Chomsky, *Linked Labor Histories: New England, Colombia, and the Making of a Global Working Class* (Duke, 2008), chap. 6.

2) See also Kim Scipes, *AFL-CIO's Secret War against Developing Country Workers, Solidarity or Sabotage?* Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010

## Author



• Avi Chomsky