

Eight labor and human rights organizations call on the Colombian government to respect the work of trade unionists and human rights defenders in Colombia and to retract statements that put these workers at risk.

We seek this action in light of the recent death threat to a lawyer at a prominent human rights organization and the government's repeated statements stigmatizing human rights defenders and union members.

On March 2, 2009, Lina Paola Malagon, an attorney at the prominent human rights organization, the Colombian Commission of Jurists (CCJ), received by fax a very detailed death threat. The threat, which was signed by the Black Eagles – Capital Bloc, explained that she had been declared a “military objective” because of her association with and work for CCJ, and her work on behalf of trade unionists.

Ms. Malagon has served for years as legal counsel to several trade unions and recently prepared a comprehensive report about the failure of the government to ensure that those responsible for killings of union leaders and members are brought to justice. This report formed the basis of testimony that was delivered at a February 12 hearing of the US House Committee on Education and Labor on workers' rights and violence in Colombia. The chairman of that committee, Rep. George Miller, specifically cited Ms. Malagon's report in his opening remarks.

Human rights defenders and trade unionists are frequently the targets of threats and violence in Colombia. Paramilitary death squads, in particular, have deliberately persecuted union members, who they stigmatize as being linked to left-wing guerrillas. Since 1986, more than 2,600 trade unionists have been killed; in a majority of cases where the perpetrator has been identified, the killer was a paramilitary.

The problem has been aggravated by the fact that senior government officials continuously stigmatize the work of human rights defenders and unions. Indeed, in February, Colombian President Alvaro Uribe publicly accused those who travel abroad and talk about human rights abuses in Colombia of being part of an “intellectual bloc of the FARC” guerrillas.

President Uribe later denounced the witnesses who testified at the hearing before the House Committee on Education and Labor as having intentionally distorted the truth and having been motivated by “political hatred.” These statements are unfounded based on our knowledge and understanding of the testimony.

Such statements de-legitimize the work of human rights groups, close the needed political space for them to exercise their right to free expression, and could put their lives at risk. In March 2008, after one of Uribe's advisors made similar statements about the organizers of a nationwide march against paramilitary violence, several of the organizers

and participants received death threats, and some were even killed.

We call upon the government to investigate the threats against Ms. Malagon, to immediately retract the aforementioned statement and to publicly affirm the legitimacy and value of the work of human rights defenders in a free and democratic society. A sustained, unequivocal, and public commitment to respect and support their work would go far in protecting human rights defenders from threats or violence.

American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO)

Human Rights First

Human Rights Watch

International Brotherhood of Teamsters

Latin America Working Group (LAWG)

U.S. Labor Education in the Americas Project (US LEAP)

U.S. Office on Colombia

Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)