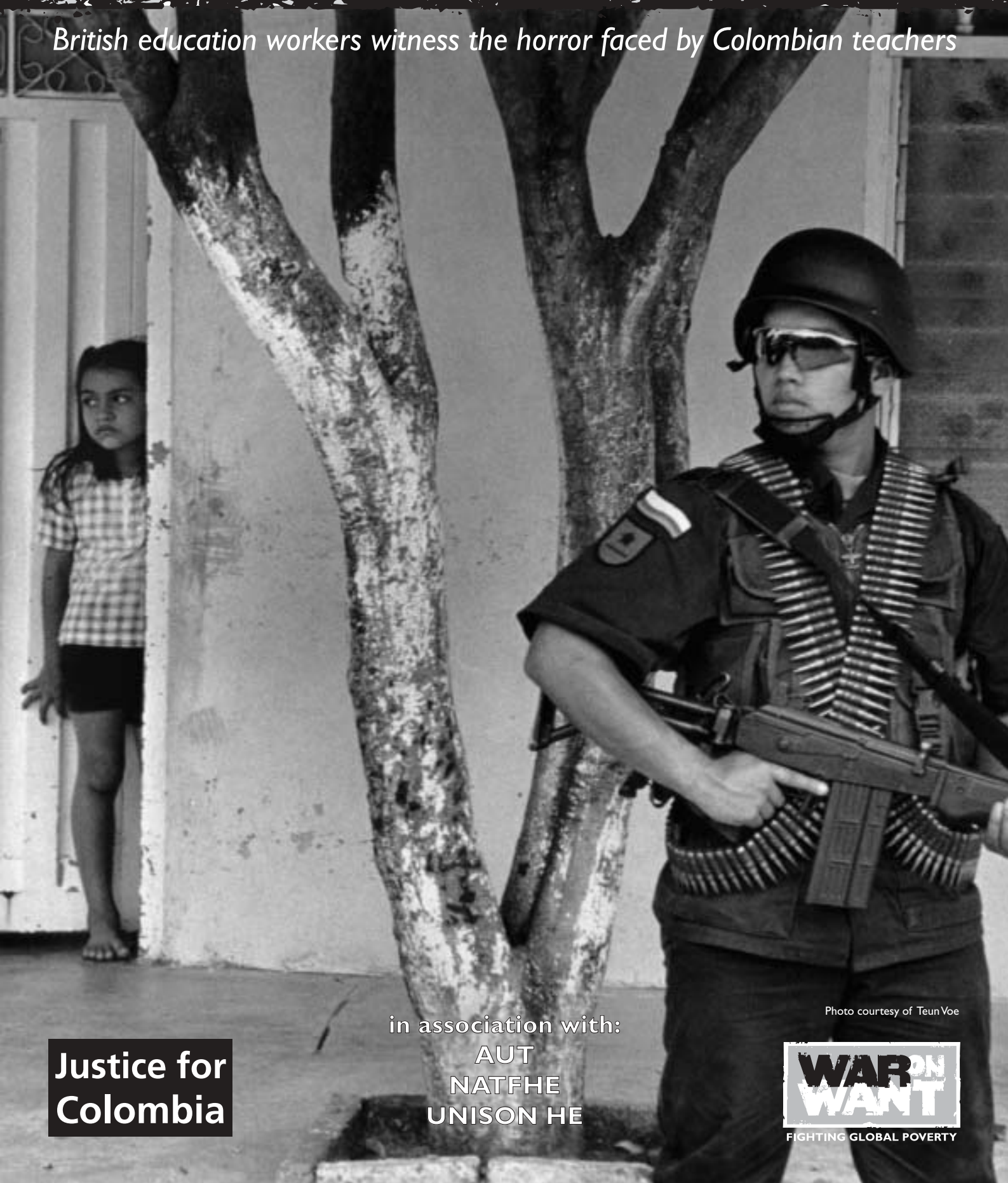


# Mayday Colombia

*British education workers witness the horror faced by Colombian teachers*



**Justice for  
Colombia**

in association with:

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NATFHE  
UNISON HE

Photo courtesy of TeunVoe

**WAR ON  
WANT**

FIGHTING GLOBAL POVERTY

# Mayday Colombia

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In May 2003 War on Want and Justice for Colombia took four further and higher education workers to Colombia. In a country in which more trade unionists are murdered each year than in the rest of the world put together, teachers and lecturers are the most targeted group of workers – accounting for nearly half of all those killed.

The horrors we learnt about shocked us all deeply, while the bravery of those we met has left us with memories which we will carry for the rest of our lives.

*This report accompanies a video which can be obtained from War on Want or Justice for Colombia.*

*The delegation and report was produced as part of a programme of funding from the European Union and Department for International Development.*



The delegation meet Congressman Wilson Borja

# Introduction

*“The peace of the rich, is a war against the poor”*  
graffiti on a wall in central Medellin

Despite the horrors that face those fighting for better societies across the world, there are few countries on earth where climbing out of a bulletproof jeep surrounded by bodyguards armed with semi-automatic weapons, walking through a metal room equipped with electronic steel gates, and finally starting work in a bomb-proof office amounts to a daily ritual for trade union leaders. This is not a description of a poverty-stricken central African state or Central American “banana republic”. This is one of Latin America’s oldest democracies; a country with some of the most desirable commodities and richest soils in the world; a country with which the British Government has extensive relations and substantial investments. This is Colombia.

On our first day in Bogotá, we were given an insight into the depth of the human rights catastrophe facing the trade union movement. Our two hosts, Gloria Ramirez and Jesus Gonzalez, were unable to accompany us on the 5-minute walk to the office of the teachers’ union, FECODE, in central Bogotá. They were instead forced to take their armoured cars. Such is the threat that faces them as leaders of the Colombian trade union movement.

It is this movement, we learnt, that is in danger of having its operations totally wiped out, not only by the appalling fact that unionists are targeted by the terrorist infrastructure of the paramilitary death squads, but by a set of economic and political decisions being made by the current government of President Alvaro Uribe Velez. In particular, labour reforms currently under discussion are aimed at flexibility in the pensions industry and the labour market, weakening the right to collective bargaining and introducing wholesale privatisation.

None of this is unusual, but what makes Colombia different is that this rampant neo-liberalism exists within a terrorist infrastructure intent on destroying the very people trying to mitigate the harsh effects of these economic policies on the poor. Thirty thousand people are murdered every year in Colombia, and around 6,000 of these murders are politically motivated. Ninety-five percent of these abuses are attributable to the paramilitary umbrella group AUC. Not one person has been arrested for abuses against teachers, never mind imprisoned, for these atrocities. We read one death threat from a special paramilitary group called “Death to Trade Unionists”.



CUT leaders on a march in Bogotá, closest to the camera is Carlos Rodriguez, the leader of the CUT

# One teacher is killed every week...

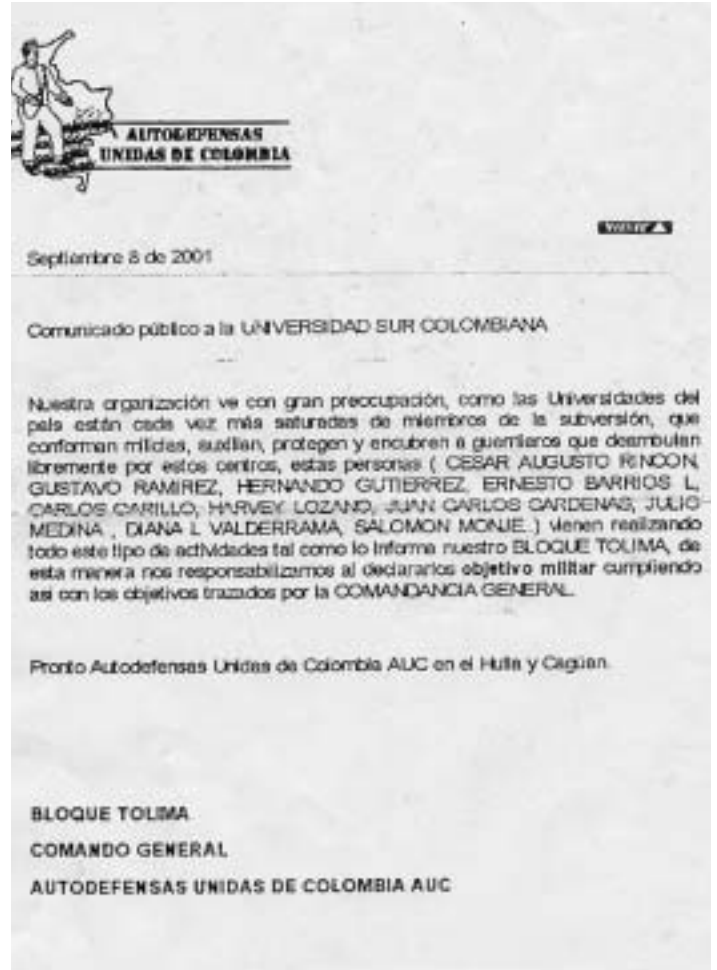
*"In Colombia, we face the fear of turning the clock back hundreds of years".*  
Opening statement to 10th Human Rights Conference, Bogotá, April 2003

In 1999 27 teachers and lecturers were assassinated; this jumped to 37 in 2000, 42 in 2001, and 83 in 2002. So far in 2003 a teacher has been killed every week. In 2000 the President of the University Workers Union SINTRAUNICOL disappeared – no one has any idea where he is, or whether indeed he is still alive. This makes organising in FECODE – Colombia's biggest union and one of the largest in Latin America – virtually impossible in many areas of the country.

Statistics are difficult to imagine. It is difficult to get beyond the assumption that this terror applies only to a handful of radical union leaders who place themselves in total opposition to the government. So instead we might want to picture the university porter who was going about his duties on campus when paramilitaries on motorbikes drove up and opened fire on him – two bullets to the head, three to the body. Or the schoolteacher shot five times through his windscreen as he drove home with his wife. Or the hundreds of innocent teachers killed, threatened, disappeared or forced to flee to a life of poverty every single year.

The Colombian press is criticised for its one-sided portrayal of the situation. It is a view often reflected in our own media. While the delegation was in Colombia, two teachers were assassinated, and both incidents reported by global union federation Education International: "On 25 April, Luz Elena Zapata Cifuentes, a teacher, was violently extracted from the vehicle in which she was travelling and murdered by a death squad in Anserma, Department of Caldas. One day later, on the 26th, teacher Ana Cecilia Duque was executed by a firing squad in spite of FECODE's mediation efforts to ensure that the ELN [Colombia's National Liberation Army] would release her unharmed". Only the teacher assassinated by guerrilla forces received attention in the international media.

This is a country in which protest is being outlawed, in which anyone who questions authority is labelled a terrorist. People who try to defend public education, or workplace rights, or simply the right to life, place themselves in the line of fire.



Holding copies of death threats became daily practice for the delegation.



(photo courtesy of Reuters/ Popperfoto)



# Displacement - case studies

*“Displacement in Colombia is not a single act but an ongoing process of fear and impoverishment”.*  
Representative of Displaced People

For every case of assassination and disappearance, there are hundreds of cases of displacement – teachers fleeing their homes on pain of death.

Two thousand members of FECODE have been forcibly displaced. We were introduced to 4 such teachers:

1. A high school social sciences teacher from Risaralda Department, near the city of Peirera, had been receiving death threats since 1987, when she received a condolence card inviting her to her own funeral. This was followed by phone calls, letters and stalking. She knew of teachers being shot in front of their pupils. She believes she was targeted because of her work in the community, work which she has had to reduce as a result of the threats. She is horrified by the so-called “social cleansing” operations now happening in her region – street children, prostitutes, homosexuals and street sellers being murdered on the streets by paramilitaries, acting sometimes, she told us, with police forces. She can no longer go out at night or weekends. Why does it happen? “Because they know they can get away with it” – impunity from prosecution is certain in Colombia.

2. A teacher who worked for 23 years in a school near Bogotá has been persecuted for the past 15 because she was a trade unionist, the wife of a trade unionist, as well as a member of the Communist party. Her house was raided many times. Like all persecuted trade unionists, she is accused of being a guerrilla – a tactic that normally means you are being set up for “cleansing” operations. She has two daughters who were also targeted for organising a march for school children aged 13-14 years. She told us matter-of-factly how her husband was kidnapped in October 2000 and then killed by paramilitaries. Her daughters are not even able to go to the cemetery to see their father's grave because of paramilitary presence in the area.

3. A teacher from Arauca who worked in a school near the Occidental oil pipeline believes it was no coincidence that the militarisation of the area under the Uribe government's security policies has been imposed because of the conduit. The militarisation has made Arauca a “laboratory for war” – a testing ground for the rest of the country. In the first eight months of militarisation he told us that 3,000 have been arrested, there have been 1,300 raids and 90,00 people have had their details entered into a security database. The teacher had received threats on his mobile phone but managed to obtain protection.

4. A lecturer who taught linguistics at the University of Atlantico has been receiving death threats from paramilitary groups since 1998. She said that eight teachers in her town were shot and this is why she had to escape with her three children to Bogotá. When arriving in Bogotá, however, she was afforded no help whatsoever – neither assistance finding another job nor being able to receive any social security. She is part of a group of displaced teachers living in Bogotá; this group has to be self-supporting – along with the help of unions – because the Government provides no assistance. She said being displaced means constant movement from place to place, as it is not safe to stay in the same location for any length of time. She has had times when she could not visit her children for fear of putting them at risk. She linked the rise in death threats with the fight against privatisation of education – the union took a stand against the state proposals.



A mural protesting against forced disappearances in the campus of Valle University in Cali



Desperate poverty has very human roots in Colombia

# Outside Bogota

In Medellin we sat in a room where a senior official in the ADIDA higher education union was murdered. ADIDA has 28,000 members and is part of FECODE. The legendary violence in Medellin has taken its toll on the union. The neighbourhood Comuna 13, with its 100,000 residents, is in a state of civil war. Ten schools have had to close because the violence is so intense, and 200 to 300 students have had to leave. Anyone even thought to have links with the guerrillas is assassinated.

But most frightening, Comuna 13 is merely the most renowned example. Exactly the same thing is happening throughout the city. As we sat in one meeting a US-supplied Black Hawk ground attack helicopter drowned out our conversation as it flew out towards the poor neighbourhoods searching for guerrillas. Colombia is now the biggest recipient of US military assistance outside Israel and Egypt, and their equipment is clearly not only being used to fight the “war on drugs” which provided the initial pretext for the stepped-up aid. We were told that helicopters had been firing shells into densely packed neighbourhoods. It was reported that in one recent incident 20 civilians were killed and no guerrillas.

It appears to be a strategy well known from the Vietnam War: drain the water and you kill the fish. The fish are the guerrillas, the water the unfortunate civilians. So far Uribe's state of internal unrest has unleashed a huge wave of raids, security measures and violence. But since it passed into effect we were told that many more community and social leaders have been killed than guerrillas.

It is when you meet ordinary Colombians from the neighbourhoods of Medellin that you begin to sense the real terror that oozes from every pore of this society. Most of them are displaced from elsewhere in Colombia – driven from their homes on pain of death. But only to find new terror in communities controlled by armed groups.

One woman we met was a member of the Patriotic Union (UP) a political party formed from disbanded elements of one guerrilla group in order to achieve a peaceful means to power. Nearly every one of the UPs 3,000 candidates for posts across the country were brutally murdered. Ten years later the few hundred that are left are still being hunted down. One remaining member we met said she was constantly running for her life.

Another woman we met from a poor neighbourhood explained to us that her son – a young man of only 20 years old – had been arrested following a raid on her community on 13th January 2003. She had received no information whatsoever on his whereabouts. Because she is displaced herself, she cannot even afford to pay the bus fair to visit him, let alone the healthcare and board payments that he needs to survive in the corrupt prison system.

A visit to a school was a scheduled part of our visit to Medellin, however, when we arrived at ADIDA headquarters we were informed that the situation was too violent and that our safety could not be guaranteed. After some time, however, a teacher from one of the “neighbourhood” schools arrived at the union office with the news that we could visit his school but that only two people would be allowed to go with a guarantee of their safety.

The taxi drive to the school was the usual hair-raising ride, and the nearer we came to the village the narrower the roads became and the more crowded the homes. It was difficult to comprehend that such a beautiful country was experiencing such terror and turmoil.

On arriving at the school we were met by the head teacher and administrator who told us about the problems that both teachers and pupils were experiencing. There were over 880 children in the school with ages ranging from 5 to 15 years yet there were only 28 teachers to cope with this number. Resources were scarce so our gifts were very welcome.

The teaching staff told us of their increasing problems. Some had not been paid for over 3 months yet their workload had been increased considerably. The head teacher said that the biggest problem facing the pupils was poverty. A school meal was available but 20% of the children could not afford the 800 pesos (approximately 5p) necessary to purchase the meal!

As we left our guide introduced us to a young man who had recently left school. He told us that he had no job and that there was no opportunity for any further education or training. He is like many thousands of young people in Colombia with no hope for their futures – this is a serious waste of valuable resources and no-one can afford to ignore this problem.

**Anne McCormack, UNISON Delegate**



Helicopters are a central part of the US aid package Plan Colombia (photo courtesy of Reuters/ Popperfoto)

# The militarisation of education

Part of President Uribe's security policy has been the creation of military zones where normal laws and procedures are suspended. In one such area paramilitary threats against lecturers and other education workers have reportedly increased. Universities have been subjected to temporary closures and militarisation.

We witnessed the meaning of "closure" at the public University of Valle in the city of Cali. Lines of students and professors stood in front of heavily armoured police vehicles whilst police in riot gear guarded the entrance to the University. This closure of public universities is now a frequently imposed procedure that obviously has a major impact on student's education. In Cali we could not discover the reason for the closure, and seemingly the government does not have to give one under its state of internal emergency, even though Colombia's constitutional court recently declared the state of emergency itself illegal. Lecturers we met seemed clear that the government was responsible for an outright offensive on the whole system of public education.

Paramilitaries have been reported to call meetings in local areas they control threatening death to anyone who remains in a union. In other areas, schools are closed because teachers and students are caught in the crossfire of the conflict.

If militarisation was meant to destroy the terror infrastructure, trade unionists asked us, why had the targeting of teachers by paramilitaries in these zones increased?

This terror has been accompanied by a policy of privatisation and cuts in the education budget. Private companies are being brought into the education sector. The government argues that the state can no longer afford to pay for all aspects of education, and the money saved through privatisation can be used to subsidise the education of the poorest.

But we heard that teacher numbers have fallen from 312,000 to 280,000. Schools have been asked to cut their budgets by 10 billion pesos before 2008, which in practice has meant recruitment is frozen – when teachers leave they are not replaced. Of those who have retained jobs, only 10% are now employed on full-time, permanent contracts, compared to around 90% in 1990. Pay has fallen and new legislation has attacked education workers' rights, supposedly guaranteed under international law, to collectively bargain over pay.

Legally all children between the ages of 5 and 15 must attend school, but there simply aren't the places. This means that around three million children are unable to attend school. The number is growing, as are class sizes



A tank guards the University of Valle preventing students or lecturers from working.

# Disappearances

Through a time-release entry system, monitored by video cameras, we entered a large and run down social centre. Right the way around the walls were photos, mostly of young people, with names and dates beneath them. These are a tiny portion of Colombia's "disappeared".

Disappearances are even more effective instruments of terror and oppression than assassinations. They are "a form of torture for the victim's whole family" as we were told by a representative from the Association of the Families of the Detained and Disappeared (ASFADDES) that supports these families. For most families, there is no closure. They cannot lay their loved ones to rest and begin to grieve. More concretely, there is no payout from life insurance and the families' income is often gone, leaving loved ones not only tortured by the disappearance, but also destitute. As ASFADDES told us "for each single person disappeared, the life of a whole family is ruined".

And we are talking about thousands of families. In the past five years 5,000 people have "disappeared" at the hands of paramilitaries. The figure may be higher because many families are afraid to report disappearances for fear of reprisals.

The families suffer many times over. Most of those who are taken are never found again and are presumed dead. Many are eventually found dead - their bodies bearing the marks of the most horrific torture imaginable. Paramilitary mass graves have been discovered, where presumably many of the disappeared have ended their lives, but ASFADDES investigators are blocked from the sites so they are unable to verify the graves.

Sickest of all, the representative we met must remain unnamed because ASFADDES itself – an organisation trying to pick up the pieces of the horror inflicted on thousands of families – has become a target. In 1997 their offices were bombed and one of their workers had eight members of his family disappeared. Like so many others we met, ASFADDES has been maligned in order to justify paramilitary action, with claims that it, and other human rights groups like it, are the "intellectual wing of the guerrillas".

What is the Government's response? These are all lies. The "disappeared" have run off to the guerrillas, or been kidnapped by them, or they have run away with their lover. It is difficult to imagine a more cold-hearted response to the disappearance of a family member, but it is a response that enables the government to evade its responsibilities under international law.

People we met see the government's response in an even more sinister light. Employees of the government have been found guilty of connection with disappearances. At anti-disappearance protests, attendance is kept low, not just by general fear, but by members of the security forces photographing those taking part.

In the most nauseating tale of horror we had heard all trip, however, we also received some hope. Following an international solidarity campaign, a military general in the Colombian armed forces had been arrested, and two security service employees sacked and arrested following an investigation into disappearances. ASFADDES is convinced that this would not have happened without international support. In fact without this support, the group may be quickly wiped out.



Photos of the disappeared line a community centre in Medellin



# Students in firing line

Chalk outlines of bodies are drawn on the ground at the entrance to the National University in Bogotá, representing students assassinated and disappeared by the terror infrastructure over the last years. At least two university student leaders have already been killed this year. In a particularly worrying development, students at the University of Atlantico in the city of Barranquilla were assassinated at the front of a classroom in which they were being taught.

“The student movement has been historically affected by violence, but in the 1990s repression started getting really severe” a group of law students at the National University explained “and it is directly related to resistance within the small number of public universities against privatisation and militarisation of the university system”. There has been a triangle of repression with universities being allocated fewer resources, fewer students getting into public universities and increasing repression of student leaders. As a result participation in student organisations has decreased markedly.

On 12th April 2003, Edwin Lopez was disappeared. He was a final year student at Francisco de Paula University in Santander. He was involved in social work in the very poor Atalaya neighbourhood he lived in, which has been plagued by violence. We heard of paramilitary massacres against marginal groups in the area. It was reported that Edwin was taken from his house by masked men, who stole his computer with his human rights database. A few days earlier a biology and chemistry student had also disappeared from Edwin’s university.

In the city of Cucuta, we heard that paramilitaries imposed a curfew on young people after 10.30 at night. Night-school students had given up their courses in fear. Women students had been banned from wearing crop tops and jeans. Punishment was meted out by acid being thrown at the offending students, or a knife being used to cut the bare skin on their stomachs. Cucuta was described as a “terror town” where community activity is impossible.

The students we spoke with believe that the extreme violence in towns like Cucuta fits into a wider and less extreme form of repression being practiced on public education throughout the country. Everywhere universities resources are being cut, governor appointments are being imposed against the wishes of students and staff, and universities are being placed under temporary military closure. Of particular concern, the students told us that student records are being passed to military security.

Universities are also being incorporated into President Uribe’s “informer network”. Reminiscent of policies pursued in what are normally described as police states, Uribe is aiming to build a million-person network of eyes and ears for the Colombian state. This is being pursued with particular vigour on campuses where we were told “there’s always someone ready to point out student leaders”. In the last 5 years between 60 and 70 student leaders have disappeared.



Students wait in front of police lines during the militarisation of the University of Valle, Cali

# Above the law

We heard from many people that “the rule of law is meaningless” in Colombia. It seemed that the prison service would be a good place to test this theory. Of 54,000 prisoners in the country, only 22,000 have actually been convicted. We met one trade unionist who was detained for 7 years before being released without charge. And we heard terrible stories about the conditions in which they are being held:

- o Up to eight prisoners might be held together in a 2m\*2m cell
- o Prisoners are regularly held for 13 hours without a toilet
- o The conditions prisoners experience depend on the amount of money they have. You can purchase nearly anything you want in prison – or you can die without medical treatment if you're poor; as one young prisoner did last year:
- o President Uribe is introducing new “US-style” prison conditions: solitary confinement, no means of telling the time or day, no paper, no news, no radio.

We were shown a video at the Human Rights Congress that brought the horror of the Colombian prison service home to us. It is described here by one of the delegates:

A representative of political prisoners showed a video filmed in 2001 of a jail in Cali. The film began with a long shot of a football field with hundreds of men milling around. As the camera panned in, it became clear that most of the men were naked.

Watching this was very confusing to begin with – the men in the field seemed playful and the atmosphere almost lighthearted. Then the atmosphere changed and in a far corner groups of men were shouting as the camera followed the noise and showed prisoners gathered around a watchtower. The guards had massed together in the watchtower and we saw smoke coming from their guns. It was then we realised that shots were actually being fired.

Again, in relative disbelief we thought the shots were being fired over the heads of the prisoners – but they were not. What ensued was panic amongst the prisoners as they scattered and tried to hide – but in the open field there was nowhere to go so they laid flat on the ground.

The image that most graphically came to mind at this point was that of the German death camps of the second war – men already degraded in their nakedness were further terrorised by this open act of violence. After the shooting stopped the screaming continued and one injured man was carried close to the camera – his body was covered in blood and the prisoners carrying him exposed the wounds towards the camera – it was clear he had been shot.

**Gerard Kelly, NATFHE Delegate**

After trying to get into numerous prisons, we were finally granted entry into one. This suggested to us that this was far from the worst example of a Colombian prison, and indeed we were told this in pretty straightforward language. It was a woman's prison in Cali. But while the conditions might not have been as bad as we could imagine, the stories were.

We met with five women being held for alleged political activity. One of these prisoners was Claudia, who was until December working as a secretary at the CUT (equivalent of the Trades Union Congress). At Christmas time she went on a beach holiday with some friends and ended up being taken by the marines. She was held for 5 days and subjected to psychological torture: they showed her pictures of dead people and told her they were going to drown her. She was passed from the marines to the military and held by the army until late February when she was transferred to Cali. She was charged with rebellion, and while she has been inside both her home and the CUT offices where she worked have been raided, though no evidence against her found. Claudia came across as someone totally lost, waiting to wake up from a bad dream. The terror infrastructure in Colombia casts a shadow over more or less everyone in this society.



Colombian police in front of demonstration outside University of Valle, Cali

# Underlying issues

“Colombia is not for sale”

Graffiti on the campus of the National University, Bogotá

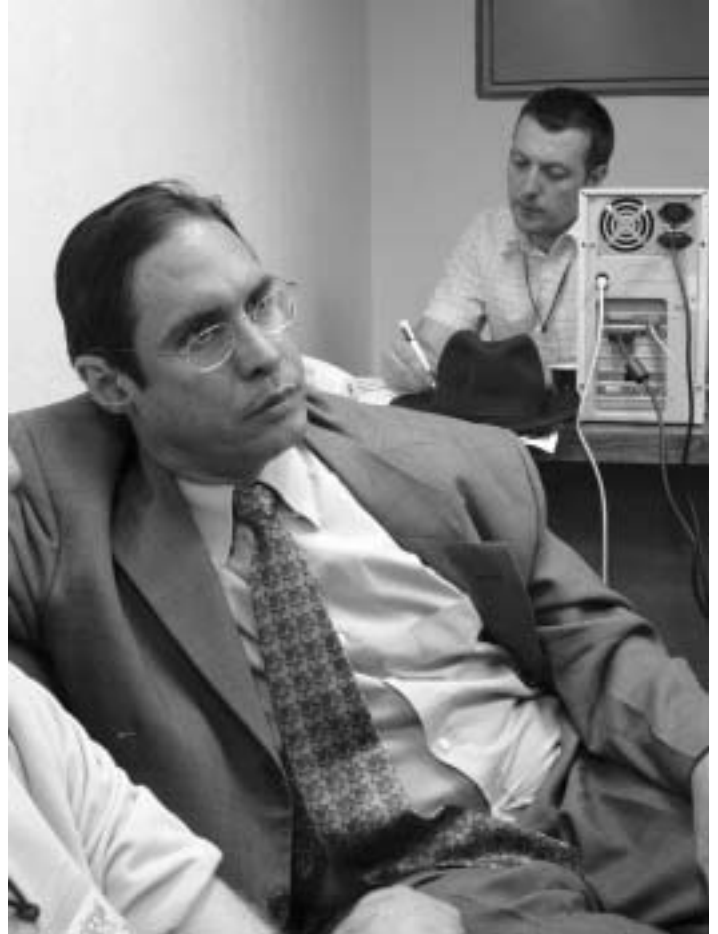
We met Wilson Borja, a former trade union leader and now Colombian congressman. Borja walks with a limp from when just over a year ago he narrowly escaped an attempt on his life. He put Colombia's many years of troubles into a context, neatly summed up by his phrase “Colombians are so poor because Colombia is so rich”.

Colombia is indeed a rich country, possessing 16 of the world's 22 most desirable resources, most notably oil and gold. Yet just over 1% of the population still own 58% of the land here while shantytowns rapidly expand to give very basic shelter to Colombia's three million displaced people. Thirteen million people earn less than \$40 a month, 3.5 million children are outside education and half of the country is unable to access health care. Meanwhile, increasing amounts of money are poured into paying off the national debt and building security forces. Borja believes it is not merely the paramilitaries that are wiping out the trade union movement here, but a series of labour reforms. Only four million of Colombia's 19 million workers now have permanent contracts.

Uribe is desperate for Colombia to sign up to the Free Trade Area of the Americas (ALCA) which will create the world's largest single market, the effect of which will solidify Latin America's place as a source of cheap raw materials, labour and markets, even in areas where Colombia would be able to compete under fair conditions. Already the world trading system has seen Colombia's food imports increase from 1 million tons in 1990 to 8 million tons today. Colombia – a country of incredibly rich soil where crops like rice, corn and maize thrive – now imports basic foodstuffs including corn due to unfair competition. The US's agricultural subsidies will be slowly phased out from 2005, but by that time, Borja fears Colombians will already have lost their ability to compete, as mega-corporations buy up the country from bankrupt small farmers.



Colombia flower worker: Violence in Colombia is integrally connected to Colombia's socio-economic situation.



Congressman Wilson Borja speaks to Jeremy Dear and the rest of the delegation

Social divisions are now so deep in Colombia that War on Want's solution to conflict and war – a war on poverty – has been perversely turned on its head. We heard some wealthy students from Bogotá calling for a “war on the poor” to save Colombian society – a chilling reminder of the “social cleansing” operations already underway in parts of this country.

Over centuries, trade unions have helped forge more equal societies in which people live with dignity, education and security. Colombia has thrown this process into reverse. Two slogans that we heard represent the aim of the struggle here: “Life with Dignity” and “Colombia is not for sale”. The fight of Colombians is not merely against the terror but for a decent society without poverty. A country which is not, as one community leader described it, “a service centre for multi-national capital” which will push millions of ordinary Colombians from poverty into desperation. A country not owned by trans-national corporations that take the profits of this rich land while its inhabitants are left to push their shanty towns ever further up the sides of mountains, their lives ever further from the satisfaction of human needs.



# A taste of poverty

Across a muddy field, ironically named Aguablanca (clear/white water), families lived cooped up, often two or three families to a 3m-by-3m area. The beds are orange crates if they can't find anything better; the roofs a small piece of polythene covering their "home". Broken glass litters the ground where 360 children play in bare feet – many of them have sores and other signs of infection. There are no lights and no heat. There is a single tap to serve 750 families. Pathways are small pieces of wood laid down as bridges over the mud.

This could describe slums any number of desperately impoverished countries. But this is not the result of a flood or other natural disaster: It is a problem with very human roots. We were told that every day thousands and thousands are forced to move from their homes, their friends and their possessions by violence in which the "democratic" state plays a role.

The government's reaction to these desperate people was seen in March when security forces reportedly turned up with bulldozers and demolished the settlement, including all the private possessions that the destitute had managed to bring with them. With no other option, the residents built the slum up again, and are still harassed by the police on a regular basis. But it's better than the fear that faced them at home. Several days before we arrived the authorities told four families that it was safe for them to return home. They were murdered on the day of our visit. Four more families added to the 30,000 murdered each year in Colombia; four more families deducted from the two million internally displaced.

The residents of Aguablanca were desperate for our help. We asked them the most important thing that we could do. The biggest immediate problem is food. Food goes to the youngest and oldest first, and young mothers often receive nothing at all. But there is no money to buy food because the people here are displaced, and so unable to work. So they



Displaced families live in tiny rooms without light or heat

Our arrival was greeted by many adults and children who thronged around us. I am always keen to speak to the children as they are the future for Colombia and the children are usually less inhibited than adults. I spotted one of the young men whom I had met previously and he took me to his home to meet his mother. The house was a small, dark, breeze block structure and there were about 20 people living there, including his aunts, cousins and siblings. In the next room lived a family with a child with a hearing disability who was also unable to speak so I taught him how to sign "Good morning". All the other children wanted to learn it, too!

We were shown a building that housed many families separated by sacking hanging from string to allow a vestige of privacy. There was only one bed in each of the cubicles together with a chair where clothes and possessions were stored. At the time of our visit, the electricity and water were off so the buildings were dark and dismal. However, no amount of light could have possibly improved the appearance of the place. There was no school and it was only thanks to Sintraemcali, a local trade union, that the people received any education so the gifts that we had brought with us were vital in assisting with teaching and learning.

We were invited to sit down while members of the community addressed us. There were two representatives from each sector of the community – pensioners, women, teenagers and children. Each person told how they had been forced from their homes – many had been forced to move several times after being threatened with violence and death for the attempts to organise their communities. All the stories were heartbreaking but they were told without any vestige of self-pity and everyone made requests for help for the community not for themselves, personally. Indeed, we were told that as food was scarce, it was pooled and the children and pregnant women were given priority. There was a true sense of community and of everyone taking care of each other. The eloquence of the speakers, especially the youngsters was most moving and it was very hard not to let my emotions show.

**Anne McCormack, UNISON Delegate**

desperately want a piece of land. Which is why the only thing people could ask of us was to "tell our story...let people know what is happening here."

Like the hundreds of urban poor we witnessed on our drive back into Cali, the authorities seemed to regard the residents of Aguablanca as a nuisance, and somehow imagine bulldozing what passes for their homes and lives will right the situation here. Like those paramilitaries involved in "social cleansing", the poor in Colombia – a large section of the population – are treated as if their poverty was a consciously chosen option designed purely to inconvenience the rich.



# Beyond education

“Sintraemcali for the people, Sintraemcali is the people”  
graffiti in Cali

The problems in Colombia stretch well beyond education. For many years one union, Sintraemcali, has been fighting off the privatisation of Emcali, a public company providing water, electricity and telecommunications to the people of Cali. This fight has come at a cost, at least 16 members of Sintraemcali have been assassinated by paramilitaries and they have suffered numerous other human rights violations. Two weeks after our visit a bomb exploded at an Emcali water plant killing three workers there. All the plants have since been militarised and Sintraemcali are currently awaiting Uribe's final decision on whether or not he will liquidate Emcali.

Sintraemcali's anti-privatisation campaign culminated in a month long occupation of the central administration tower in January 2002. Six hundred Sintraemcali members put their lives on the line to keep Emcali public. The tactics worked and the negotiating team managed to reach agreement. But now, under Uribe, the privatisation plan is back on the agenda as he is determined to increase spending on the war and to increase repayments on the external debt, which he can only achieve through cutting back on public spending.

One of the most remarkable things about Sintraemcali is the way in which they work within their community. They not only defend the public provision of essential services for the benefit of all, they are also trying to improve the desperate situation in which many people are forced to live. They are providing food and also developing education programmes for the young people in Aguablanca. Sintraemcali also organise what they call Mingas that involve bringing together groups of workers who go into Aguablanca for a weekend offering their services for free.

Sintraemcali offered us a glimpse of what a trade union could achieve in the most adverse of conditions. Their role is not just about defending the rights of members but fighting for a decent standard of living for all the Colombian people. They also prove the effectiveness of international solidarity, by making the lives of those in the front line safer, and opening some much needed space for those struggling in Colombia.



Kids play in dirt in Aguablanca

## A personal story of conflict

Blanca was a woman who had been travelling with us to various meetings during our time in Bogotá, it wasn't until a few days into the visit that we realised she was a body guard. I can't really be sure why I found a woman body guard to be so disturbing, but I did. Blanca was a young woman, small, and slightly built, she wore a black shoulder bag that contained her gun. I learned that she was a crack shot – did better in target practice than any of the others. We interviewed her in one of the bedrooms of our hotel.

Blanca was 20 years old. She was one of the 6 women amongst around 500 men working for DAS, the secret police. She argued that women make much better guards than men, that they were much more responsible with their guns, they were less macho and don't carry guns in the flamboyant way that some men do. She was clearly proud of her work, and said her mother was proud of her work too. Her main motivation for doing the job was to fund her university course, she intended in the future to study medicine and become a doctor:

It was a frustrating interview, I had hoped to get a view of this world of protection and guns that would help me make sense of it, but it didn't help. I wanted to find out more about her role as a woman in a very male dominated world, in a world of guns that was so far from my understanding, but she didn't really reveal any sense of herself in that role. Blanca was similar age to some of my students in Liverpool, they work in nursing homes and in hospitals as care assistance while preparing for a university course in nursing, I couldn't reconcile the differences of experiences of students on an Access course preparing for university study and this; Blanca sitting with a gun in her lap.

**Maire Daley, NATFHE Delegate**



Displaced people living under plastic sheets outside Cali

# Oil Workers' Union

It is difficult to sum up the bravery we witnessed in Colombia. To meet people who are confronted with death for what they say, yet go on saying it because they are the only people who will. They have surrendered their lives for the greater good, for a vision of a country that grows daily further away from reality.

One of the bravest men we met was Hernando Hernandez, the former president of the oil workers union (USO), a union that has suffered human rights abuses beyond imagination, even by Colombian standards. Hernando is suffering from cancer. Over his lifetime he has seen many members of his family slaughtered by the paramilitaries. He is now under house arrest on a charge of rebellion and he explained to us the history of severe repression in the oil sector - a sector that the government has wanted to privatise for decades.

He told us that the strength of USO - committed to a nationalised oil company which allows Colombians to benefit from their own resources - was met initially with massive dismissals and trumped up charges that saw workers receive sentences of between 20 to 30 years in military courts. These are courts where judges and witnesses are literally faceless - masked to prevent identification or interrogation. But after failing to break the union, repression was stepped up in 1988 and 100 leaders of USO were assassinated in just four years as displacement and imprisonment continued.

Eight other USO activists have been imprisoned recently. As in almost all cases, the charges are that the imprisoned are in league with the guerrillas. Being labelled a guerrilla in Colombia is the first step in the process of legitimising your dehumanisation and then murder or disappearance. Hernando explains how this is very far from the truth. He believes he proved his commitment to peace when he went to meet one of his worst enemies - a paramilitary leader who had wanted him dead for years - in order to bring peace a step nearer. "The decision was not an easy one, I thought for a long time about it" he explains "but I am utterly committed to peace in Colombia".



former USO leader Hernando Hernandez meets the delegation

## The omnipotence of guns

By the end of our first afternoon in Colombia we had in our hands two copies of death threats that trade unionists we met had received, and while in a meeting with us a student from Bogotá University received a death threat on his mobile phone.

Throughout the ten days in Colombia we were never, when outside of our hotel, without these armed guards. The guards were not for us, but for the trade unionists that were our hosts, against whom death threats were commonplace. The whole context of our experience was framed by the presence of these guns and guards.

In the delegation we went around as a group. We had to learn to be conscious of each other all of the time - to always walk in sight of each other; when one of us stopped we all stopped; we watched and waited for each other; counted each other.

To partially share the experience of life as a Trade Unionist in Colombia for a short time, to witness the constant and relentless threat to life and freedom that is forced on them raised many issues. The test of their commitment to the ideals of unionism, solidarity and collectivity was indisputable and inspirational, each of us as lay activists in our own unions reflected on how we would be if in their shoes. It is the activism of individuals under the presence of guns in Colombia that can be the inspiration for all trade unionists - our struggles with government and employers is strengthened by the courage of their struggle.

It would be wrong to place the gun as the symbol of union struggle in Colombia, there is much more going on in trade unions - but the power of the presence of guns is symbolic of the repressive forces used against individuals to stop collective activity, to stop freedom to be critical of a Government failing to care for the basic needs of millions of its people.

**Maire Daley, NATFHE Delegate**

# Conclusion

“First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Socialists and the Trade Unionists, but I was neither, so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew so I did not speak out. And when they came for me, there was no one left to speak out for me.”

Martin Niemoller 1892-1984  
on the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany

The depth of terror in Colombian society reaches well beyond a few courageous leaders. Anyone who questions authority - whether to defend public education, workplace rights, or even the right to life - is regarded as a terrorist and their life put in jeopardy. Teachers, lecturers, students and all other trade unionists are living through a humanitarian catastrophe in a country still considered reasonable by the West. Fascism is not a word which should be used lightly, but it is term we heard again and again to describe the direction of President Uribe's policies. Hope can only be pushed so far and it's rapidly running out in Colombia. They look to our solidarity as a last defence against the horror film this country has become.

But if fear and terror stretch to the base of society, then so do courage and hope. Despite the most dramatic frontal assault on social organisation, ordinary Colombians refuse to have the bonds of society broken. Trade unions, under attack in their own right, become social movements, protecting not just their own members but fighting poverty in the wider community. Communities build up around displacement and disappearance and fear and terror. The people we met were surely amongst the bravest people in the world – summed up in the slogan “kill one of us, and ten more will fight back”. And in Colombia, it is not the courage of one or two people, it is the courage whole society.



UK delegates march in solidarity on Colombian May Day march in Bogota

# Taking it forward

## What can I do?

Meeting Wilson Borja I was reminded of an urgent action for him that had come across my desk many months and many urgent actions ago. I had got used to ignoring many of these actions, they now come so frequently. But meeting Wilson I realised that each one of these actions that we take, doesn't merely save the life of one person – as worthy as goal as that is in itself. It is an act of solidarity with the whole Colombian trade union movement, because it keeps alive hope of social change in Colombia. It keeps alive hope of a better world for the destitute yet courageous people of this terror state that we call democracy.

**Nick Dearden, WoW Delegate**

We have real power. It is not just the US pouring "security assistance" into Colombia. The UK Government, which refers to Colombia as "one of Latin America's oldest democracies" – has excellent relations with Uribe's Government – a President doing his best in a very difficult situation to restore order in his country. The UK Government has even given military assistance to Colombia. British companies are amongst the biggest investors in Colombia. The pressure we can bring to bear here will be critical.

Make sure you contact Justice for Colombia and War on Want to receive regular updates on how you can help.

### **War on Want**

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## Actions you can take:

- Get a copy of the delegation video for £4 and hold a local meeting to show the video and spark off discussions
- Affiliate your trade union to Justice for Colombia – nationally or at branch or regional level
- Join War on Want's Global Justice Network or affiliate to War on Want and get regular updates on Colombia and struggles in other conflict zones
- Lecturers, teachers and adult educators – get free teaching materials
- Write to the British Foreign Office and ask them to cut all military assistance to Colombia until links between the Colombian state and the paramilitaries have been severed
- Twin your branch with a branch in Colombia – Justice for Colombia can help you out on this
- Ask for a speaker to come and address a meeting – there are usually Colombian speakers in the country, or War on Want can provide one



# Recent urgent action on Colombia

War on Want and Justice for Colombia are calling for an end to UK military assistance to the Colombian security forces. The Colombian military have one of the worst human rights records in the Western Hemisphere and well-documented links to paramilitary death squads that are responsible for the vast majority of human rights abuses perpetrated in Colombia each year. Last year 184 trade unionists were assassinated – more than in the rest of the world combined.

Due to the lack of transparency, it is unknown whether UK assistance goes to those units of the Colombian army that share equipment, intelligence and other resources with the paramilitary death squads – who are responsible for 95% of the murders of trade unionists. We are, therefore, extremely concerned about the possibility that British aid to the Colombian security forces could contribute to abuses against trade unionists. The British government refuses to make clear what mechanisms are in place to ensure that British aid is not going to such units.

The British Government also recently refused to vote in favour of an International Labour Organisation Commission of Inquiry into the murders of over 3500 trade unionists since 1987 in Colombia. Despite the murder of several trade unionists each week, the call was rejected by an alliance of employers and governments on the International Labour Organisation governing body.

War on Want believes that the full-scale assault on the trade union movement is an attack on people's basic human right to fight for a better and more equal society. As such the trade union catastrophe in Colombia will have a detrimental effect on the fight against poverty in Colombia – a country in which just over 1% of the population still own 58% of the land and approximately 8 million Colombians have incomes below a nutritionally-defined subsistence level.

Go to our website to take further action – [www.waronwant.org](http://www.waronwant.org)



13 leaders of the British trade union movement join MPs including a former Foreign Office Minister to show opposition to Britain's military aid to Colombia



AUTODEFENSAS  
UNIDAS DE COLOMBIA

Septiembre 8 de 2001

VERIFICADO

Comunicado público a la UNIVERSIDAD SUR COLOMBIANA

Nuestra organización ve con gran preocupación, como las Universidades del país estén cada vez más saturadas de miembros de la subversión, que conforman milicias, estudian, protegen y encubren a guerrilleros que desfilan libremente por estos centros, estas personas ( CESAR AUGUSTO RINCON, GUSTAVO RAMIREZ, HERNANDO GUTIERREZ, ERNESTO BARRIOS L, CARLOS CARILLO, HARVEY LOZANO, JUAN CARLOS GARDENAS, JULIO MEDINA , DIANA L. VALDERRAMA, SALOMON MONJE. ) vienen realizando todo este tipo de actividades tal como lo informa nuestro BLOQUE TOLIMA, de esta manera nos responsabilizamos al declararlos objetivo militar cumpliendo así con los objetivos trazados por la COMANDANCIA GENERAL.

Frente Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia AUC en el Huila y Caguan.

BLOQUE TOLIMA  
COMANDO GENERAL  
AUTODEFENSAS UNIDAS DE COLOMBIA AUC



Reuters/Popperfoto

**Price £4**

**July 2003**

**Acknowledgments:**

War on Want and Justice for Colombia would like to thank all delegates who took part:

- Maire Daley, NATFHE
- Jeremy Dear, NUJ/TUC
- Angela Rogers, AUT
- Gerard Kelly, NATFHE
- Tammy Sherar, UNISON
- Anne McCormack, UNISON

As well as: NATFHE, AUT, UNISON, NUJ, TUC and Education International for their support.

Printed by Upstream Ltd 020 7207 1560



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Company limited by guarantee reg No 629916.  
Charity No. 208724

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