

Colombia: “Doing business”, killing workers

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A November 4 World Bank and International Finance Corporation report, *Doing Business 2011: Making a Difference for Entrepreneurs*, ranked Colombia as the 39th most “business friendly environment” in the world.

Colombia’s “Doing Business” score, which measures how much the country has improved for business, showed Colombia as the best improving economy in the region.

Missing from the report were the more than 500 unionists killed in Colombia over the past eight years, making up 60% of all unionists killed globally.

Also missing were the 38,255 people that have “disappeared” in the last three years, many of them union and community leaders.

The report doesn’t mention the 7500 political prisoners in Colombian jails or the more than 4.5 million internally displaced people within its borders — the largest number for any country in the world.

These are just some of the results of the policies of state terrorism carried out by successive Colombian governments, backed by Washington, that unionists confront every day.

One such unionist is Parmenio Poveda from the National Unified Agricultural Trade Union Federation, Fensuagro, who visited several unions in Sydney recently.

With 80,000 members, Fensuagro is the largest peasant and farm workers’ union federation in Colombia.

Fensuagro has organised plantation workers, small landowners, landless peasants, internally displaced people and small coca growers since 1976.

Fensuagro has been hard-hit by Colombian state repression. More than 1500 of its members have been assassinated since it was set up.

Many unionists and solidarity activists in Australia know Poveda’s union because of past visits by Fensuagro leader Lilianny Obando. Obando is in prison two years after being arrested, despite military authorities admitting evidence used to convict her was fraudulent.

Poveda spoke to *Green Left Weekly* about the political situation today in Colombia.

“We have to understand that the Colombian oligarchy, historically, is the most repressive and reactionary oligarchy in the region”, Poveda said. He said this was why Colombia was bucking the continental trend towards electing left-wing and progressive governments.

He recalled the massacre of more than 5000 leaders and members of the Patriotic Union (UP), a left-wing party created in the wake of peace negotiations between the Belisario Betancur government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas in 1985.

Seeing the growing sympathy for the UP, which won five senators and 14 deputies in the 1986 elections, the Colombian government adopted a scorched-earth policy, which was carried out by the armed forces and paramilitaries in areas with strong UP support.

"I believe that if this massacre had not occurred, Colombia would have been the first country, of course after Cuba, to join this wave of progressive governments that have come to power through elections."

Instead, unionists continue to face the wrath of state terrorist policies and paramilitaries. Each day new atrocities are committed.

Every day of his Australian tour, Poveda read his email to tell people about the latest crimes carried out against unionists and their families.

One example was the assassination of a leader of the mining and energy union who was negotiating a new contract with US mining company Drummond. After leaving his home early on October 26, William Tafur's body was found two days later in an open grave with bullet holes in his head.

On November 4, former Colombian president, Alvaro Uribe was subpoenaed to testify in a civil case against Drummond for the company's ties to paramilitary death squads.

A former paramilitary testified on November 10 that Drummond had congratulated members of a paramilitary organisation for killing two labour rights activists, who worked for the Colombian branch of the company.

Poveda told Australian union leaders that several children in the department of Arauco (youngest aged six) were kidnapped, tortured, raped and then killed in early October by members of the Colombian armed forces.

Such stories were common, Poveda said. The difference this time was that this story was covered by a corporate media that generally ignored the countless more such cases.

"Despite all the media hype, this is continuing to happen under the Santos government", Poveda said. "The only thing that has changed is the tactic: [President Juan Manuel] Santos is attempting to present himself as someone open to dialogue and negotiation.

"Meanwhile, the assassinations continue."

Santos has tried to present himself as something new by selecting a former Communist Party member and leader of the United Workers Central (CUT) as his vice president.

Moreover, the General Confederation of Workers (CGT) has said it was willing to work hand-in-hand with the new government.

"Clearly, this is a case of Santos finding people who have sold out or are willing to be bought

out in order to present his government as something new.

“The problem is that this creates confusion among the less political sections who look and see former union leaders in the government and say ‘maybe change is possible with workers in the government.’

“However, beyond the words, the actions speak for themselves. A recent report showed that 22 unionists had been assassinated in the first 75 days of the Santos government.

“We are seeing not only the continuation but also the internationalisation of the previous Uribe government policy of criminalisation of social dissent by attempting to smear anyone who opposes the government as linked to the FARC.

“Since the 2008 bombing of the FARC camp in Ecuador, [which killed] FARC leader Raul Reyes, the Colombian government has used the laptops it supposedly found to spit out documents linking any union leaders it dislikes to the FARC.

“These magical laptops, which I have said several times are incredible given they can survive the bombardment of the camp, have been so useful to the Colombian government that, more recently, when they killed another FARC leader, Mono Jojoy, they said they found over 20 laptops and a similar number of hard drives!”

Poveda said the government is using this to target any social activist it wants. But the Santos government has taken this one step further by calling for Chilean Communist Party member Manuel Olate to be extradited to Colombia on the basis of supposed documents from Reyes’ laptops.

“What we have here is an attempt to internationalise the criminalisation of those willing to speak out against the Colombian state and campaign for peace.”

For this reason, he called for solidarity with the campaign to free Olate.

Poveda was sceptical about possibilities in the short to medium term for real political change in Colombia, saying there was no real alternative political force.

“Many of us had high hopes for the Alternative Democratic Pole (PDA), which brought together different left and progressive parties and individuals and came second in the 2006 elections with 2.6 million votes”, Poveda said.

“It seems as though the right wing and imperialism have been working from within to undermine the Pole.” He pointed to the preselection campaign for PDA presidential candidate earlier this year, where Gustavo Petro defeated Carlos Gaviria, the 2006 candidate.

“In a country where the left has never had money to run campaigns, Petro received funding from somewhere to produce a newspaper for his preselection campaign and pay people to go door-knocking.”

After winning preselection, Petro immediately stated his willingness to continue to implement Uribe’s policy of “Democratic Security” — code for crushing guerrillas and repressing dissenting voices by linking them to the FARC.

This time around, the PDA dropped to less than half its 2006 vote because many felt it was not a real alternative.

Instead, the Greens got the votes of those disenchanted with the status quo.

“The Greens are made up of old politicians from the right, from the centre and from the left, who have been recycled and represented in the new guise of the Greens.

“Therefore they also represent no alternative.”

Fensuagro has continued to organise in the countryside, putting on workshops about human rights and community, and union organising for members and non-members.

They have also placed emphasis on agroecology and food sovereignty to small farmers.

“This is to break our dependency on multinationals such as Monsanto who are always trying to force peasants to use genetically modified seeds and agro toxins.”

Fensuagro promotes an agroecological alternative “because it is better for the soil, it is cheaper for farmers to produce and it produces healthier food for everyone.”

Fensuagro has produced an agroecology handbook, which is available at www.fensuagro.org.

“But these projects, and our ability to organise, depend on international solidarity.”

Fensuagro receives financial support from some NGOs and solidarity organisations. But more important is the work of condemning the Colombian government at an international level.

“Each time the Colombian government is condemned on the international stage, a bit more breathing space is opened up for us as union and social movements.

“The government is very conscious of trying to defend its image on the international scale.

“Due to the condemnation of human rights abuses, the US government felt pressured to not sign a free trade agreement with Colombia.” The union and peasant movement rejected the agreement because of the devastating impact it would have on the poor majority in Colombia.

Poveda also extended an invitation to the Australian union movement to send a delegation to Colombia to see the human rights abuses for themselves.

Poveda is back in Colombia now and, like many other union leaders, will be high on the interest list of the Colombian government.

We must ensure Poveda, and others like him, don't join the more than 2700 unionists assassinated in Colombia since 1986 by doing all we can to fight for peace and justice in Colombia.

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