

No Colombia Free Trade Agreement

Discover the Real Colombia

See it through the eyes of a native union activist forced to flee for his life



Gerardo Cajamarca

Gerardo Cajamarca Alarcón, 43, is a native of Sasaima, a village in the coffee producing area of Colombia. He worked in Bogotá as a mechanic and in Facatativa, a small city west of Bogotá, where he became a town councilman with the backing of the Facatativa Popular Movement and the labor union SINALTRAINAL. He now works as an organizer for District 11 of the United Steelworkers. Through the Colombian Support Network, the USW raised money for him, and later his family, to get out of Colombia. Mr. Cajamarca was quickly granted political asylum here, which enables him to legally remain and work. He flew from Bogotá to Madison, Wisconsin on Feb. 22, 2004 and said what he felt when he landed on that winter day was “tranquility.”

When I heard that some Bush Administration dignitaries were planning to offer Congressmen junkets to Bogotá to win their votes for the proposed Colombian Free Trade Agreement, I began to daydream about the tours of my home country that I'd like to give lawmakers to explain why the pact is so wrong for both nations.

My expeditions must remain fantasies, though, because I can rarely return to Colombia safely now. I fled in 2004 when it was clear I would be murdered imminently by the paramilitaries, groups the U.S. government has officially designated as terrorists. The U.S. granted me sanctuary, and I live now in Minneapolis.

The version of Colombia that will be offered Congressmen by U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab or U.S. Commerce Secretary Carlos M. Gutierrez will be the sanitized tourist one. Gutierrez said recently, for example, that he likes to take lawmakers to the streets of Medellin, infamous as a drug capitol, and show them how children may now safely walk to school. These administration-orchestrated trips for Congressmen are called CODELS, reminding me of the English word coddle. On those excursions, there would of course, fancy hotels, Embassy parties, chauffeured limos.

I would offer less pampered outings, the stuff of everyday life in Colombia. That is what I believe the Congressmen should experience.

It's fine to see children walking to school, but I would also take the Congressmen to the park at the archeological site known as Cercado de los Zipas in Facatativa, which is the town from which I fled. At that site on Dec. 28, an acquaintance and fellow unionist, Sigifredo Higuera Ramirez, was shot in the head as he exercised. The union to which this 63-year-old man belonged, SINALTRAINAL, has said it was an assassination.

That, of course, sounds like an outrageous allegation in America where trade unionists are fired, not killed for their activities. But in Colombia last year, 38 trade unionists were murdered, and that is a shockingly low number. The year before it was 72, which was more than the number of trade unionists killed in every other country in the world combined. Since 1991, more than 2,200 trade unionists were murdered in Colombia, and that includes more than 400 since Alvaro Uribe became president five years ago.

I am sure that on the official CODEL trips, Mr. Gutierrez will take lawmakers on tours of the courts that are now supposedly putting the perpetrators of those murders behind bars with the \$1.5 million that he brags about President Uribe devoting to prosecuting high-profile cases. Unfortunately, precious few cases are actually taken to trial, and even fewer convictions are won, so that the impunity rate for murder of trade unionists remains at 98 percent.

Instead of a fancy courtroom, I would take the Congressmen to the site of a crime that never was prosecuted, maybe my mother's house in Facatativa. In 1999, when I was serving on the Facatativa city council and running for re-election, my opponent was a member of a paramilitary. He was losing and wanted me to drop out of the race. Members of his group went to my mother's house, smashed the windows, broke down the door and held a gun to her head.

In Colombia, the paramilitaries – remember, these are terrorist organizations -- have been used by multinational corporations to suppress unions. At least four multinationals, Drummond, Nestle, Chiquita Brands International and Coca-Cola, have been named in lawsuits claiming they paid paramilitaries to kill or intimidate union workers in Colombia. And one, Chiquita, admitted last year that it paid \$1.7 million over six years to Colombia's brutal right-wing militias, the AUC. Although my mother was terrorized, I did not withdraw from the race. And I won. The paramilitary group targeted me because I am openly a union activist. I have been since the age of 19 when I helped organize the factory where I first worked, the firm KLEIN, in Bogota which manufactured industrial tanks. The paramilitaries began to attack me then. Over the years, I was kidnapped, tortured and beaten.

That sort of thing will be ignored on the official CODEL trips to Colombia. Those will, no doubt, take American Congressmen to see the great historic fresco in the Elliptic chamber in the National Capitol Building in Bogotá. I would take the Congressmen to see each of the 85 seats in the Colombian Congress that belong to members who have ties to or who are being investigated for having ties to paramilitary groups. That is 35 percent of the legislature. Already, 44 have been stripped of their offices because of involvement with these terrorist groups.

Mr. Gutierrez will be sure to treat the Congressmen on his CODELS to the best restaurants in Bogota. I would like to show them one in Facatativa. I held a rally there during one of my re-election campaigns for city council. Three members of the paramilitary organization came in, and one punched me in the face. Another pulled a gun, but luckily, my supporters shoved them outside before gunfire erupted. Though we called the police and the military, the gunfire continued for two hours before it was broken up. And, remember, I was already a sitting councilman, and the police station was only two blocks away. I was forced out of the country after a friend of mine, active in the professors union, was assassinated, and three other union activist friends were murdered. I was threatened and had to flee. I received help from the Colombian Support Network in Madison, Wisconsin.

If I could show the Congressmen what is really going on in my country, I would ask them how they could vote for a Free Trade Agreement with a country that still allows 38 trade unionists to be killed in a year. It is fewer than it was in 2006, but is, nonetheless, an appalling number.

And I would ask them if the reason fewer are killed is that the multinationals and their paid assassins, the paramilitaries, have been so successful? The fact is that unions are smaller in Colombia now because of the years of terror tactics by the paramilitaries. So though there are fewer individuals murdered, each death is more meaningful as it represents a larger percentage of those left.

I would ask the American Congressmen, is it ethical for them to sign a treaty with a country whose legislature is infiltrated by partisans of the terrorist paramilitaries that, in turn, are supported by drug trafficking to the United States? I would ask how they would even think about signing a free trade agreement with a government that has failed to control terrorist organizations – the leftist guerrillas and the paramilitaries. That is not my assessment but that of the U.S. government itself, which says these organizations have complete dominion over vast territories in Colombia, including plantations on which they grow coca, sent to the U.S. as cocaine.

I suppose, however, that as a tour guide, my role is to answer questions, not ask them. So my answer is no to the Colombian Free Trade Agreement. Just vote no.