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Public Service unions up in arms over Tory attempt to rush Colombian free-trade agreement

OTTAWA – Four of the largest Canadian trade unions are incensed at the Harper government’s attempt to ram through the Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement in advance of a possible federal election.

The Canadian Union of Postal Workers, the Canadian Union of Public Employees, the Public Service Alliance of Canada and the National Union of Public and General Employees are criticizing the scheduling of Bill C-23, the Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement Implementation Act, as the first order of business when Parliament resumes on Sept. 14, 2009.

PSAC president John Gordon, CUPW president Denis Lemelin, CUPE president Paul Moist and former international vice-president of NUPGE, George Heyman were part of a trade union delegation that visited Colombia in July 2008.

“In the past eight months, 27 trade unionists and more than 77 members from the Indigenous communities have been murdered in Colombia,” said Moist, who heads the 590,000-member union, CUPE. “Stephen Harper should not be legitimizing these killings by ratifying a free trade agreement with Colombia”

Lemelin, who represents 56,000 postal workers through CUPW echoes Moist’s sentiment. “The Colombian Presidency has authorized its own intelligence service (DAS) to spy on and intimidate human rights defenders, journalists, lawyers and even magistrates from the Supreme Court who have been investigating political scandals. Canada should not be ratifying a free trade agreement with a government that is working so hard to block democratic debate.”

“We are in an economic crisis,” said Gordon, president of PSAC which has over 166,000 members. “The federal government’s priorities should be creating jobs. This free trade agreement will not create jobs for Canadian workers, and it will not improve the lives of Colombian workers. In fact, the ratification of such an agreement will legitimize a repressive state internationally and will put the lives of Colombian activists in further peril.”

The four union presidents are asking Prime Minister Stephen Harper to shelve the Canada-Colombia free trade agreement until a comprehensive and independent human rights impact assessment is carried out.

The presidents of the four unions are calling on all political parties to support human rights and real democracy in Colombia and to reject Bill C-23. So far, they have garnered the support of the New Democratic Party and the Bloc Québécois. They have yet to hear from the Liberal Party, but are calling on Michael Ignatieff to put human lives before free trade.

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