

Colombia and the Philippines: the two most dangerous places in the world for trade unionists

By Brenda Wall

Colombia

Imagine having to sleep in a different person's house every night — and first thing in the morning reaching for your bullet-proof vest.

That's what life is like for many trade unionists in Colombia today. In 2008, 46 union members were killed. Every day health care workers, teachers, prison guards, food and agricultural workers are targeted for assassination by government-linked paramilitary death squads.

Despite the atrocious human rights record of the Uribe government in Colombia, the Canadian government is still determined to push through a Canada-Colombia free trade agreement — now scheduled for the fall of 2009.

In February 2009, four representatives of the Colombian Coalition of Social Movements (COMOSOC) addressed OPSEU. They came to Canada with the message that a free trade deal would only make the situation worse for members of grassroots organizations in Colombia — women, indigenous people, workers and campesinos.

In August, 2009, OPSEU sent a delegation to Colombia to view the situation and report back. Their message was also clear — listen to the people of Colombia, stop the trade deal, and step up our solidarity with their unions and social justice organizations.



Photo: Heino Nielsen

Brenda Wall, Jennifer Giroux, Archana Mathew, Jamie Ramage and Yhony Muñoz on their way to meet with unions in Medellín, Colombia.

The Philippines

Trade unionists in the Philippines also face repression, killings and abductions on a continuing basis. Two representatives from public sector unions came to OPSEU in May, 2009, to build links with public sector unions here in Canada and to share their experiences in the fight against privatization and political repression.


The two solidarity guests were Ferdinand Gaité, National President of Confederation for Unity, Recognition and Advancement of Government Employees (COURAGE) and Antonio Tinio, National Chairperson of The Alliance of Concerned Teachers – Philippines (ACT). 



Photo: Jason Crowitz

OPSEU member Yhony Muñoz greets sisters Yolanda Becerra from OFP (the Popular Women's Organization) and Maria Del Carmen Sánchez from ANTOCH (the health care workers union in Colombia).



Photo: Jason Crowitz

Antonio Tinio and Ferdinand Gaité at OPSEU Head Office

Indigenous People and PLAR

What is PLAR? It stands for Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition — a learning model which focuses on the need to recognize the skills and knowledge of peoples throughout the world. In particular, PLAR stresses that oral traditions and indigenous knowledge must be recognized and validated in any learning /teaching model for indigenous communities. Three women who have taken a leadership role on this issue in Canada and South Africa came to share their knowledge at OPSEU in June, 2009.

Photo: Mabokang Monnapula-Mapesela, Associate Professor and Senior Researcher of Higher Education, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa; Tim Little, A/Administrator, OPSEU Communications; Joan Connolly, Associate Professor/Associate Director, Centre for Higher



Photo: Jason Crowitz

Education Development, Durban University of Technology, South Africa; Derek Miller, OPSEU Region 5 Executive Board Member; Diane Hill, Academic Coordinator, Social Service Worker Program, First Nations Technical Institute, Tyendinaga Mohawk Territory, Ontario