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Colombia: Communities at Risk



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NEWS IN BRIEF



The Colombian government signed peace agreements in the autumn of 2017, but troubles remain.

Armed paramilitary forces connected to large land-owners and corporate economic interests are active throughout the country and have been linked to over 125 killings since the signing of the accords. These abuses continue despite the disarmament of the FARC, a national liberation movement, and they

threaten the hopes for a genuine peace process that addresses the social and economic roots of the armed conflict.

In other words, peace deals have been signed, but peace has not yet been achieved. That's why CUPE and other Canadian unions continue their solidarity work with Colombian workers and Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities through the

Frontlines Initiative (an initiative involving four public sector unions in Canada).

For over 15 years, Frontlines has been organizing worker-to-worker solidarity exchanges with Colombian unions and social movement groups that focus on supporting the peace process and exposing the negative impacts

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CUPE

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Youth and students protest poverty and repression in Iran



Since the end of December, massive protests have taken place in over 100 Iranian cities. The driving force behind these protests are the people most impacted by and reacting to widespread poverty, unemployment, skyrocketing cost of living and brutal political repression.

Over 4000 of the demonstrators who were arrested during the protests are youth under the age of 25. Of these, 20 were killed by security forces during the protests and 10 more have died in detention under suspicious circumstances. Many student activists have been arrested and put on trial.

Despite the country's considerable wealth and extensive natural resources, including oil, gas, coal and copper, almost 70 per cent of Iranians live in poverty. In contrast to the crushing poverty levels is the growing upper class and the "super rich" that are mostly linked to different factions of the ruling class.

The situation is very serious for trade unionists. Workers have been denied their internationally recognized right to organize. Labour activists face ongoing persecution and imprisonment. But unions are speaking out. The Union of Workers of Tehran and Suburbs Bus Company and the Sugarcane Workers' Union of Haft Tapeh issued a joint statement supporting the mass protests and affirming that people are fed up with poverty, injustice, and repression. The union and independent worker's organizations, which represent and defend the rights of workers and teachers, have been denied recognition and are being violently suppressed.

Workers and the poor in Iran urgently need international solidarity to help strengthen workers' and social justice movements – and stave off interference by the US administration and its allies. CUPE members can help.

• Farid Partovi

For more information, visit **The International Alliance in Support of Workers in Iran.**

Global Justice is published three times a year to provide members and staff an overview of international solidarity work taken on by the Global Justice Fund and within CUPE as a whole.

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CUPE Canadian Union of Public Employees

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NAFTA/Mexico



Unions and social movement groups were on hand to challenge the recent round of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) talks in Montreal this past January. Concerns about the ongoing re-negotiation of NAFTA brought trade unions, farmers, indigenous peoples, women, environmentalists, and human rights organizations together to convene a series of protests and public meetings. Many of these groups have been working together since the inception of NAFTA in the early 1990s and have long criticized the agreement.

This time, groups had to face the Trump factor. The question on everyone's mind was whether US President Donald Trump would withdraw from NAFTA negotiations during

this sixth round. He didn't, and the talks concluded with all three countries remaining at the negotiation table.

Regardless, civil society groups amplified their call for a NAFTA replacement that would genuinely improve peoples' livelihoods and protect the environment in all three countries. They further committed to forging and strengthening their solidarity across borders, something deemed particularly urgent for the labour movement in Mexico.

In Montreal, Mexican labour leaders called for international solidarity in advance of a looming debate in the Mexican Senate. A proposed bill will substantially weaken workers' rights in the country by locking in low wages and poor working conditions and

will undermine legitimate unions' efforts to negotiate collective agreements.

Workers in Mexico work the longest hours for the lowest pay among all countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). They desperately need legislation that guarantees their right to freedom of association and collective bargaining, but this proposed bill will do the opposite.

If passed, the bill would help employers, and employer-dominated unions, keep independent unions out of the workplace. It would eliminate transparency requirements for fair union elections and reduce basic worker access to collective bargaining agreements and contract language.

The proposed bill would also introduce additional obstacles that make it even harder for independent unions to replace employer-dominated unions, promote greater subcontracting, and will lower the compensation owed to workers who fall victim to workplace accidents and injuries.

In response, Mexican trade unions filed a complaint alleging that Mexico is violating the NAFTA labour side deal, called the North American Agreement on Labour Cooperation. In the coming weeks, more pressure will be brought to bear on the Mexican government to implement labour reforms in the interest of workers rather than employers, and CUPE will help amplify these efforts. ●

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of Canadian investors and harmful economic policies, including privatization and the Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement. The goal of our delegations is to build mutual solidarity between public sector workers in Canada and Colombia in our mutual fight to stop the privatization of public services and to support that country's fragile peace process.

In February 2018, Frontlines sent a Canadian labour delegation to Colombia that included CUPE, the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) and the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC). The delegation met with communities struggling against water privatization, the impact of resource extraction by

Canadian firms and the free trade agreements that are threatening the livelihoods of workers, farmers, Indigenous peoples and Afro-Colombian people.

The delegation came away with a deeper understanding of how privatization, land grabs and massive displacement of the rural population continue to be commonplace.

The delegation also learned how communities and unions that resist are being criminalized and silenced through legislation, the justice system and/or paramilitary violence.

CUPE, along with its Canadian partner unions, continues to work to shed light on the situation in Colombia. ●



1. Honduras Recent elections in Honduras have led tens of thousands of people, including CUPE's partner organization CODEMUH, to the streets in protest. They are demanding the immediate resignation of Juan Orlando Hernández following what is widely believed to be fraudulent elections. Despite the public conclusion by the Organization of American States (OAS) that the November 26 elections were fraudulent and required new elections, the Canadian government recognized Hernández prior to his inauguration.

Eighty-five Canadian academics sent the Trudeau government a joint letter on January 22. It stated: "The fraudulent and repressive re-election of Juan Orlando Hernández must not be legitimized by Canada's presence at his inauguration. Nor should Canada continue to provide any form of assistance to his discredited regime."

2. Philippines CUPE, along with several Canadian civil society organizations and working with trade unions, human rights organizations and human rights defenders in the Philippines, expressed shock and deep concern when the Government of Canada announced in February that it was supporting the sale of 16 helicopters to the Philippine Air Force. Given the high profile human rights violations documented in the Philippines by international human rights organizations, we were clear that there was a serious risk that the helicopters would be used by the Armed Forces of the Philippines in aerial bombardments that could harm innocent citizens. Unions and civil society groups worked tirelessly to stop the helicopter deal. The contract was cancelled, in part due to these efforts. There is still work to do to ensure adequate human rights safeguards are applied to the sale of all military equipment.

3. World Social Forum The World Social Forum (WSF) is taking place in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, from March 13 to 17. Under the banner, *To Resist is to Create, to Resist is to Transform*, the WSF will focus on the need for alternatives for a better world. This global gathering is taking place at an important moment in Brazil, on the heels of a "soft coup" by the right wing, and during a time of electoral political turmoil following the widely disputed Brazilian federal appeals court decision to uphold the conviction of former leftist President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva on corruption charges.

Brother Denis Bolduc, president of SCFP-Québec, will participate in the *Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec* (FTQ) trade union delegation to the World Social Forum this year.

