

Free Trade Agreement: Anything But Popular

Written by

Friday, 14 October 2005 12:33 - Last Updated Friday, 14 October 2005 12:33

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PEJ News - Tens of thousands are in the streets of the main cities of Colombia today protesting a proposed free trade pact with the United States and accusing President Alvaro Uribe of selling out the country.

Thousands of state judicial, transport and education employees walked off the job, forcing the closure of public schools and notary offices in Bogota.

"Four more years of Uribe and we'll be in a coffin," chanted the demonstrators, who urged Colombia's highest court to strike down a measure that would allow Uribe to seek a second consecutive term in office during next year's presidential elections.

Hundreds of riot police erected road blocks across the capital to keep the protesters, some of whom wore Uncle Sam outfits, from straying off the planned march route.

The demonstrators are mainly trade union workers, students, and Indians.

Trade union leaders charge a free trade deal with the United States - expected to be signed within months - will make it impossible for Andean growers of sugar cane, rice, corn, potatoes and cotton to compete with heavily subsidized U.S. agricultural products. Further, they say the pharmaceutical patent protection clauses sought by Washington, that would make local production of generic medication illegal, will lead to a surge in the cost of medicine in the country.

"We are against the pact because we don't think that selling the country to the gringos is the best thing," said Oscar Mora, a teacher marching through Bogota.

Before the protests began Unitary Workers' Central (CUT) President Carlos Rodriguez told Prensa Latina that more than a half million people would be at protests throughout the country

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to demonstrate against the negative effects resulting from the FTA's implementation.

The CUT, along with other labor unions, students and social organizations plus the Colombian Federation of Teachers, called for a strike today to show the government people's rejection of the commercial treaty with Washington.

"With this strike and rally we want to reject immediate presidential reelection of president Uribe as it is neither logical nor ethical that the Republic's president be simultaneously a presidential candidate and head of state and use the nation's budget for his campaign," emphasized the CUT president.

The community protest coincides with an indigenous protest that started Sunday and was suppressed Monday by members of antiriot squadron, where one person was killed and more than 40 injured, among them seven minors.

Some 8,000 Indians embarked Monday on what was to be a weeklong march in western Colombia to protest the trade deal that they say would only worsen Colombia's unemployment woes.

Alberto Wazorna, a protest leader, said violence erupted after police provoked the marchers when they reached a major highway near Viterbo, 130 miles west of Bogota. "It was not necessary for the police to confront us, we were walking peacefully," he said.

The pact has been the target of other demonstrations in other countries in the past as well. In fact, popular protest broke out in most of the nations involved, led by farmers and labor organizations.

For example, on July 14 of this year some 500,000 people—construction workers, teachers, students and many others—marched in seven of Peru's regions to protest the Andean free trade pact. The protests were organized by the General Confederation of Peruvian Workers (CGTP). A day earlier, July 13, some 4,000 people marched in Lima in another protest against the Andean trade pact, this time organized by the Association of Pharmaceutical Industries of

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National Origin and Capital (ADIFAN) and the National Convention of Peruvian Agriculture (CONVEAGRO).

The Peruvian negotiators seem to be gringos, since until now they have achieved nothing for the country. On the contrary, they have given up 50 percent of the national market to the U.S., said CONVEAGRO president Luis Zúñiga at the time.

In September Peruvians took to the streets again.

A year ago, in Guayaquil, Ecuador's main commercial city, negotiators from Ecuador, Colombia, Peru and the U.S. (as well as Bolivia, which has only observer status) held the fifth round of talks over a free trade agreement (TLC). At the same time, members of indigenous, campesino and grassroots organizations from Ecuador and other participating countries gathered in Guayaquil to protest the negotiations and strategize against the pact.

On October 25, the first day of the talks, five women activists from the group Ecological Action (Acci?n Ecol?gica) managed to sneak past heavy security into the reception area of the Hilton and pull out anti-TLC protest signs which they had hidden under their clothes. They shouted slogans (including "We don't want to be a U.S. colony") as guards grabbed them and threw them out.

On October 27, some 5,000 people protested the TLC by marching from the State University of Guayaquil coliseum to the Col?n Hilton hotel, where the talks were taking place. The "March for Sovereignty and Life" was organized by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), the National Campaign Against the TLC-ALCA and other groups. The same day, October 27, the groups participating in the "social round" issued the "Andean Declaration of Guayaquil," reiterating their rejection of the TLC negotiations and announcing their intention to deepen and expand their struggle against the trade pact.

In Bolivia, too, indigenous farmers have protested and blocked roads. Today, with the volatile situation in that country, the government there would just as soon not even talk about such a deal with the US.

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Back in Peru, Miguel Palacin, a leader of Peru's Agricultural and Communities Front, which groups together more than a dozen associations of small-scale farmers warns, "The free trade agreement is going to destroy traditional agriculture in Peru. Millions of farming families are going to be pushed deeper into poverty by tariff-free imports."

The front, as well as Peru's largest umbrella union, the General Confederation of Peruvian Workers, wants an eventual free trade agreement to be put to a referendum, in which voters and not Congress will decide if the trade pact should be ratified.

Peruvian economist Humberto Ortiz, who coordinates the Humanization of the Global Economy project for the Latin American bishops' council, known by its Spanish acronym CELAM says, "For nearly 20 years, our countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have been implementing a so-called development model that has led not to development, but to greater inequality and the loss of opportunities for the majority of people. What we need is a more humane model."

Riordan Roett, director of Latin American studies at Johns Hopkins University speaking of the popular opposition to the Andean trade pact, told the New York Times there was more than just a backlash against market reforms and the perceived trade agenda of the United States. "It's almost a wholesale rejection of what people believe they were fed by the folks in Washington," he said.

Sources: Global Exchange, Fundacion Solon, Prensa Latina Seattle, Post Intelligencer, New York Times, bilaterals.org, Resource Center of the Americas.