

## The Wikileaks Revelations: The AFL-CIO and Colombia

By ALBERTO C. RUIZ

Ernesto Guevara “*feels that in social and political matters the role of Latin America has been one of neglect. As an example of this, he remarked on one occasion, ‘Five thousand workers are shot down in the Bolivian highlands, and maybe there is one line in the New York papers, which mentions that there is labor unrest in Bolivia.’ He wonders if the United States so-called international labor unions would take an interest in the South American worker and if it might help to raise the living standards of the Latin Americans to a level which might come closer to that of the North Americans.*”

–CIA biographical report on Che, 1958

(as reproduced in [Who Killed Che? How the CIA Got Away with Murder](#)).

Many of us have wondered the very same thing about “the so-called international labor unions” in the U.S. and whether they would take a real, sincere interest in the workers of Latin America. For some time, it has appeared that, for whatever its faults in other countries such as Venezuela, the AFL-CIO has taken a bona fide interest in the workers of Colombia. Specifically, it has seemed that the AFL-CIO has taken a good line in opposing the unprecedented anti-union violence in that country – “the most dangerous country in the world to be a trade unionist” as the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) has opined each year for the past many years. The diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks, however, show a more equivocal role.

First, some background on Colombia. Since 1986, around 2900 unionists have been killed in that country. According to the ITUC, which itself relies upon the well-respected National Labor School of Colombia (ENS), 51 unionists (out of 90 worldwide) were killed in 2010. In 2011, there were at least 28 labor leaders assassinated, while hundreds more (including 600 teachers) were threatened with physical harm, including death. The Colombian government, in an attempt to paint itself in the best light and to win Congressional passage of the Colombia Free Trade Agreement (which it successfully did this past October) has tried to take issue with these figures. It has done so by claiming that some of the unionists in these figures were killed, not because they were trade unionists, but rather, for other reasons – e.g., as the result of common crime or crimes of passion.

And so, for example, the Colombian government took the position that in 2010, only 37 of the unionists killed in Colombia (out of the 51 total) were killed *because they were unionists*, and that this should be the figure used when tallying up the victims. However, even if we took this as the correct number of unionists *qua* unionists killed in Colombia in 2010, this would still mean that Colombia accounted for over 40% of the entire world’s trade union killings – hardly anything for the Colombian government to brag about. Still, the fight over these numbers is highly contentious, and for serious reasons of policy.

Another important background issue is the very nature of unionism itself in Colombia. The view of honest human rights and labor rights groups is that unions in Colombia, while representing diverse views from the far-left to the far-right, and everything in between, are peaceful, civilian actors in Colombia and merit protection from armed violence in Colombia. This is indeed the official policy of the United States government which in fact provides aid for union protection in Colombia.

This can be viewed as inconsistent with the U.S.'s continued policy of providing massive aid to the Colombian military which itself carries out anti-union killings and which is aligned with right-wing paramilitaries which carry out the lion's share of anti-union killings in Colombia. However, the point is that the U.S. government, particularly the State Department, does not officially question the legitimate, peaceful aims of the Colombian labor movement.

On the other hand is the Colombian government which, especially under President Alvaro Uribe who held office between 2002 and 2010, attempted to rationalize and even legitimize the killing of unionists by attempting to portray unionists generally in Colombia as being aligned in some way, either in fact or at least in outlook, to the left-wing guerillas in that country. This stigmatization of the Colombian union movement has not only served to justify union killings, it has indeed encouraged them. This is so because the right-wing paramilitaries, which are themselves closely aligned to the military, have the propensity to kill anyone they view as even potentially aligned, again if merely in thought, to the guerillas. And so, this stigmatization serves as a green light to the paramilitaries to carry out extra-judicial killings of unionists. That is why it is so dangerous in Colombia to accuse someone of being a guerilla. Similarly, accusing someone of being a communist is equally dangerous given that guerillas and communists are viewed as one in the same by paramilitaries in Colombia.

In short, the varying ways in which unionists are portrayed in Colombia is not simply an academic one; it is quite literally a matter of life and death.

This brings us to the Wikileaks cables. There are about a dozen Wikileaks cables which reflect meetings between the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center and the U.S. Embassy in Bogota, and they are quite revealing. For example, there is an embassy cable from August 11, 2008, entitled, "COLOMBIAN UNIONS, IDEOLOGY, AND THE ARMED CONFLICT." And, in this cable, the Solidarity Center's Rhett Doumitt [the same AFL-CIO staffer directly involved in aiding and abetting forces that carried out the coup against President Chavez in 2002] professes strong views on this subject to the U.S. Embassy, in particular to Ambassador Brownfield.

Thus, in this cable, Mr. Doumitt is said to have "complained of a 'Stalinist' approach taken by Communist and other hard-left labor leaders within the CUT," the largest labor confederation in Colombia. The cable continues:  
In 2006, they affiliated with the Social Democratic international confederation, which later became the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). Even then, RHETT

DOUMITT of the AFL-CIO affiliated Solidarity Center said the Communists literally ‘turned the lights out’ at the convention in a last ditch attempt to block this affiliation. Further in the cable, DOUMITT complains that the politics of the labor movement in Colombia impede positive, practical advances on labor issues. In the April 22 monthly ‘labor dialogue’ meeting with President Uribe, the confederations focused discussions on the investigations of the Colombian congressmen associated with the parapolitical scandal. CGT (Confederacion General de Trabajadores Democraticos) International Relations Secretary Jose Leon Ramirez notes there was no discussion of labor issues at the meeting. Still, DOUMITT says the unions have made progress in moving away from their traditional polemic cold war perspectives.

Another cable from another meeting indicates identical complaints to the Embassy by Doumitt about the Colombian labor movement elevating its political concerns – e.g., about the “parapolitical” scandal which involved scores of politicians collaborating with the paramilitaries who, among other things, have been hunting down labor leaders – over purely labor concerns. In this cable, dated February 5, 2009, Doumitt complained that “the public’s perception that the unions value politics over pocket book issues for workers also limit union membership. Doumitt complained that the politics of the labor movement in Colombia impede positive, practical advances on labor issues, but noted that some unions are moving away from their traditional socialist ideologies.” Still, in another cable dated September 5, 2008, Doumitt seems to side with the Colombian government in terms of the debate over the figures of unionists killed in Colombia.

Thus, the cable states: RHETT DOUMITT of the AFL-CIO affiliated Solidarity Center told us paramilitary violence against unionists subsided after the last paramilitary block demobilized in 2006. Recent murders of unionists are largely related to common crime. . . .

The tenor of these cables is repeated in other Latin American countries, such as Ecuador, where the Embassy reported on a meeting with Solidarity Center officials who told the Embassy “that unions generally have a bad reputation all around. Younger workers see them as either communist or irrelevant, and most Ecuadorians seen them as essentially selfish actors.”

In a January 22, 2007 cable emanating from Peru, and entitled, “GOP Wins Battle Against Radical Teacher’s Union,” the local AFL-CIO representative is cited as siding with the government in this legal victory which, among other things, limited the number of teachers (from 314 to 30) who could engage in full-time union activity and still receive their teachers’ salaries.

Thus, the cable states: “According to Oscar Muro of the local chapter of the AFL-CIO, the fund sometimes aids teachers in need but is often misused. He further said that 30 subsidized representatives was a generous number given that no other union in the country has such a high number of positions as a percentage of membership.” Finally, in a cable out of Managua, dated January 23, 2007, and involving meetings with various anti-Sandinista NGO’s, the cable explains that unions can play a role in

challenging the policies of President Daniel Ortega, and that “he Ambassador offered to meet with independent unions and suggested that Huembes [a union leader from a non-FSLN union] contact the AFL-CIO regional representative in Guatemala to seek his guidance.”

What these cables portray is an organization, the AFL-CIO, which is beholden to the U.S. State Department and which is reporting to it on a regular basis. Among other things, it is reporting on the perceived blemishes of the union movements in those countries in which it operates. And, as during the Cold War, the “blemishes” it is reporting on in many instances revolve around the left-wing, and possibly socialist or communist, nature of these unions. Of course, the AFL-CIO is reporting on this to the U.S. government which is hostile to such left-wing institutions and which is indeed bent on wiping them out. The cable emanating from Nicaragua actually shows the Ambassador himself calling upon the AFL-CIO for help in agitating against Sandinista President Daniel Ortega.

This type of conduct by the AFL-CIO is particularly dangerous in the case of Colombia where trade unionists are being threatened and killed in record numbers by state and quasi-state actors which receive their support from the U.S., and where the U.S. is such a powerful, intervening force.

At worst, such red baiting of the union movement in a country such as Colombia to that country’s military backer (the U.S.) serves to put the lives of unionists – who the AFL-CIO actually claims to protect – in danger.

Further, such conduct on the part of the AFL-CIO has an adverse impact on U.S. policy. For example, in the case of Colombia, undermining the union movement in the eyes of the U.S. government only serves to undercut the cause of the U.S. and Colombian unions who desperately attempted, and succeeded for several years, to prevent passage of the Colombia FTA, largely on the grounds that Colombia should not be rewarded for anti-union violence.

This message was greatly compromised – and possibly fatally so as seen in the ultimate passage of the FTA under Obama – by the AFL-CIO’s representative in Bogota who, at least as reflected in the cables, portrays the Colombian unions’ concerns as unworthy, either because the unions are themselves somehow unworthy because they are communist-ridden or too political (that is, too concerned about government officials collaborating with paramilitary death squads), or because the issue of violence isn’t the big deal those unions are claiming it is.

In short, the AFL-CIO continues to do the work, not of a true internationalist union, but of an imperialist organization which sees itself aligned with U.S. foreign policy in challenging the movement for radical change and for socialism in the world. I can say that, as someone who believes in the cause of socialism – a cause more relevant than ever in light of the current global crisis of capitalism – this is not what I want those speaking in labor’s name abroad to be doing. I would submit that the U.S. labor movement would be better off, instead of presumptuously telling unions in other

countries what they should be doing and what political line they should be following, to instead focus on its own efforts at organizing workers and in agitating for real change in this country – efforts at which it has been woefully inadequate since the 1930's when, oh yes, it was being spurred on by militant socialists and communists.!

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