

**ALERT**

For all BCGEU members  
July 28, 2008

## Leaders from NUPGE, other Canadian unions tell Colombians free trade will hurt, not help

**F**REE TRADE WITH Colombia will lead to worse human and labour rights abuses and further devastation of communities at risk, four top Canadian labour leaders said at a news conference in Bogota on July 24, capping a week-long tour to the South American country.

The Canadian public sector union leaders spent a week meeting with leaders of Colombian unions, diplomats, human rights groups and others. Their goal was to assess the human and labour rights situation in a country notorious for abuses.

Given the recent and controversial free trade agreement with Colombia signed by Conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper, the fact-finding mission allowed the leaders to examine first-hand the profound social and economic problems that afflict the South American country.

Retired BCGEU president George Heyman represented the National Union of Public and General Employees. He was joined by Paul Moist, president of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, John Gordon, president of the Public Service Alliance of Canada and Denis Lemelin, president of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers.

Here is the statement the leaders read to several Colombian media reporters July 24 following a meeting with leaders of the United Central of Workers (CUT), one of three central labour bodies:

"We have met with many sectors of Colombian society, including government officials, the CUT and other trade unions, opposition leaders, non-governmental organizations, groups representing indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples as well as the Canadian ambassador.

"We also were present to hear the final report of the Permanent People's Tribunal following two years of hearings in six sectors of the Colombian economy. The report condemned the Colombian government and transnational corporations for countless violations of human and trade union rights.

"Our overwhelming conclusion is that a free trade agreement will not help the Colombian people. It will only exacerbate an already horrifying list of human and labour rights abuses that are shocking the world.

"Colombia continues to be the most dangerous country on earth for trade unions and civil society activists. Since the beginning of 2008, 32 trade unionists have been assassinated. We have also observed that Colombia has no juridical framework that permits free collective bargaining.

"On our return to Canada, we will tell our one million members, our government and all Canadians that it is unacceptable to sign a free trade agreement with Colombia as long as trade unionists are at risk and free collective bargaining and other labour and human rights continue to be violated."



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