

Faces of Colombia: Who are the Victims of Free Trade?

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What is AFTA? AFTA comes *after* NAFTA and CAFTA. AFTA is the Andean Free Trade Agreement, striving to create a trading block between the US, Colombia, Ecuador, and Peru (Bolivia is participating as an observer and invited to join in the future.)

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The birth of CAFTA and AFTA was a result of the failed strategy to create the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The FTAA was proposed in 1994 as a hemispheric free trade agreement between the 34 countries of the Americas (with the exception of Cuba), from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego. Opposition was so strong that a new strategy was formed to divide and conquer the territory.

Despite an extremely well organized grassroots effort, CAFTA, the Central American Free Trade Agreement (including six countries of Central America with the exception of Panama and the inclusion of the Dominican Republic) was passed on July 28, 2005. It passed by only two votes. Bush, Cheney, and Rice made a last minute appearance (closed door, members only) on Capitol Hill for a final round of arm twisting and promising of federal funds. The bill passed by two votes after an illegal extended voting period of one hour; the polls closed immediately after the votes needed to pass CAFTA were secured.

AFTA has been broken down into separate negotiations with each country, although it may be voted on altogether in US Congress. Peru has signed on, Ecuador is refusing to sign (due to a strong mobilization of the indigenous community in opposition), and Bolivia refuses to sign. Negotiations began in Colombia in May 2004 and closed on February 28, 2006, after President Uribe made a fly by night trip to DC to defend Colombian interests but failed. What is next for Colombia? **The US and Colombian Congresses will vote on the FTA sometime in the next six to 12 months. Now is the time to educate your communities and organize to stop AFTA.**

The Colombian agricultural sector will suffer greatly under the proposed Colombia-US free trade agreement (FTA). Analysts predict that US products will be dumped onto the Colombian market at below production costs, destroying the livelihood of many

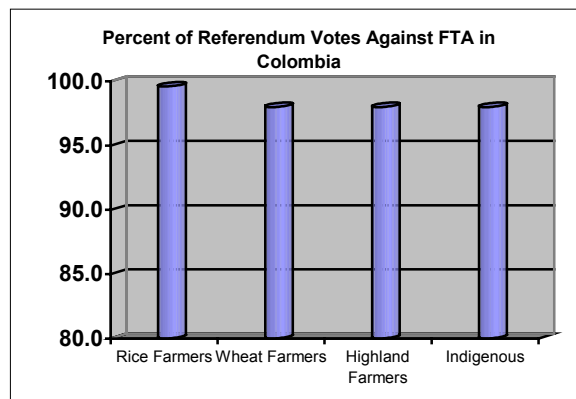
"The ratio of profits from 'free trade' is 6:1 in favor of the US."

Colombian farmers and agricultural workers. According to RECALCA (Colombian Action Network Against Free Trade), the FTA will legalize dumping (exporting at below production costs, illegal under current trade practices of the World Trade

Organization). The US agricultural sector received \$24 billion in subsidies in 2005. Colombian

products cannot compete with these subsidized products. This will have a devastating impact on the internal market for Colombian products, causing Colombia's food security to become even more tenuous.

Food security is already a problem in Colombia for 2.5 million children living in chronic hunger (UN Food and Agricultural Organization). In a country of 44 million people, five million go to bed each night hungry (UN World Food Program). The FTA will hand over control of agricultural production, imports, and exports to multinational companies who prioritize profit over well-being. This is in violation of article 65 of the Colombian Constitution that guarantees collective rights for protection of food production. "Food security is not a bag of bread and potatoes. It is sovereignty in deciding what we grow and what we eat. The FTA will bring new diseases, transgenic products, and dependency on foreign products. It will destroy our campesino culture, economy, and autonomy," proclaimed Dagoberto Villadiego, representative of the National Farmers' Association (ANUC) from the state of Sucre.



"The typical Colombian meal is now a foreign dish. Our lentils, beans, rice, vegetables, and cooking oil are imported from multinational companies. We need to produce our own food to preserve our culture and identity, our local economy and autonomy," said Teresa Alvarado, ANUC board member from Meta.

According to the National Federation of Agricultural Unions (FENSUAGRO), over 700,000 people currently employed in the rice industry will lose their jobs as 79,000 tons of US-subsidized rice (20% below production cost) floods the market. The states of Tolima, Huila, Casanare and Meta are major rice producing regions. The irrigation system required to grow rice makes the land virtually impossible for

substitution of any other crop. Cotton has been suggested as a replacement for rice, but US cotton will receive immediate duty-free status and will not be subject to taxation under the FTA. Colombian cotton could not compete with duty free cotton imported from the US.

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regions, and be forced to join the insurgency,” explained Angel Caballero, President of the National Association for the Salvation of Agriculture (Asociacion Nacional por la Salvacion Agropecuaria, ANSA). Many Colombian rice farmers live in high conflict zones with the presence of armed groups. During rice farmers’ meetings in 2005, it was concluded that many farmers, facing economic ruin, would be forced to turn to coca and poppy production or join illegal armed groups in order to survive. In a referendum in 2005, 99.6% of the rice farmers in these four departments voted against the FTA. Most rice farmers are mid- to large size landholders, unlike wheat farmers, whose average plot of land is less than 10 acres. “African palm and rubber trees are recommended as replacement crops for rice. It takes six years for palm to mature to production; by that time, palm oil would be competing with US imported, tariff-free sunflower, canola, and soy oil. We would still lose our shirts,” said Caballero.

“The average farm laborer earns \$3 per day. There is no pension for farmers, no health care, no social programs for poor families or single mothers. We need industrial farm machinery and technical skills training from the US but we don’t need imported food. We need a local market for our goods. We grow grains, wheat, barley, and beans. Our local beer factory shut down due to imported beer entering the market; we no longer have a buyer for our barley,” said Fidencio Amaya, Vice President of the Nariño Farmers Organization.

Wheat is grown in the southern part of Nariño, on the border of Ecuador, and in the mountains of Boyaca. Monocropping of wheat dries out the soil, according to Nariño farmers. Vast stretches of rolling brown wheat fields provide jobs for over 20,000 people in Colombia. The wheat industry will be gravely affected by the FTA, as US imported wheat will receive immediate duty-free treatment. The wheat farmers asked the mayor of Guatarrilla, Nariño what she thought would be an economically and environmentally sustainable crop to substitute wheat in

the region. “Flowers and guinea pigs, for export”, she responded. Flower production requires massive investment in greenhouses, lots of water, and a nearby international airport for rapid export. Nariño has none of these. Guinea pigs are rarely eaten in Colombia, unlike other Andean countries (Ecuador and Peru), and not considered a food item in the US.



Wheat crops in Southern Colombia, courtesy of the Escuela Nacional Sindical (Medellin)

The wheat farmers know that the most lucrative substitute crop for their dry highland soil is poppies, from which the sap is extracted to produce heroin (in 2004, Colombia produced four metric tons of heroin). In 2005, the wheat farmers’ referendum produced a vote of 98% opposition to the FTA. The chicken farming industry provides 240,000 jobs for Colombians, according to Aurelio Suárez Montoya, Executive Director of ANSA. Under the FTA, 26,000 tons of chicken parts will be imported from the US, duty-free. These chicken parts are not sold for human consumption in the US, thus selling at any price in Colombia would be profitable. This will have a walloping impact on the Colombian chicken industry. US factory farmed chicken, with high hormone levels, will enter the Colombian market and the mouths of many children who have grown up on free-range meat.

Impact of the 1st year of the FTA on the agricultural sector

Exports from the US to Colombia (tons):

- Wheat 1,200,000
- Yellow Corn 2,000,000
- White Corn 130,000
- White Rice 79,000
- Chicken 26,000
- Dairy Products 9,000
- Soy 90,000
- Cotton 70,000
- Beans 15,000
- Total: 4,629,000 tons**

Colombian exports to the US (tons):

- Sugar 50,000
- Tobacco 4,000
- Beef 30,000
- Dairy 9,000
- Total: 93,000 tons**

Source: www.RECALCA.org.co

We have seen the horrible impact of 12 years of NAFTA on Mexican farmers; in ten years, 1.3 million jobs were lost. Under the 1st year of the FTA, the US will import two million tons of yellow corn to Colombia; on average, Colombian corn consumption is 2.3 million tons annually. Many of the 300,000 Colombians employed in the corn industry are likely to lose their jobs and enter the bursting pool of the unemployed.

In Putumayo, one of the most war-torn states in Colombia, 2,200 acres of beans are grown for internal consumption. Under the FTA, (according to the existing text prior to the February 28 closing of negotiations) 15,000 tons of beans will enter Colombia duty free, thus destroying the local bean market. Alto Putumayo produces 17,000 liters of milk daily. Colanta, a Medellin dairy company, purchases this milk. Under the FTA, 9,000 tons of dairy products will

enter the market at below production costs. Putumayo dairy farmers will lose their income.

“We can’t compete with US products under the FTA. The only crop that we can survive on is coca,” a campesina leader from Puerto Asis, Putumayo, commented.

“Our national food security and sovereignty is lost under the FTA,” commented Eder Sanchez, Vice President of ANUC. “We have seen too many farm children from the highlands migrating to pick coca. Colombian farmers can no longer survive by farming their land. The campesino economy is being destroyed by imported products, forcing us to grow illicit crops,” said ANUC board member Alvarado



Community referendum on FTA, courtesy of Escuela Nacional Sindical (Medellin)

Montoya (ANSA) said, “In the first two years, the FTA will cause a loss of 300,000 hectares (741,313 acres) of cultivated farmland, two million working days, 17,000 jobs in the poultry industry in Colombia. The ratio of profits from ‘free trade’ is 6:1 in favor of the US.” His organization, founded in 2001, has 80,000 members including coffee, sugarcane, rice, wheat, potato, soy, corn, cotton, and dairy farmers from across the country.

The FTA will have a detrimental effect on the 81 indigenous cultures in Colombia, a total of about half a million people. Indigenous communities see the FTA as a major threat to their culture and continued existence, according to displaced Kankuamo leaders. The US has already patented the sacred Yaje plant, used in indigenous rituals throughout the Amazon region. Local communities fear that the biodiversity of the Amazon and Chocó regions will disappear with the prioritization of profit, privatization, and monocropping. “Mega-projects threaten our cultures, traditional lifestyles and agricultural practices. Petroleum, water, and all energy sources will be privatized, decreasing access to basic necessities for the poor,” said Sanchez of the ANUC.

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Some common Colombian products do not meet strict US sanitary regulations. Major investments are needed in order to meet these standards. Export capacity, technology, transportation, and lack of government subsidies also severely limit the US market for Colombian exports. However, transgenic products from

the US will enter the Colombian market, violating the regulatory biosecurity protocol of Cartagena, approved by 130 countries in Canada on January 29, 2000, to place limits on transferring, using, and testing of genetically modified organisms and their commerce.

The trade negotiations do not include the marginalized voices of campesinos, Afro Colombian and indigenous people, or the voices of those in the US who will be negatively impacted by the FTA. These people are the principle organizers of the anti-FTA events. The Association of Indigenous Councils of Northern Cauca organized the first local referendum on the FTA, held in five municipalities. An overwhelming 98% of voters (51,330 people) sent a resounding message of **NO** to the negotiating table. This model was repeated in other regions of the country.

On September 4, 2005, highland farmers held a referendum in 21 municipalities in the departments of Nariño, Boyacá and Cundinamarca, 98% of the more than 20,000 voters voted against the FTA, as it will destroy their market for cereals, grains, and potatoes. Similarly, on October 12th, Columbus Day, thousands of indigenous Colombians marched against continued imperialism and extermination of their people over the past 500 years. Over 50,000 people marched in Cauca, protesting the FTA and fumigation of their ancestral land, and demanding dignity, protection, and autonomy.

Luis Eduardo Garzón, mayor of Bogotá, capital of Colombia, population eight million, has called for a May 27, 2006 FTA referendum. Garzón is concerned about the effects of the FTA on his “Bogotá without Hunger” Program. The FTA’s intellectual property rights will increase patents on new medicines, thus increasing prescription costs and restricting access to affordable medicine for millions of Colombians.

Bogotá is home to more than 580,000 internally displaced people, according to the UNHCR. Under the FTA, the already suffering rural economy will be crushed, causing a massive influx of farmers into urban areas. Programs for displaced people in Colombia do not sufficiently cover basic needs such as food, housing, health care and access to gainful employment.

Colombian farmers, indigenous people, Afro-Colombian people, teachers, students, and many others have educated their communities, organized, marched, and voted against the FTA. The closing of the negotiations on February 28, 2006 slams a door in the face of the interests and opportunities of the majority of Colombians. National days of protest and a march to Bogotá are being organized for May 1 and May 15, with a focus on rural areas.

Colombians across the country are mobilizing to oppose this FTA, which prioritizes corporate profits over people. They need the support of the US grassroots community to stop the Colombia-US FTA in its tracks, before the US and Colombian legislatures approve this disastrous policy.