



feature

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Supporters rallying for the nation's new peace agreement with FARC stand under a banner reading "for peace" during a march in Bogota, Colombia, November 15, 2016. *REUTERS/John Vizcaino*

ENDING CONFLICT IN A POLARIZED SOCIETY: COLOMBIA'S TRADE UNIONS MOBILIZE FOR PEACE

After five decades of civil war, a peace treaty was rejected by a narrow majority of the population in this deeply divided country. Colombia's trade unions are determined to help build a just peace, working with civil society to achieve a settlement that begins to heal the deep wounds.

Despite the peace agreement being defeated by voters, both the Colombian government and FARC have announced that they will not return to war. A revised peace treaty has been negotiated and a new agreement has been published, which will be voted on in Congress.



To end the conflict between the government, right wing paramilitaries, and the major guerilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the government of President Juan Manuel Santos began negotiating a peace deal with the leaders of FARC in 2012.

In a ceremony that included UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon, US secretary of state John Kerry, and a dozen Latin American leaders, President Santos and FARC leader Timoleón "Timochenko" Jimenez signed a peace agreement in September 2016. Santos was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for achieving what was hoped to be lasting peace.

During the negotiations, ex-president Alvaro Uribe, responsible for years of violence in Colombia, campaigned against the peace agreement. President Santos put the agreement to the electorate in a referendum in October. Polling showed a healthy majority would approve it, but the result was a shocking rejection of the treaty by 50.2 per cent of voters, on a low turnout of just 37.4 per cent.

The roots of the conflict lie in the development of agribusiness in Colombia, when peasant subsistence farmers were forced off their land to make way for private companies. Established in 1964, as a response to the wave of political violence after the assassination of the liberal President Jorge Eliécer Gaitán (El Bogotazo) and following attacks by the Colombian government on villages, FARC's original aim was to use a short, sharp campaign of guerilla warfare to spark a general insurrection and revolution.

The conflict dragged on into a brutal war of attrition for half a century, escalating under the presidency of César Gaviria Trujillo, 1990-1994, with the creation of paramilitary groups. The Years of Terror under Uribe's administration in

2002 – 2010, were a violent period for rural communities, trade unionists, social activists and guerillas. Backed by the CIA, Uribe hired death squads, Escuadrones de la Muerte, to train the paramilitary, army and self defense groups, who were responsible for the deaths of thousands.

FARC responded with kidnappings, ransom demands and drug trafficking, putting a toll on the civil and rural communities. Some of the worst violence took place in strategic economic sectors and regions where IndustriALL has affiliates, such as the oil, mining and extractive sectors. **Colombian trade unions have much at stake in supporting the peace agreements and rebuilding society.**

UNIONS BUILDING PEACE



Colombia's trade union movement is fighting hard to build peace, and a historic, restorative justice that transforms society.

Fabio Arias Giraldo from the trade union centre, Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT), believes the peace agreement was rejected because of the strength of the right and extreme polarization in Colombia:

“Political polarization in Colombia is very strong, and the vote is the result of this polarization. The most reactionary forces of the country maintain a strong presence in different sectors of society, and unfortunately, this is the result.

“We believed that it was impossible that this could happen, but it did. It corresponds to a rightward shift that started with Uribe. 13 years ago he began a polarization in the country that had to do with the problem of political violence, which has marked many people and has left too many victims. There's a reaction against that.”

Giraldo argues that the low turnout and lack of enthusiasm for the deal was due to neither party being popular with the electorate:

“The two parties that signed the agreement are not very well perceived by the vast majority of the population. And there is much opposition to the political violence that FARC has generated, as well as a lot

of dissatisfaction with the government for all the measures they took against civil society.

“So both situations were combined and, unfortunately, Uribe made a deceptive speech. He stressed how harmful the violence was, what it had meant to the victims, and he added a number of religious components. This combination became very destructive to the chances of endorsing the peace agreements in Colombia, and it defeated us.”

Cesar Loza Arenas, president of IndustriALL Global Union affiliate oil and gas union USO, says:

“We cannot give space to the enemies of peace. Peace is a right for all Colombians, as it is for workers. And we support peace. It doesn't mean that we agree with the politics of the government but when it comes to peace, we are all united.”

Giraldo says:

“The Colombian people and especially the youth have not given up. There is a wide social mobilization in Colombia. We have now realized, even those who voted “no”, that we made a serious mistake, and we have taken to the streets.

“So now, not a day passes without strong mobilizations in the streets, telling the government and the “no” people that we cannot miss this opportunity to achieve peace.



“The national mobilizations, the support from the international community and the support we give internally from the trade union movement will help us to overcome this impasse and achieve peace, which the vast majority of those who live today in Colombia have never known.”

During IndustriALL 2nd Congress in October, 1,500 delegates unanimously passed a solidarity resolution regretting the result of the referendum. Congress called on the Colombian government and FARC leaders to continue their efforts to negotiate peace and to guarantee respect for individual and collective freedoms.



Speaking in support of the resolution, Pablo Santos of IndustriALL affiliate the energy workers' union SINTRAELECOL said:

“We are calling for a responsible solution to obtain peace. Millions of people have been displaced and thousands of people, including trade unionists, have been killed. Now is the time to extend solidarity.”

“This resolution shows that we have backing from the global union movement, telling us workers in Colombia to keep going. We are not alone in the fight,” said Loza Arenas.

FARC is viewed as a terrorist organization by Colombia, the US, Canada and the EU, and as a legitimate opposition group by a number of countries in South America. The politics of FARC is originally Bolivarist, a peasant guerilla of Marxist - Leninist orientation.

For its part, right wing paramilitary forces, the Colombian army, police and security services have been heavily involved in large-scale human rights abuses. In the 1980s, FARC abandoned guerilla warfare for electoral politics, forming the Union Patriótica (UP) party with a number of left wing groups and trade unions. The UP performed well in elections, but 5,000 members, including a number of electoral candidates, were assassinated.

Approximately 220,000 people were killed between January 1958 and December 2012. The violence in Colombia has resulted in 4,000 assassinated trade unionists, seven million displaced people, and over 600,00 forced disappearances.

- 1 Fabio Arias Giraldo, CUT, Colombia. *IndustriALL*
- 2 Cesar Loza Arenas, USO, Colombia. *IndustriALL*
- 3 Pablo Santos, SINTRAELECOL, speaking at IndustriALL Congress. *IndustriALL*