

"If the FTA is adopted, we will be slaves like this donkey"



Colombian farmers, teachers and others fighting for sovereignty against the FTA (Photo: indymedia, Colombia)

FTA resistance in Colombia

Interview with Aurelio Suarez (November 2007)

What is the level of organisation of resistance in Colombia to free trade agreements?

About three years ago, when the 8th round of negotiations for the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) took place, several hundred Colombian popular organisations, trade unions, environmentalists, farmers and independent research centres created the Colombian Action Network against Free Trade and the FTAA, or RECALCA. This group has become the core of the struggle for Colombian resistance against the US free trade agreement (FTA). Through RECALCA, we have organised research, forums and seminars and supported various mobilisations of different social sectors which, in one way or another, have raised their voices against the US-Colombia FTA. This activism has ranged from direct participation in discussions within the Colombian Congress, in both the Senate and the House of Representatives, support for the public consultations that indigenous communities, farmers, youth and workers have conducted as "people's referenda" on the FTA, which have resulted in a clear rejection of the agreement at the popular level, as well as various days of social mobilisation against the US-Colombia FTA, whether as a coordinated front or through separate groupings.

What is RECALCA focusing on today?

It is focusing on the new FTAs that the government is negotiating and wants to sign. That means the Chile-Colombia FTA, the Central American Northern Triangle FTA (with Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador), the Canada-Colombia FTA, the EFTA-Colombia agreement (EFTA being Iceland, Norway, Liechtenstein and Switzerland) and the so-called Association Agreement – which is nothing other than an FTA – between the Andean Community and the European Union.

How has the Colombian government responded to so much mobilisation?

The Colombian government – which is clearly neoliberal and authoritarian, and of an extremely undemocratic nature – has turned a deaf ear to the people. It is refusing to listen to the opinions of an immense set of organisations, including all the peasant organisations, small and medium producers (including some agribusinesses), the trade unions, environmental organisations and the indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. The Colombian government has simply replaced these people – Colombia's real civil society – with what the government calls "civil society" – in reality, tiny organisations that it has created and funded to give some kind of façade of social participation in the negotiations. It has also ignored not only social organisations, independent analysts and various universities, but also Senators and Representatives from the opposition. The core of the US FTA – before the additional protocol was negotiated between the Bush administration and the US Democratic Party – got the supporting vote of only 55 out of 102 Senators. It got the deal passed on the grounds that it was the final text – which, in fact, it turned out not to be. This is a treaty approved behind the country's back. Those of us who opposed the agreement in public debates in Congress clearly demonstrated that this negotiation was going to cause serious harm to the territorial, legal, economic and food sovereignty of Colombia. Despite our arguments, the government pushed ahead and used its parliamentary majority to get the FTA approved.

What is the relationship between the FTA and food sovereignty in Colombia?

The US-Colombia free trade agreement was negotiated on the basis of two criteria. One, Colombia agreed that it would slash tariffs on all US farm products to zero. In



The US FTA in the eyes of a Colombian student.
(Picture: Rene Elken)

five years, 89% of US imports would enter Colombia tariff-free. Within ten years, an even broader group of items would be covered. And within 18 years, all agricultural produce from the US would face zero tariffs at the Colombian border. But while Colombia negotiated this way, and this is the second element, the United States did not remove its system of agricultural subsidies that enables it to export its surpluses – especially cereals, oilseeds, meat, dairy products, fruit and temperate vegetables – at prices below the cost of production. In other words, dumping. So what the government did was to legalise US agricultural dumping in Colombia. In this sense, our country has opted to increase its dependency on foreign food (which started with the introduction of the neoliberal model and the so-called economic opening). In fact, 51% of our plant-based protein and calories and 33% of our vegetable fats already come from outside. So this is going to increase our food dependency and diminish our self-sufficiency in the production of basic foodstuffs.

What are the related implications?

This implies not only a problem of sovereignty, but will also cause the ruin and displacement of millions of rural families and small and medium-sized producers who are involved in production for the domestic market. For example, the capital of Colombia, Bogotá, gets 80% of the food it consumes from farmers producing within a 300-km radius. These regions are going to be directly hit when US food imports flood the market. The big traders, which have an almost oligopolistic control of the food and agricultural market, will prefer to drop their domestic sources and buy US products at lower cost. This will affect our self-sufficiency, our self-determination, household food security and the food sovereignty of the nation.

By preventing Colombian farmers from growing food, won't this push them into the cultivation of illegal crops?

Fifteen years ago in the department of Nariño, one of the largest wheat-growing areas of the country, there

were only 100 hectares of coca. Today, there are more than 15,000 hectares of coca. So it's likely that this will happen. The peasant and indigenous communities, and the poorest sectors, will either be displaced or they will be driven to produce crops that are used for illegal purposes, like coca or poppy, because they are the only profitable ones.

What is the relationship between the FTA and the environment?

If you read the details, the environment chapter of the US free trade agreement says that environmental considerations cannot block trade, meaning trade takes precedence over environmental standards. The environmental regulations of our countries are increasingly being subjected to the rules set up by these supranational treaties. There is nothing in the FTA which prevents investors from taking control of our water ecosystems, our biodiversity, etc. They are free to engage in profit-making businesses around so-called environmental services at the expense of what we all fight for in terms of having a friendly and sustainable relationship with our environment, in order to enjoy real human development.

What are the expectations for the future?

The FTA has not yet been ratified by the United States Congress. So far, they have only ratified the FTA with Peru, in both the House of Representatives and in the Senate. In the case of Colombia, the deal is held up by opposition from the Democratic Party, now the majority in both chambers, given the denunciations pouring in from both the national and the international community against the government of Alvaro Uribe, whose close relationship with paramilitary groups and drug traffickers has contributed to the escalation of violence, especially in rural areas of Colombia. There is a kind of lull in the adoption of this FTA. The main candidate of the Democratic Party for the US presidency, Hillary Clinton, said she is against the FTA with Colombia. It is unlikely now to be approved by the US Congress in 2007. The year 2008 might not be conducive to its passage either, since the US will be in an electoral process and broad sectors of US public opinion are highly



Colombia's horrific record on labour and human rights has been a major sticking point with the US political elite, which has to approve the deal.

sensitive to free trade. So everything is on hold. Meanwhile, our network in Colombia and the organisations we work with have been preparing to wage our last battle - the legal battle at the Constitutional Court, which, before the FTA is finally approved, must decide whether the FTA complies with the standards set out in our national constitution. But let's be clear. When the FTA comes into force, that is when the resistance will increase. When people begin to see the changes in public and private policies, we are sure that their resistance is going to grow. Resistance does not end with the adoption of an FTA. That's when it begins to take shape.

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This interview was conducted by
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FTA protester in Colombia (Photo: Global exchange)

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<http://www.salvacionagropecuaria.net>

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