



# Colombia Trade Facts

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## Colombia Free Trade and Labor Unions: Myth vs. Fact

**Myth #1:** Union members in Colombia are more likely to be murdered than other individuals in Colombia.

**Fact:** Union members are far less likely than average Colombians to be murdered. In 2007, the homicide rate for unionists was less than one-seventh the rate for the general population (less than 5 per 100,000 versus 39 per 100,000). The national homicide rate has dropped 40 percent since 2002, and the homicide rate of unionists has dropped by twice as much over that period.

**Myth #2:** All Union members killed in Colombia are murdered because of their union activity.

**Fact:** Statistics for Colombian unionist homicides include all victims who were members of a union, regardless of the actual motive.

**Myth #3:** Colombia has the world's highest incidence of unionist murders.

**Fact:** This assertion cannot be supported. We are not aware of any other country in the world that tracks homicides based on union membership. The United States does not.

**Myth #4:** The Government of Colombia does not protect union members from violence.

**Fact:** The government has established a special program to protect labor union members and other persons that may be at risk. Today, approximately 9,400 people are protected by that program, of which more than 1,900 are union

members –making them the largest group of private citizens participating in the program. Funding for the protection program has increased by 141 percent from 2002 to 2007 to over \$38 million.

**Myth #5:** The low conviction rate for homicides of over 2,000 union members dating back to 1991 demonstrates particular impunity for unionist homicides.

**Fact:** Well over 300,000 Colombians were victims of homicide during that period. Conviction rates were low for all crime victims in a country that was wracked by violence and had a judicial system that was overwhelmed and inadequate. Today violence has dropped significantly in Colombia and the government is seeking to end impunity.

Following a decade under previous administrations in which there were no convictions in homicides of union members, the Uribe Administration made prosecuting homicides against unionists a priority and is making progress. The government established a special unit within the Prosecutor General's Office with 13 prosecutors, 69 investigators, and 27 supporting lawyers focused exclusively on cases of violence against trade union members. The unit prioritized investigation of 187 cases of violence against unionists – cases identified by Colombia's three leading labor unions – as well as the backlog of other unionist homicide cases. Since 2001, 73 cases involving trade unionists have been resolved with 88 convictions involving 156 individuals. Of the 187 cases prioritized in early 2007, 14 have been prosecuted resulting in 27 individuals sentenced for their crimes.

**Myth #6:** Withholding approval of the free trade agreement (FTA) provides leverage to pressure the Colombian government to help combat crimes against union members.

**Fact:** Colombian efforts to strengthen the rule of law and end the violence began long before negotiation of the FTA. These actions were not taken for the benefit of a trade debate in the United States -- they were taken as part of a commitment by the Colombian government to the Colombian people. The FTA enshrines in an enforceable international agreement Colombia's commitment to adopt and maintain laws ensuring fundamental labor rights and to enforce its labor laws. Ratification of the FTA will provide additional tools for the United States to ensure continued progress by future Colombian governments on labor matters.