

Many people – especially labor union members – have approached me on the Colombia Free Trade Agreement. Some would have you believe Colombia is a dark, dangerous no-man's land that sucks up labor organizers and spits out cocaine. Others think Colombia is too fresh, too new to the global economy and it hasn't yet earned its stripes to be considered for such an exalted trade agreement.

I have a different view of Colombia. I lived in Colombia, speak its language and have followed its history. I am one of only two members of Congress that I know of who have lived in-Country. I know Colombia not through statistics, or political white papers, or newspaper accounts. I know Colombia through personal experience. I am part of Colombia and it is part of me.

So I bring to the debate on the Free Trade Agreement something that I think is missing from the dialogue: the passion of the Colombian people to be free and full partners in the global economy.

Colombia is a nation with an illicit drug industry, yes. But it is more a nation with a people determined to crush those drugs and reclaim their land for legitimate use. Colombia is a nation coming out of paramilitary incursion. But it is more a nation whose people have asserted themselves and have said, "We're tired as hell and won't take it anymore," -- and they're not. Colombia is a nation that looks up to the United States as its role model and has worked to emulate it. Colombia's legislative, judicial and social structures are modeled much after our own and the Colombian people want nothing more than to live rich, productive lives like their American counterparts to the north.

The Colombia Free Trade Agreement is but a tool to enable Colombia to achieve further democratic advancements for its citizens. Having been a Peace Corps Volunteer in Colombia, I was there to help empower Colombian citizens through engaging their government. They are a people uniformly invested in the success of their government and they want good government. The FTA is one more way for them to make that happen.

Not everyone has had the opportunity to experience Colombia the way I have. Even so, the facts argue in favor of this FTA. Colombia is the world's third largest Spanish speaking country, one of the oldest continuing democracies in Latin America and America's best friend in the hemisphere. The United States has sent more aid money to Colombia than any other Latin American country and, in 2010 alone, exported \$11 billion in US goods to Colombia. It is one of our top trading partners in Latin America and our 20th largest export market. America already has an existing strong trade relationship with Colombia; the FTA only takes this to a new level.

But unlike many other free trade agreements, the Colombia FTA provides us – both the U.S. and Colombia, as partners – with an opportunity to reinforce the advances Colombia has made in its social democratic society.

In particular, this FTA plan with Colombia brings with it requirements to enact some of the strongest labor protection measures ever imposed. In fact, the labor protection requirements in

the US-Colombia FTA are stronger than the labor protections in the EU-Colombia FTA and the recently enacted Canada-Colombia FTA.

When Colombia sought assistance to turn itself around, who did they come to? The United States. We have been helping them restore security and democracy for decades. And it hasn't been one-sided. We have been putting demands on Colombia since 2000 when we began funding Plan Colombia and every year since have approved sending more aid, partially through the Andean Counterdrug Program. With each tranche came stringent conditions, and tough stipulations. The total spent so far equals over \$8 billion. At our behest, Colombia has dramatically upgraded its military, instilling new discipline and a more accountable chain of command so much so that Colombian forces have provided security and counternarcotics training in 14 Latin American countries.

American aid to Colombia has also made it possible for Colombia to upgrade its social structure, improving schools, health care and labor laws. The labor laws, especially, I know are at the crux of the debate over the FTA.

We all know of the violent labor history in Colombia. Yes, the country has gone through years of violence, even back in the time when I was a Peace Corps Volunteer, but it has also adopted the strongest laws to prosecute labor crimes and to protect labor union activists with special security personnel. Even the United States doesn't have such an elaborate specialty division of its Justice Department to prosecute crimes against labor. Colombia has adopted the standards that we required for approving trade agreements and has an ILO office in Bogota to monitor labor violations. On the insistence of members of our Congress it recently enacted tough penalties for companies trying to circumvent collective bargaining agreements through the use of "cooperatives," also known as associated cooperatives. It has created a separate Ministry of Labor to give Cabinet-level attention to critical labor issues and has expanded the government protection program for labor leaders and human rights defenders, which has successfully protected participants since 1999.

Of concern to me, as it should be to everyone is the issue of assassinations and murders of union activists in Colombia. No doubt, when even one unionist is killed it is one too many. Zero tolerance needs to be our mantra and zero deaths our goal. But that is exactly why the U.S. demanded that Colombia enact – and enforce – new laws that are tough on crimes against union activists. Indeed, Colombia has tougher laws for crimes against labor organizers than America does. In the U.S. there is no separate category of crime against unionists, only against persons in general whereas harassment of unionists in Colombia can get you locked up for a good long while.

Violence in Colombia is down by every objective measure. It may not be at zero – where we'd like it to be – but violence in America, especially gun violence, is all too familiar to us, too. Could this be a situation of the pot calling the kettle black? The inner cities of America that suffer from gang wars understand that eradicating that ilk takes time, commitment, money and sheer power. It's not an overnight thing. But progress is progress whether it be in the alleys of Salinas or the barrios of Medellin and we can't ignore that fact: Colombia has made enormous strides in tackling the problem of violence against union activists and further, it has

set up a judicial and police infrastructure that is single-minded in its mission to stop the violence against unionists. The progress has been such that in 2010 the ILO dropped Colombia from its list of countries subject to labor rights monitoring. That's a clear endorsement that the union environment is improving in Colombia.

And as much as we might wish the numbers of deaths were lower than they are, it is important to note that Colombian unions have endorsed the Labor Action Plan executed between the Obama and Santos Administrations. If Colombian union members feel comfortable with the direction this plan is taking Colombia, we should be, too. Again, to me that shows that the environment for labor unions in Colombia is getting better, not worse, and we should encourage that. The FTA will help.

The United States has demanded that in order for the U.S. to approve the FTA, the Colombian Government must undertake all these actions to protect and advance labor interests – and Colombia is doing so. We can't now say that that isn't enough, that even though they are fulfilling their part of the bargain that we've changed our mind. The U.S. would not stand to be treated like that nor should others expect such treatment from us. You don't move the goal post in the middle of the game.

Colombia's new president, Juan Manuel Santos, has been as dedicated to U.S. interests in Colombia as he has been to Colombian interests at home. He even chose a labor leader to be his vice president. Colombia is a nation on the move. It purchases products from every one of our 50 states and for some U.S. small businesses Colombia is its leading purchaser of goods. Approving the FTA will not only increase purchasing incentives, but can also help to create more jobs here in the United States. Failure to approve the Colombia FTA will end seven years of trade negotiations and set up China – not America – to be Colombia's future.

We can't afford to abandon our best friend in Latin America and one of our best trading partners in its struggles against poverty and drugs. Congress approved the Peru FTA to the south with fewer labor requirements than those imposed on Colombia under the Labor Action Plan. There are also fewer associated labor requirements for the proposed FTA for Panama to the north. Our goal actually ought to be the same stringent labor standards in all FTAs, but at the very least we shouldn't discard the one that meets those tough thresholds.

My vote on the Colombia FTA will not be made lightly but it will be made based on facts. I believe the facts argue in favor of the FTA. What country other than Colombia has adopted tougher labor laws, has created and funded institutions to prosecute crimes against labor and other human rights violations? If we abandon this FTA and its Labor Action Plan, we abandon the highest labor standards attached to a trade agreement in the world. Wouldn't it suit all interests to lock these in now as a gold standard for future trade agreements? It was under Democratic congressional leadership that the framework for labor provisions – provisions predicated on American law - was negotiated that even made it possible for the Administration to send the FTA up for a vote. Let's honor the Colombia FTA for implementing the reforms necessary to meet our criteria, isn't that the message our President is sending? If not now, when? The future is too late if we want Colombia to remain one of our strongest allies and trading partners in Latin America. The chance to impose these labor protocols will pass us by if

we don't do it now. This is the moment in history that will define us, and Colombia, for the generations that follow.

As someone who has a lifetime rating with the AFL-CIO of 96%, I don't think I'm someone who is looking to throw labor under the bus. On the contrary, I want to make union membership available to more workers, including our brothers and sisters in Colombia. I think the Labor Action Plan makes that possible and with it, makes the Colombia FTA the right thing to do.