

The Cost of Activism in Colombia

Union activists in Colombia often put their lives on the line as they try to improve their workplaces and communities.

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- During the morning of November 7, 2007, 45-year-old elementary school teacher Mercedes Consuelo Restrepo Campo headed to work on her motorbike. As she stopped at a stop sign in front of another elementary school along her route, a group of gunmen unloaded fire, piercing Mrs. Restrepo's upper body with bullets. The gunmen fled, leaving Mrs. Restrepo to die from her wounds. Why was she killed? She was known for the views she shared with her teacher union's leadership (Mrs. Restrepo was the head of her union's women's committee). They had recently taken a public stance against the ongoing corruption occurring in the city administration of Cartago, Colombia, the city where Mrs. Restrepo had worked and lived.
 - José Jesús Marvín Vargas worked at a Nestlé subsidiary in Dosquebradas, Colombia. On November 22, 2007, he left work as usual. On his way home, unknown gunmen opened fire and shot him dead. Mr. Marvín Vargas was a married father of two, who was known as a good union activist within Sinaltrainal, a food industry union in Colombia that has strong ties to the Steelworkers. He was also known in the community for his activism and campaign work to gain a seat on the Dosquebradas city council.
 - This past fall, union activists throughout Colombia were part of the planning for a national protest event called the National Agrarian and Popular Mobilisation. The goals of the protest included a demand for the resignation of Colombian President Uribe and a call to stop the pending free trade agreement with the United States. Leading up to the October event, the state-backed paramilitary groups and the Colombian Army set out to silence dissent. What followed was a systematic hunt for activists that resulted in torture, illegal detention, and most tragically, murders. Among those murdered were Simón Corena, Gentil Yascuaran Pai, and Feliciano Obando, three union members involved in the protest planning.