

TEACHERS IN THE SPOTLIGHT: POLITICAL VIOLENCE AGAINST TEACHING UNIONS IN COLOMBIA



Education International
Internationale de l'Éducation
Internacional de la Educación

 **fecode**
FEDERACIÓN COLOMBIANA DE EDUCADORES





In Colombia, five million people have fled from their homes and land over the last 20 years. They have been driven out by fear as they found themselves trapped in the middle of a confrontation between different armed groups. The situation in rural schools epitomises this strife: the guerrillas use schools as platforms to claim the support of the local community, the army uses them as operational bases to combat the guerrillas; helicopters land in school yards, troops sleep overnight in classrooms... Drug traffickers hide their caches of drugs in schools, while the paramilitaries break into them to 'liquidate' anyone whom they consider to be a military target, namely, teachers. In addition, students are recruited by the guerrillas and the paramilitaries alike. Some estimates put the number of child soldiers at between 8,000 and 11,000 (Human Rights Watch, 2011).

TEACHERS: IN THE SPOTLIGHT

For more than two decades, there has been an almost historic elimination of trade unions. Various methods have been used to achieve this: selective assassinations, threats and forced exile, smear campaigns in the media, state sanctions, and legal blockades.

Education International's affiliate, the Colombian Federation of Educators (FECODE), has been the hardest hit. Over 968 of its members have been assassinated, and significant violence has been directed at its affiliated organisations.

FECODE represents 160,000 teachers at national level. As well as seeking a satisfactory resolution to their own labour demands, the trade union's work also includes the defence of full democracy and the fair delivery of public education for the whole of Colombian society. It strives towards education becoming a cross-cutting theme spanning Colombia's political, social, economic and cultural environment.

SINCE PRESIDENT JUAN MANUEL SANTOS CAME TO POWER, IN 2010, FECODE HAS REGISTERED THE ASSASSINATION OF 32 TEACHER UNIONISTS. APPROXIMATELY 500 MORE HAVE BEEN THREATENED OR FORCED TO MOVE AWAY.

Likewise, cases of harassment against trade unionists have increased over recent years and have become an effective tool for education workers' persecution.

DEFENDING THE FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT TO EDUCATION

We are basically persecuted because we exercise what the Constitution refers to as academic freedom. Critical thought allows teachers to make declarations on certain scientific, but also political, matters - as how universities are run - and reporting irregularities. This is what local education authorities do not like.

F.R. Ferrel Teacher disqualified from working at the University of Magdalena

Most of the persecuted teachers are social activists and their role within the unions goes beyond simple labour demands. They have openly criticised the policy of deregularisation and commodification of public education, which has been in place since the end of the 1990s in Colombia. Progressive cuts have damaged the quality of, and access to, education as well as decreasing the status of teachers. Some examples include:

- ■ Law 715 of 2001, allowing professionals from any area of knowledge to work as teachers
- ■ Statute 1278, whereby newly qualified teachers lose basic labour rights. This statute coexists with the previous one, Statute 2277, dividing the teaching profession into two categories
- ■ Punitive evaluation methods which justify dismissal are protected by law, leaving the door open to widespread abuse
- ■ The gradual closure of public schools and the transfer of funding to privately managed schools, such as the so-called 'mega- schools'. The migration of children to private schools and the loss of 30,000 school principal jobs in the last 15 years
- ■ The migration of pupils to private centres and the loss of 40,000 teachers. Moreover, overcrowding in public schools with over 40 children per class has led to a loss of 50,000 teaching jobs

CLIMATE OF IMPUNITY

The failure to investigate and punish all acts of violence against trade unionists is still very high, and the impunity rate reaches 95% for assassinations and 100% for other human rights' violations. The regulation governing the rights of threatened and displaced teachers (Resolutions 1240 in 2010 and 3900 in 2011) were repealed by Decree 1628 in July 2012, leaving teachers completely devoid of protection. Additionally, new constitutional reforms introduced by the Santos administration give a greater role to military tribunals in the legal process, opening the door to possible amnesties for the perpetrators of these types of violations.

THE VIOLATION OF AND FAILURE TO IMPLEMENT THE AGREEMENTS SIGNED BETWEEN FECODE AND THE GOVERNMENT

In June 2011, the Agreements Act was signed in order to negotiate the national teaching profession's list of demands. To date, the Education Ministry has sought to violate the agreements signed with the previous government and those agreed with them.

ACTION PLAN

Education International urges UN agencies and the international community to put pressure on the Colombian government to:

- ■ Officially recognise the existence of systematic anti-trade unionist violence in Colombia, targeting particularly teacher unionists
- ■ Prosecute and eradicate all violations by the state through the means of *parapolitics*, the nexus between armed paramilitary groups and the Colombian state
- ■ Invest in programmes which include the participation of trade unions and show trade unionists to be defenders of democracy and social justice
- ■ Defend the rights of schools to be places of peace which are never affected by violence or criminal activity
- ■ Take effective measures to safeguard the lives and/or integrity of teachers. Enable them to carry out their teaching roles with the guarantee of safety

Put pressure on the Colombian Education Minister and public authorities to:

- Support FECODE's teaching movement, which proposes new teaching approaches as alternatives to the current neo-liberal model
- Adopt a new single teaching statute which guarantees decent working conditions for Colombian teachers
- Dedicate at least 7% of GDP to public education
- Implement the proposals of the trade union and social movement for a constitutional guarantee of the right to free, quality education, without intermediaries, financed by the State
- To respect and fulfil the agreements signed with FECODE

We call on EI affiliates in 170 countries to send letters to the Colombian embassies or consulates in their countries to demand the fulfilment of the agreements signed between the government and FECODE, and respect for the rights of teachers and of public education, in particular the right to life and the physical integrity of teachers now under threat from armed violence.

Education International (EI) is the voice of educators worldwide. It brings together 390 education unions in 170 countries and territories, with a combined membership of 30 million professionals, serving in education facilities from early childhood education through to tertiary education.

EI's affiliate, FECODE, represents 33 education unions across Colombia, including ADIDA, ADEMACOR, SUTEV and EDUCAL.

Education International
Headquarters
5, Boulevard Roi Albert II
1210 Brussels, Belgium
T. +32 2 224 06 11

EI Latin America
Barrio Luján
Calle 23 bis, Edificio Tenerife #2
San José, Costa Rica
T. +506 2 223 77 97