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Chair

Mr. Lee Richardson

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•(1135)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Lee Richardson (Calgary Centre, CPC)): The meeting will now come to order. This is the 41st meeting of the Standing Committee on International Trade.

We are going to immediately welcome our guests from Colombia. Today we all, I think, have the interpretation working properly.

We're sorry for the delay. We had votes in our House of Commons just moments ago, and it delayed the start of our meeting.

Let me welcome our witnesses again, as we did two days ago: Walter Navarro, president of the Industry Union of Professional Employees of the Public Utilities in Colombia; Germán Restrepo, president of Empaques S.A. Workers Union; Luis Fernando Cadavid, president of Clothing and Textile Industry Union; and Gerardo Sánchez, the president of Rionegro section, SINTRACON-TEXA Union.

Gentlemen, we very much appreciate your coming and taking the time today as well. We're sorry that we're slow getting started and that we had technical difficulties earlier in the week.

Our usual practice here is that we ask our witnesses to begin with an opening statement. I will leave it to you to decide whether one or more of you will present. I understand that Mr. Navarro is prepared to begin with opening remarks. If others of you would like to comment before we begin questions, we'd welcome that too.

To begin with, may I ask Mr. Navarro to start with an opening statement, which will be followed, of course, by questions of our committee.

Señor Navarro.

Mr. Walter Navarro (President, Industry Union of Professional Employees of the Public Utilities) (Interpretation): Thank you very much.

For us it's an honour and a pleasure to be at this Canadian committee session looking at approving the free trade agreement. We are a group of unions. We met in 2007 in the department of Antioquia and in other departments of the country as well. We have a position in favour of a free trade agreement for Colombia.

We are present—that is, the company I work for—in the textile, clothing, packing, and plastics sectors, agro-industries, gold mining, metal mines, flowers, and beverages, in addition to public services. We develop a positive unionism, which fosters conciliation and agreement as opposed to permanent confrontation, and along these

lines we have made some significant achievements for workers, for the companies, and for the country.

We remain convinced that in this time of globalization of markets and the integration of peoples of the world with respect to seeking general well-being, trade agreements are necessary, and they must contribute to establishing conditions that are beneficial for the parties involved.

In this regard we are different from the general unionism that exists in the country as a result of the orientation of CUT and CTC, which have political and ideological concepts. For practical reasons they have declared themselves enemies of all of the free trade agreements and have mentioned disparities and dissymmetries among the different markets and the huge advantages that the strong-economy countries want to have at the expense of weaker countries. For us, this is a very poor and mistaken argument. Within SCT central there has been a lengthy debate in order to refute this, and the results were encouraging.

We want to demonstrate this. I hope you received the e-mail I sent you in which there are some figures about what the deaths of union members have meant in Colombia. The deaths of union members in Colombia have been decreasing in a significant fashion. From 1995 to 2003, the death rate of union members in Colombia was approximately 200 deaths per year. From 2003 to date, there has been a decrease in deaths of union members, to an average rate of approximately 40 deaths per year. We understand that the deaths of our brothers and sisters are unfortunate, but we cannot maintain that it's a state policy, nor that over the last government period there has been an increase; on the contrary, there has been a decrease.

The deaths of union members in this country have been due to violence by FARC and the paramilitary forces, as opposed to the state. As I said, there is no state policy to kill union members. On the contrary, here in Colombia the union members are the custodians of their situation.

•(1140)

The death rate in our country is approximately six per 100,000, whereas the national average is 33 for each 100,000, which means that it's less probable that something will occur to a union member as compared to an ordinary citizen. It is five times more probable that one could be killed in Colombia being a common citizen as opposed to being a union member. For example, there are some unions that are much more vulnerable to death, such as the tradespeople, at a rate of 86 for each 100,000, or politicians themselves—municipal advisers, municipal councillors.

There is great protection for union members, and proof of this is the fact that the union members who are against free trade agreements have been carrying out the profession for more than 30 years. They go to other countries to speak negatively about Colombia, and they have never been paid anything, so they are proof of the fact that to practice unionism is not a dangerous activity.

Another one of the important points that we would like to mention is impunity. It's true that in Colombia there has been impunity in cases of death of union members in the 1980s and 1990s, but this government has strengthened...has set up a special monitoring office with more than 126 public servants, among them 19 monitors or supervisors. One hundred and sixty-six sentences have been issued, and 159 people have had their freedom taken away. So at this point, the Colombian government is carrying out some significant work where impunity is concerned.

As far as the right of association is concerned, we're convinced of the fact that in Colombia there is no limitation whatsoever. In fact, the union that I chair was born during this government as a result of a policy put forward by the president against our company. We created a union. There has been no change in the life of our company or at the personal level.

With respect to hiring, there have been improvements over the past few years. We are concerned about the associated labour co-ops, but thanks to this group the national government introduced some important changes in order for these cooperatives to not be intermediaries for jobs.

Also, in terms of the right to strike there were improvements made in Decree 535, approved in 1995. There is no obligation for arbitration in order to strike, and there was a union contract imposed.

We have a list of unions that support the free trade agreement in general with all countries, in particular with Canada, among which, as I said, there are all of our companies. There are mining companies, shoe companies, beverage companies, fruit, metal, mechanics.

• (1145)

I think this is a good summary of our introduction.

We're ready to listen to your questions, so please go ahead.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Navarro.

I take it that will complete the opening statements.

We'll begin with questions from members.

I think Mr. Brison, the Liberal critic, will begin the questioning.

Mr. Brison.

Hon. Scott Brison (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Thank you very much, gentlemen, for appearing today.

I met Mr. Navarro in August, when we were in Colombia.

You made the same reasonable arguments then as to why a free trade agreement and legitimate economic opportunity could help make a difference. The wars and the violence that have so paralyzed Colombia over the last 40 years started as ideological wars, but they have become more drug wars. I would like your comment on what

will happen to young Colombians in communities without legitimate economic trade opportunities in the absence of trade agreements like this one with Canada.

• (1150)

Mr. Walter Navarro (Interpretation): The situation we have with neighbouring countries is good, as you know or as you've been told over the past few days. There's an embargo from Venezuela and Ecuador against Colombia, because ideologically speaking our country chose President Uribe and his policies as far as democratic security and drug trafficking and any manifestation of violence are concerned. We think that free trade agreements for our country are not only necessary, as they are for all countries of the world, but free trade agreements are going to be constant over the next few years. They are in fact imperative at this point in order for Colombia to be able to go ahead in terms of this world crisis.

We're not lying to you. Commercially speaking, we have a close relationship with Venezuela and Ecuador. And if a free trade agreement is not approved with the United States and with Canada, then the situation in this country would be very grave for all young people—for all of us, in fact.

Mr. Germán Restrepo (President, Empaques S.A. Workers Union) (Interpretation): I'd like to add something.

If a free trade agreement with the United States and Canada doesn't take place, there's going to be more unemployment here. There won't be any possibility of employment for these young people who are coming out of school and universities. In the countryside, it would be even worse.

Once again they would plant illegal crops such as poppies...and the cocaine that has gradually been eradicated. In the case of Empaques, where I work, in the high sectors along Colombia we have eradicated a lot of these illegal crops, and I think jute has been planted. We work with the raw material. If we don't sell our product in this sector, then this crop would be exchanged for illegal goods.

There's a huge risk with this position, particularly in terms of the latest events that have taken place with Venezuela, which has almost established an embargo on our products in their country.

Hon. Scott Brison: With regard to your current export market for Colombia, your biggest trading partner is Venezuela. Is that correct?

Mr. Germán Restrepo (Interpretation): That's right. Fifteen percent of our products went to Venezuela. At this point we're not selling even a kilo of our products. So we are selling absolutely nothing to Venezuela.

Mr. Gerardo Sánchez (President, Rionegro Section, SINTRA-CONTEXA Union) (Interpretation): The company where I work produces indigo. More than 32% of the production used to go to Venezuela. Since the month of January they have not only blocked the entry of textile products but there is a debt that has accumulated over the last few months, because the Venezuelan government will not authorize payment of it.

To this we can add the expropriation that the government has carried out, Mr. Chavez has carried out, on Colombian companies because of the agreement on the military basis in the country. The latest news we've had is that four banks have been closed, some of which were Colombian, with dire consequences for the economy of both countries, because Venezuelans are also suffering the consequences of this.

●(1155)

Hon. Scott Brison: The issue of violence is one that concerns many Canadians. We look at the numbers of attacks on union leaders. You have said that statistically the union leaders in Colombia are safer than the general public is. Is that in part a result of the protection being provided by the government?

You mentioned earlier that the attacks on union leaders are not coming from the government or from the army but from FARC and demobilized paramilitary. Is that accurate?

Mr. Walter Navarro (Interpretation): Yes. In Colombia the violence that took place, the death of union members, at the end of the last century, that is in the 1990s, was due to a war between the paramilitary and the guerillas in the areas where there was the highest banana production and the greatest mining in our country. That's where there was the death of approximately 2,600 union members.

The guerillas and the paramilitary were there in these areas. The unions in those zones were under a lot of pressure from these armed groups. At this point the national government is providing protection to 10,000 people in the country, and 2,000 of those are union members. One-fifth of the effort being carried out to protect people in the country is for union members or unions. This is the equivalent of 30% of the amount set aside in Colombia for the protection of people. So 30% of the budget that the national government provides for the protection of people goes to unions.

Mr. Gerardo Sánchez (Interpretation): Nonetheless, it is unfortunate for us that the enemies of trade agreements use the deaths of union members, although these have decreased markedly, to say that Colombia should be punished by having the international community refuse to approve free trade agreements with it. The union members who are involved in this campaign against free trade agreements are therefore fighting against the interests of workers whom they claim to defend.

If these agreements do not take place, and if the Canadian Parliament does not cooperate with us by approving this trade agreement, then without a doubt there will be an increase in unemployment, and, as my colleagues pointed out previously, there will be many more situations of violence in our country.

Hon. Scott Brison: So you actually see more violence as a result of not signing free trade agreements. You see the free trade agreements as a means to reduce violence and to reduce dependency on the illicit drug economy.

Mr. Germán Restrepo (Interpretation): I'd like to point out something here.

Last year the situation in Venezuela caused unemployment, and quite a bit of unemployment in Colombia, in addition to the people from Venezuela who come in to Colombia. Unemployment is increasing in our country just from the problem with Venezuela. This

demonstrates that free trade agreements with the remaining countries, including yours, are necessary because of what you produce in your country. We do not produce those things here in Colombia, and we need these products.

Here we need to broaden and expand our highways. We need to have dual-lane highways and tunnels. You have those; we don't have them. Here we have some products in the countryside that you don't have, so we're going to need each other. You use machinery that we need, and we'll have jobs here. We will open up highways with your machinery and at the same time generate employment for people in the countryside.

●(1200)

The Chair: Thank you. We appreciate it.

We're going to move now to Monsieur Cardin of the Bloc Québécois.

Go ahead, Monsieur Cardin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Serge Cardin (Sherbrooke, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, gentlemen.

I am pleased to be able to have a discussion with you. As the Chair has said, I represent the Bloc Québécois. So that you understand, the Bloc Québécois is a sovereignist party in this federal institution. We are not against free trade. However, we favour multilateral agreements, rather than only bilateral ones. But as I have said, we have nothing against trade. On the contrary, we want trade to help in the distribution of wealth, that is obvious.

However, I must underline that this Committee has tabled in the House of Commons a report with recommendations to the effect that this trade agreement not be signed before an independent group has examined the human rights situation in Colombia and has made an assessment of the agreement's impact on human rights. Before signing on, we would have to be certain that the situation is constantly improving and obtain guarantees for the future.

So as you can see, we are not basically against trade. However, we want trade to be done in a context of minimal respect for human rights.

You talked about trade unions. You were saying that there are 6 trade unionists per 100,000 population and 33 in the civil society, but I presume that the 6 are included in the 33. What is the number of union members in Colombia? How many of them are represented by your four organizations?

[*English*]

Mr. Luis Fernando Cadavid (President, Clothing and Textile Industry Union) (Interpretation): We are connected to the private sector, basically. In Colombia there are 800,000 workers who are organized into unions in the Colombian federations, the SCT and the CUT. We have to add something that's very important at the time of making any sort of a decision, this being that the CUT is a central one that has more workers from the official sector—that is, teachers, people from justice, everything that has to do with civil service. And whether there's an agreement or not, it's the same for them.

We who are from the private sector, particularly with respect to SCT, we produce, we manufacture, and we export. But the reason we're here today at the table, we who've had an opportunity to be in the United States as well as in Europe, is that we've realized that this negative campaign carried out by some people from Colombia has been politicized. It has become a political tool against the current government.

I have been involved in the union movement for the past 30 years. I have been involved in strikes. I have carried out tasks in terms of the right to association. And all of us who are here at the table today have carried these activities out. But we realize that people from here, in Colombia, who are against the free trade agreement, we've seen them in the U.S. Senate, those who do not want the free trade agreement, and here they come and burn the U.S. flag. So we see that there is not something that has an identity for the country.

We in the production sector export 40% of textile and clothing to external markets. We've understood that the agreements that are made between Colombia and other countries of the world are about the healthy management of people: some have technology and others provide labour. We recognize in Canada some requirements that have been made of the government—the right to association, respect of human rights, and legislation are indicated. Here, intellectual property has been a requirement as well, and we think that in good trade relations we have to respect these. We repeat, our industries complement what you do. Whatever you do not manufacture, we manufacture. As a tropical country, we have different products that are exported to countries in the north, including Canada.

● (1205)

[Translation]

Mr. Serge Cardin: Excuse me, sir. Could we come back to the first questions I have asked?

You are describing to us, one by one, all the elements of the free trade agreement, but my questions dealt mainly with the trade union movement and the size of your organizations compared to the total trade union movement. We know that three large trade union organizations representing the great majority of unionized workers are against the free trade agreement.

You said, about the other unions that are opposed to the free trade agreement, that they want to politicize the issue. In our country, a large labour organization representing the employees of the Public Service of Canada has declared against this agreement. I do not believe that they are making a political statement. However, they are against this Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement because of what is happening over there with regards to human rights.

You made reference to people who are doing misinformation in the United States. Still, the United States have not yet ratified the free trade agreement. The main reason is because of what is going on in Colombia in the area of human rights. We know full well that Americans have done a lot of trade everywhere on the planet and they have not always been concerned about a minimum level of human rights respect. In this case, they are. So there must be some validity to the argument. Also, while the human rights groups are not all taking position totally against the Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement, at the very least, they are suggesting that we wait and make a formal assessment of the human rights situation.

According to one theory, if you are doing business, if you are making money and more people are working, automatically, the crime rate and the number of human rights violations will decrease. However, this is not necessarily automatic. There must also be some will. However, we are wondering about the will or the capacity of the Colombian government to clean up the situation concerning the armed militia, such as FARC, etc.

I believe that you represent a minority of union members, but you are giving them some greater significance because you are in a large urban centre with a population of 3.5 million. You are saying that most crimes occur elsewhere, in mining centres. And indeed, there is a lot of Canadian investment in the mining industry. However, according to witnesses, the mining companies hire members of the armed groups to ensure their protection.

I would really like to be able to tell you that the arguments that you are giving us to defend the free trade agreement are based on the fact that there is some significant improvement. Unfortunately, there are still some 40 trade unionists who have been murdered. In Quebec and in Canada, there has been none and that, since the beginning of the movement. The worst that has happened is that once, three trade union leaders have been jailed for a few days. I believe that there must be some will.

Have you made an impact study of the human rights situation or the social context, following the signing of a free trade agreement with Canada?

● (1210)

[English]

Mr. Walter Navarro (Interpretation): I'd like to put some order into the comments made by the representative in terms of the following. In Colombia, the violence that is being experienced is not due mainly to inequality. I think in areas where there are the most riches in our country, which is in the mining and the banana sectors, that's where the groups are that are outside the law. If it were true that inequality causes violence in the poorest parts of the country, that's where the guerillas and the paramilitaries would be, and we see it's the contrary. The guerillas and the paramilitaries are where there is wealth.

So it's not true that inequality causes violence. I think on the contrary, the offenders—we can't call them anything else—the guerillas and the paramilitary go where there is wealth. They do not represent the poor in our country. Rather, they are trying to take advantage of the wealth.

With regard to the number of unions and union members, we represent approximately 70 unions, which is approximately 85,000 affiliates among all the groups that support the free trade agreement. It's approximately 10% of the unionism in Colombia. In Colombia there are approximately 800,000 unionized people. However, look at these figures: of the 800,000 unionized people, 500,000 are from the public sector, and the whole public sector has approximately one million workers. This means that 50% of the public sector is unionized, whereas in the private sector, where there are 17 million workers, 300,000 are unionized. Although we are a small group of 85,000, we do believe we represent the majority of workers in our country, who want the free trade agreement.

More than unions, ideologically speaking, we truly represent the majority of workers of our country. As you know, there are many associated labour cooperatives, and they have the great majority of workers. The great majority of workers are not unionized. We work with the national government so that these people will be allowed a union contract by means of which we could represent them.

This is a task that we are carrying out. Conversations have gone pretty far ahead. Although those who are against the free trade agreement are part of the majority, it's also true they're mostly in the public sector, and they don't really care if there's a free trade agreement. The agreement will not affect teachers, will not affect health, will not affect justice. They don't care if there's a free trade agreement. But in the production sector, where we have strong representation, it does affect them, and, as I said previously, it represents approximately 17 million workers.

● (1215)

The Chair: We're going to have to move on.

Thank you for those questions and answers.

Mr. Gerardo Sánchez: [*Witness speaks in Spanish*]

The Chair: We're going to move now to the representative of the New Democratic Party, Malcolm Allen.

Mr. Allen.

Mr. Malcolm Allen (Welland, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to my fellow brothers in the trade union movement.

I am someone who has come out of the trade union movement in this country. Prior to the post I hold now in this Parliament, I was a member of the leadership of the Canadian Auto Workers in this country, which is the largest private sector union.

I understand when you talk about private sector unions. I also understand when you talk about public sector unions. But I don't understand when you suggest, as you just did, that somehow free trade agreements or trade agreements are meaningless to public sector workers. I beg to differ with you, because a flourishing economy has a flourishing public sector. The public sector depends upon the private sector in nearly all countries—certainly in this country, and perhaps you can explain to me if it's different in Colombia—and can only exist if it is flourishing, because it needs that tax base; it needs those folks to actually pay the public sector.

The government here—and I'm sure the Colombian government—pays public sector workers. Since they provide service to the general public, they don't produce particular goods to sell to folks. They intrinsically provide services to the general public.

So I take a different tack when it comes to the public sector, because I would suggest to you, my fellow brothers, that they are our sisters and brothers in solidarity. I hope you would want to see them in that way.

But I listened to you and heard the statement I have heard before—my honourable colleague Monsieur Godin talked about it earlier—about the number of deaths, and you made a subgroup of trade union leaders. You said that only six per 100,000 of the general population die, yet in the general population it's 33.

An economist taught me a long time ago how to do figures, and you can do your sums all kinds of different ways. When you generate only one subgroup, you actually misrepresent what that means in totality, because you have to take it as a whole. Mr. Cardin was asking that very question, which, I hate to say—I say it with all due respect to my fellow brothers—you ignored. The number six out of 100,000 is based on a factor of 800,000 trade unionists, not on a population of 45 million. The number 33 is based on a population of 45 million. The percentage is therefore higher for trade unionists versus the general population.

Consequently, through your own words, you provide—as you said your government has—protection to trade union workers. If you're providing trade union workers protection, that says to me—albeit from afar, and it is me looking from afar—that somehow you believe the trade union workers are imperiled. I don't think you would go to the expense of providing the protection if they weren't in peril. I'd find that difficult to comprehend as a trade unionist.

So I say with great respect to my brothers that one needs to bring solidarity among the unions in your country so you have a united position rather than a divided position, similar to what we try to do here.

Now, we're not suggesting that everyone is going to be in lockstep. You hold a different position, and that's okay. I was interested to hear you say, though, that you speak for all workers. If CAW council president Ken Lewenza of Toronto told this government today in Canada that he speaks for all workers across this country, the government would say, “No, you don't. You speak for the 240,000 you represent and not for all workers.” You say you represent 10% of the organized workers in Colombia, yet you say you speak for the other 90%. I find that hard to fathom.

Can you perhaps explain to me why you believe you speak for the 90% of workers you don't represent, especially in light of the fact that the CUT doesn't agree with you, and they represent six times more workers than you do?

● (1220)

Mr. Walter Navarro (Interpretation): First of all, on the percentages, in Colombia last year they killed approximately 40 unionists. And 40 unionists among 800,000 gives you six in 100,000, whereas the civil society, taking into account...

In any case, what I wanted to say was that violence against the unionists is lower than the normal rate. The normal rate is 33 among 100,000, whereas for union members it's six per 100,000. That's why I have two groups: the normal group, which is everybody, and then the unionists. That's how I came up with these figures.

As far as what you've said about the representation, it's very simple. The opposition in Colombia is headed up by the Polo Democrático, which, among other things, is the party that is with CUT. CUT belongs to that party. And in that country, in the elections for Congress, Polo Democrático used as a banner free trade agreements, and they were overthrown. They were visibly overthrown.

That's why I repeat that if people in Colombia were against free trade agreements, then they would have voted en masse for the Polo Democrático, as that was their electoral banner. In Colombia, workers are in favour of free trade agreements. If this were not the case, then they would not only be the leaders of the country but also have the presidency of the republic, because it was clearly established in the political debate that took place who was in favour of the free trade agreement and who was not. That was the political banner.

That's why we say that we represent the majority of the workers.

Mr. Malcolm Allen: With the greatest respect, my brother, I beg to differ with you. In politics in democratic societies, such as this one, in terms of the outcome of an election, we can all lay claim to what the significance of the meaning is when it comes to trade unionists. All of us have done it at one point or another in our lives who belong to the trade union movement and who are, indeed, the leadership of the trade union movement. I certainly have heard it through many of our unions laying claim to certain victories, or not, depending on what it does.

Clearly what democratic trade unionism means, and I certainly don't take this opportunity to suggest that I'm lecturing, but you know as well as I do that what it means to all of us in the trade union movement is that when we are in a democratic organization, it gives us the right to not always agree. Clearly, 86% of those who are organized in your country do not agree with you, sir. And I say that with all the greatest respect to my brothers. They don't agree. Those who I've had the experience to talk to—and I've talked to members of CUT here in this country, and numerous years ago—who fled your country because of the threats, and indeed the violence perpetrated on their families....

We still see it continuing to this day—albeit at a lower rate, and that's to be commended. One needs to say that is a good direction. The problem is that still, in my eyes, and in the eyes of some of the parliamentarians in this country, it needs to continue to work in a downward direction to where true free and democratic trade unionists feel that they're not imperiled. At this point, in Colombia, that's still the case: it is one of the few countries in the world where, indeed, to be a free and true democratic leader imperils your life. There are not many countries in the world where that's the case.

All that's being asked—Mr. Cardin asked it earlier, and indeed a previous committee talked about it—is for a human rights committee that would look have an oversight role so that we would eventually come back with a report to see if you're on the right track. But you're not there yet. To suggest that we should just go ahead with free trade while this is not eradicated is the wrong direction for us.

I say again to you, I think you ought to be working with your trade union central so, indeed, you come with a homogeneous trade union position. Because you are trade unionists, my brothers, similar to

what I am here in this country, and you work on behalf of workers. And it is, indeed, a solemn oath that we take to those workers, that we work on behalf of them, not necessarily work on behalf of a particular government. That's who we work for as trade unionists.

So I would only offer to you that perhaps instead of working on behalf of the government of the country, you work on behalf of the trade union movement and the workers you represent.

• (1225)

The Chair: We are out of time for that speaker, but we will give you an opportunity to respond.

Mr. Gerardo Sánchez (Interpretation): When one concentrates on figures, it gives the impression that there is some insensitivity in terms of the solidarity that should exist among all workers, and that's not the impression we want to leave with you. You must know that, above all, we are extremely grateful for the interest and the care you are taking in the Canadian Parliament with respect to the human rights situation in Colombia.

This is a struggle we all have, and it pains me to hear the honourable representative say that we are representing the interests or the way of thinking of the Colombian government. That has never been the case. There is much to be done as far as human rights are concerned, and we have indicated this to the government. We have carried out much action to update labour standards so that everything is in tune with the ILO and there is respect for and protection of the unionists' work and their right to strike. We have been constant in this regard.

We act in solidarity, and we wouldn't want any union member to die. Nevertheless, I would like to point out that with respect to trade agreements, some brothers and sisters have devoted themselves to leaving a false image in the international community that the country is a place where the murder of union members is a government policy. This is not the case. This is what we want to make clear here.

We would like to kindly request that you approve the trade agreement with Colombia as a way of creating jobs in our country and as a way of improving labour conditions. We will cooperate with you to improve the human rights situation and the labour situation in Colombia.

The Chair: Thank you for that response.

We'll now move to the Conservative Party.

Mr. Holder will begin questioning.

Mr. Ed Holder (London West, CPC): *Muchas gracias, señores.*

To our guests from Medellín, thank you for making your presentations today.

Just to explain, I am with the Conservative Party, which happens to be the government. I say that to give you some comfort, because there is at least one other party around the table that I know supports proceeding with Colombia, and that is the Liberal Party. I don't pretend to speak for them.

I say this so that you will have some confidence that we believe in this free trade deal. We believe that it should go forward and will go forward, and that it respects the integrity of workers and citizens in Colombia. We think it is in the best interests of both of our countries to proceed with this free trade agreement as quickly as possible. Today's testimony was probably the most compelling that we have heard. I say this because you live there, and we don't. All the people who have made representations to us mean well, but they don't all live there. You do.

The people around this table, who I believe want what is best for Colombia and Canada, live here. They don't live with you. I would say respectfully that I myself don't fully appreciate the benefits of proceeding. I'm more committed today as a result of your testimony than I have ever been before.

You spoke of the embargo put on Colombia from Ecuador and Venezuela, and you talked about how it would result in more unemployment and violence. I am compelled to proceed with this now.

Mr. Navarro, I believe you commented that the delays in bringing in free trade would cost jobs and cause violence. It seems that we are affecting the ability of workers and their families to provide for themselves. Could you tell us more about how the embargo and the free trade delays will contribute to violence?

• (1230)

Mr. Walter Navarro (Interpretation): In Colombia, according to the last report of DANE, which is the agency responsible for statistics in the country, unemployment has increased to 11.5%. This means that in Colombia there are about 2.5 million unemployed. Likewise, exports to Ecuador and Venezuela, which represent 50% of general exports, have decreased significantly. Recently, we might have gotten to 10% in exports, and this is mostly to Ecuador. It's a simple equation. Our exports to other countries have stayed about the same as before, while during the last year what we sent to Venezuela and Ecuador decreased significantly. This has greatly increased unemployment.

In addition, they are expelling Colombians from Venezuela. In fact, they expelled 400 people from the border area, and every day there is violence against Colombians in Venezuela. This has caused many Colombians residing in Venezuela to return home. That contributes to unemployment in our country, and violence in Colombia has increased. The increase hasn't been great, but it can be attributed to unemployment in the cities and in the countryside. We can see no solidarity whatever with the U.S.

We urge the Canadian government, which is in favour of the free trade agreement, to approve the agreement as quickly as possible so we can proceed with exporting our products to your country.

Thank you.

• (1235)

Mr. Ed Holder: Thank you for that thoughtful response.

I know that my colleague at the table, who is very involved in the trade union movement, made some comments. One that I quite agree with was when he said it is the private sector that pays for the public sector. I thought that was very clear, and I think he was quite correct.

He also mentioned, and you clarified, the number of deaths of trade unionists per 100,000 people. I think you made that very clear, and I appreciate your clarifying that for all of our purposes. As well, when you talked about not working on behalf of the government, you made that response very clear.

The thing I thought was interesting is that my colleague at the table said that you should all stand together. Well, you know what? You're standing for what is in the best interest of your membership and, I believe, in the best interest of Colombians. You have the right to not always agree. I respect that you have the right to not always agree.

If you had a message that you would like to give to your union brothers and sisters in the trade union movement in Canada—and this is a message we will help deliver—may I ask you, please, what would that message be?

Mr. Walter Navarro (Interpretation): Gerardo will speak to you. He's our colleague from the textile industry.

• (1240)

Mr. Gerardo Sánchez (Interpretation): A message for Canadian trade unionists as well as for the working class of Canada, for all workers, is that we have set up a union collective, which is a minority within all of the unions of the country. However, we have opened up more and more areas, more and more spaces, to the extent that we see that information that is taken outside of the country is being twisted, and this is done by the leaders of working centres. I'm talking about the leaders, because not all Colombian workers think the way they do, that as a result of Colombia's violating human rights and labour rights, it's not worthy of a free trade agreement.

These voices to the effect that the Colombian workers do not want the free trade agreement do not represent the great majority of workers of the country, who meet in small and medium-sized businesses, who don't have an opportunity to be unionized, who are not represented every year in order to define a minimum wage, because they're a minority that participate a minority of unorganized workers.

As my colleague Walter was saying, out of the 18 million of us in the working force in the country, only 800,000 are organized. Of the 800,000, we represent only 10%, but we have been growing stronger in the country. We have had sufficient moral authority in order to be able to say that not all Colombian workers are against the free trade agreement. On the contrary, the great majority feel that we need a free trade agreement.

This is a brotherly voice. It's in solidarity. This is a message that we send to Canadian workers who are duly represented through you, members of Parliament. We hope for that cooperation, we hope for that approval, which is very necessary for our country so that we can advance with development plans, so that we can create jobs, which is what we need. Because of all these problems with our neighbours we really need to export our products beyond our borders, with the support of the international community.

Mr. Ed Holder: Thank you, Señor Sánchez.

I have two last points.

Señor Navarro, you made the point that you have a list of unions in Colombia that are supporting the free trade deal with Canada. Could I ask you if you have some way, through our clerk, of being able to provide us with a list of those unions so that we have that as a matter of record for our information, please? You don't have to give that today, but if you could, we would ask you to provide it.

Mr. Walter Navarro (Interpretation): I'll try to send it electronically.

Mr. Ed Holder: *Perfectamente.*

Many of us around this table are working hard to put this deal together as thoughtfully as possible. If there's anything I've heard from the testimony you have all provided today, it's the urgency of doing this. I do not wish to be negative, but if it does not happen, what are the implications for the people of Colombia generally, and for the trade union movement and their families? What is your opinion, please?

Mr. Luis Fernando Cadavid (Interpretation): I'm connected to the clothing sector. It's an organization, like Leonisa, that has 1,800 mothers and heads of households. We export 40% of our production. If we do not reach agreements with countries of the north that are more developed and that accept our production, then the situation for us will be pretty complicated. It's not easy to have the technology. We don't have that high level of development in the manufacturing industry. That's why we want things to be clear.

In Colombia, there are two central unions. Numerically, CUT is the majority, but qualitatively speaking, connected to the production sector, it's SCT. Among our leaders, some say no to the free trade agreement. Within the SCT this has given rise to an inter-institutional team comprising employers and workers and the state itself. Most of those involved are the employers and workers who would be directly affected if a free trade agreement were not signed.

A free trade agreement is a business by which interests are negotiated. I think Canada and the United States and Colombia are interested in establishing guidelines in the trade relationship. We're very grateful for the fact that you are demanding, in the final documents, that there be defence of human rights and the right to free association, because this is the way we can grow.

We need to grow as an industry. We grow if there's employment. If there's employment, there are workers. This is an opportunity to organize workers into unions.

For example, one of the requirements has been eradicating child labour. The right to strike, the right of Colombia in terms of agreements.... It's a request from us to you that these agreements be supported and that these agreements be fulfilled.

The fact is that we share some positions of the government, and we fight for security. We're not part of the government, as some sectors against the free trade agreement want to say. We're not at all similar. We have our political will to fight for the defence of the national industry to guarantee thousands of jobs that should remain, will remain, in Colombia.

The Chair: We'll go back to you, Ed.

Mr. Ed Holder: I'd finally say, to be clear, that we already do business with Colombia, and it's a point that needs to be reinforced. What we are asking, in terms of putting this free trade deal together, is to ensure that we have a rules-based way of dealing with Colombia so that it's fair to both countries and that we have, at the same time, what is ultimately a very strong labour cooperation and environment agreement. I think those are essential to making this work.

If you have any final comment on why it's important to have a rules-based deal to increase trade and to remove tariffs both ways, I would leave that for your pleasure.

Thank you for your time here.

• (1245)

The Chair: We will not have time for another round of questioning.

If any of you gentlemen would like to have a brief closing statement, I'd ask you to do that now. We very much appreciate your attendance today and the responses you have provided.

Is there any final word you'd like to leave before we sign off?

Mr. Germán Restrepo (Interpretation): In closing, I'd like to make some points with respect to the death of a trade unionist. I've been working for 38 years for the Empaques company. Three union leaders have been killed throughout the history of the company. They have been killed for reasons that were totally different and far removed from union work. One was killed because a motorcycle was stolen, one because a car was stolen, and another because of a problem he had in the neighbourhood where he was having a few drinks. Approximately one month ago, in the early hours of the morning on a Friday, an affiliate of ours in the municipality was murdered, and the investigation found he was killed because he stole a chain and a radio.

So in Colombia they're killing some union affiliates, some union leaders, but the majority of them are being killed not because of their union activity but because of the violence we're involved in in Colombia. You are aware of this in your country, and you'll have to cooperate with us to see how we can eradicate this violence that has existed for some time in Colombia.

In another example, a teacher was murdered last year, and we went to the ILO. The ILO said the leader of the teachers federation was associated. An investigation indicated the teacher was killed by a stepson because he had been hitting the mother. This was not mentioned in the complaint. The ILO said a union leader from the textile centre in Bello was killed. This was how it was announced. What did the investigation indicate? The people killed him because he was raping minors.

So all the union members who have died in Colombia did not die because they are trade unionists, but because of the violence in the country.

Mr. Walter Navarro (Interpretation): As was indicated by Gerardo, I want to thank you for the opportunity you have given us to appear before you as witnesses for the House of Commons of Canada.

To conclude, I'd like to say the free trade agreement should be approved for Colombia, for a very simple reason, this being the fact that there's violence here. That situation will not improve from one day to the next, as the trade unionists at your table said. Some terrain has been won over. In Colombia we have improved the situation of human rights but we're not going to eradicate violence in Colombia from one day to the next. If the free trade agreement is not approved because there's violence here, that would mean that in Colombia we would never have a free trade agreement; there happens to be violence here, and there will be violence for one reason or another.

I think the approval of the free trade agreement is a way of helping us. It's very necessary for our country so we can continue along the path of eradicating violence.

I wanted to leave that as a final point so that you can analyze this.

• (1250)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Navarro, Mr. Sánchez, Mr. Cadavid, and Mr. Restrepo. It's been very useful and very helpful to us. It provides a local perspective. As Mr. Holden said, you understand and know your country so well.

Thank you very much for your attendance today and for your willingness to come last Tuesday. I'm sorry that didn't work out.

Again, we very much appreciate you being here today. *Muchas gracias.*

I have a couple of short technical announcements to make. For the interest of members, there will be two conferences of interest next week. One will be here in the West Block on Monday, beginning at

10 a.m., on international trade matters. It looks like pretty interesting stuff. I think you have a note on that.

There is also a human rights conference being put on by Amnesty International. That begins on Tuesday at 12:55 p.m. We're going to meet next week on Tuesday, so we'll probably adjourn early to allow some of the members to attend that.

On Tuesday we'll have a briefing on Jordan. We were unable to commit witnesses for Tuesday on Colombia discussions, so we'll get started on Jordan. At eleven o'clock on Tuesday we'll start with an hour briefing by departmental officials on the Jordan free trade agreement. Then we'll go to committee for half an hour. I'd like to talk then about where the committee would like to go after we pass Colombia and Jordan.

I have a quick motion:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Committee conduct a study on the Canada-Jordan Free Trade Agreement.

Could I have a motion to that effect?

Mr. Ron Cannan (Kelowna—Lake Country, CPC): I so move.

Mr. Richard Harris (Cariboo—Prince George, CPC): I second the motion.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you. That allows us to start on Tuesday with a discussion of Jordan.

We're adjourned.

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