

# 2.515 or that sinister ease to forget

21 years of sistematic and selective assassinations unionists(1986-2006)



## Cuaderno de Derechos Humanos no. 19





# **2.515 or that sinister ease to forget**

**21 years of sistematic and selective  
assasinations against Colombian unionists  
(1986-2006)**

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Human and Labor Rights Unit

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Around the year 1998 or so in the municipality of San Onofre –in Sucre—, a good friend of mine, Georgina Narváz Wilches, and other friends, decided together to create the union of municipal workers of San Onofre, and after several meetings and complying with all the requirements, we had everything ready, the thing is that our friend Georgina, who was going to be the president of our union, due to her dedication and leadership, went to the city of Sincelejo to register the union on November 21, and that same day, at night, upon returning from the task of registering the union, she was assassinated in her house. The assassination happened a few days after the general mayoral elections, that year, Luis Saleman was elected. That was the history of our union, after that day none of us wanted to meet again and think about the organization, we never even found out if the union was registered or if its registry was rejected. The year after Georgi was assassinated, her father died of sadness, as he never got over it, and the rest of her family decided to leave their property behind and move to other cities.

Recounta by a friend of Georgina  
Cartagena, Colombia  
September 2006





## Introduction

Almost twenty years have passed since they killed him, and during those twenty years, every month, every week, I have felt that I have the unescapable duty, not to avenge his death, but yes, at least, to tell about it. (...) It's possible that this is useless, no word will be able to resuscitate him, the history of his life and death will not give a new breath to his body, it will not restore his laughter, nor his immense bravery, nor his convincing and vigorous style of oratory, but by all means I need to tell it. His assassins remain at large, every day they are more numerous and more powerful, and my hands cannot combat them. Only my fingers, with each keystroke, can recount the truth and denounce the injustices. I will use his same weapon: words. Why? For nothing, or for the most essential and simple: so that it can be known. To extend the memory of him a little bit more, before the definitive oblivion arrives.

The Escuela Nacional Sindical, due to its concern for the difficult human rights situation of unionized workers, has over the last 16 years carried out the tasks of research, distribution of information, and denouncement of the violations against life, liberty and physical integrity that

workers across the country have suffered. It has published annual reports analyzing the advances and setbacks of the situation of unionists' human rights, supported by rigorous studies of information that is classified in the human rights database of the ENS, called SINDERH.

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1. Héctor Abad Faciolince, *El olvido que seremos*, Bogotá, Planeta, p. 254.

This publication has been written as a contribution to the recovery and dignification of the memory of those 2,515<sup>2</sup> men and women who have lost their lives exercising their fundamental right to union organization, in a country that severely punishes the exercise of that right, while the violators get confused in the delayed, historical panorama of violations, which allows them to disguise themselves in a cape of impunity, in which the truth ends up becoming fiction, justice becomes an agreement to forget, and reparation becomes resignation and forgiveness. At the same time, this document is a denouncement of the prolonged silences that the Colombian state has maintained with respect to a wave of violence that could be also called a political genocide, which remains in absolute impunity.

There are many blank spaces in this history; some victims will not be able to be named, due to the forgetting of their bodies. However, despite all

the spaces and intervals that still need to be defined, we present our homage to all the victims in this publication, as our contribution to the struggle against the oblivion to which some want to condemn them to.

### **Colombia, the most dangerous place in the world for unionists**

In regards to the human rights of unionists in the country, there are complex paradoxes and deep contradictions between what is the law, what is the reality, and what is said in the media about that reality. On one hand, we can say that the institutional legal framework of the country is amenable to human rights. Colombia has ratified and included in its 1991 Constitution many important international treaties that protect human rights as well as the universal spirit and norms that underly those rights.<sup>3</sup> In the realm of labor, the Colombian state has ratified several conventions of the International Labor Organiza-

2. Following an exhaustive search to recover information, and a rigorous process of research and verification, we present a review of 21 years of assassinations of Colombian unionists, expanding this information with partial statistics that we have recovered for the years 1986-1990. It is important to state that some of these statistics do not coincide with statistics that were published in past occasions, since the effort to recover information has led us to revise some of the consolidated statistics. This task of research and analysis of the indices of homicides is registered in the Human Rights Database of the Escuela Nacional Sindical.
3. See: Constitución Política de Colombia, Title II, Chapters 1,2 y 3, referring to fundamental rights.

tion (ILO),<sup>4</sup> including those that refer to fundamental labor rights.

Paradoxically, this favorable normative framework and the existence of a series of institutions that should advocate for the effective protection of human rights, contrasts with a humanitarian crisis marked by systematic, permanent, and selective violations of the rights to life, liberty, and personal integrity of Colombian unionists. These violations take place in the general context of impunity, which corroborates the fragility of our democracy and the distance that exists between the legal country and the real country, where human rights are permanently violated.

The union movement is suffering a grave humanitarian crisis, expressed by the 2,515 unionists assassinated in the last 21 years; the fact that on average, annually, more than half of the worldwide assassinations against unionists occur in Colombia; and in the

persistence of an anti-union culture that keeps characterizing the Colombian union movement as allies of the guerilla as well as barriers to the economic progress of Colombian companies and the country in general.

These statements can be irrefutably confirmed by the annual human rights reports of the ICFTU (International Confederation of Free Trade Unions)<sup>5</sup> which shows that during the last seven years (1999-2005), Colombia has registered the highest number of human rights violations against unionists in the world. According to the information provided by the ICFTU on the dimensions of anti-union violence and in particular homicides, Colombia has accounted for between 57% and 88% of all homicides against unionists worldwide. These statistics place the country in the shameful position of being the most dangerous place in the world to carry out union activity.

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4. Colombia has ratified 60 of the 187 Conventions expedited by the ILO. Among the most important are Conventions 87, 98, 154, and 151, which refer to union freedoms and the protection of the right to organize; Convention 26, related to the setting of minimum wages; Convention 95, on the protection of salaries; Convention 138, on the minimum age of workers; Convention 182, on the elimination of the worst forms of child labor; Convention 105, on the abolition of forced labor; and Conventions 98 and 111, which refer to equality in pay for male and female labor, and employment and occupational discrimination.
  5. The ICFTU is part of the new International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), since 2006.

### Homicides against unionists worldwide and in Colombia

Year	Number of homicides Worldwide	Number of homicides Colombia	Percentages %
1999	140	80	57
2000	209	137	66
2001	223	197	88
2002	213	186	85
2003	129	94	73
2004	145	96	66
2005	115	70	61

Source: Information provided by the Human Rights Department of the ICFTU and the ENS database

### A History of Oblivion, Protest, and Bullets

The history of labor struggle in Colombia is also the history of a selective violence that infuriates the union movement and infuses it with pain, resistance, and bullets. With the same capacity that workers learned to create unions as the most logical way to defend their rights, the victimizers learned to design strategies to liquidate those unions. The early installation, distribution, and institutionalization of a perverse image of union activities became perhaps the first strategy that justified the systematic practice of liquidation, using the rhetoric of the threat of an insidious enemy that places obstacles in the way of the country's economic development. This practice was carried out during the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century, creating a bloody tradition fed with libels and artificially constructed im-

ages that place unionists in the camp of the enemy, and that also cover the victimizers with a semantic protection that defies their characterization.

This text will not try to present a chronological history of the union movement in the country or provide an inventory of the tragic events that have accompanied this movement. Our contribution is oriented towards the revindication of the memory of the victims who marked –and continue to mark– the trajectory of a movement that persists and resists all the diverse intents to annihilate it. In this sense, it is important to review history, to be able to corroborate with accuracy that despite the countless armed conflicts that have taken place in Colombian national history, the goal of annihilation of union action has a historical continuity which is independent of these wars, and which is embodied by countless figures of death, which have ended up giving the

union movement an existence marked by bloody episodes in a history held together by pain and resistance.

In a short review of the history, between chronological breaks and gaps, we can confirm that the lack of recognition and murderous responses to voices and actions to reclaim rights has been a historical constant, since the times of the first intents to conform a union movement. This history, old or recent, of the violence against the Colombian union movement is marked from one extreme to the other by oblivion and injustice.

### **Before the oblivion, a violence with its own names**

Since 1991, the Escuela Nacional Sindical has registered and categorized cases of violations to the life, liberty, and personal integrity of unionists all throughout the country. In those 17 years, the ENS database has registered 8,231 cases of human rights violations, separated into 2,245 homicides, 3,400 death threats, 1,292 cases of forced displacement, 529 arbitrary detentions, 192 assassination attempts, 208 harrasments, 159 kidnappings, 137 dissappearances, 37 cases of torture, and 34 illegal searches. After recuperating the information, we have recently incorporated 270 cases of homicides committed during the years 1986-1990.

According to the research carried out during this time, the forms, modalities, and intensity of the violence against unionized workers have varied. In addition, the contexts and strategies of the victimizers have transformed and the geography of the violations has moved towards new territories. However, these transformations, instead of taking away from the credibility of the thesis that the Colombian union movement is a victim of systematic violence, it corroborates it, by showing that the long tradition of human rights violations against unionist cannot be explained by one sole context or conjuncture, and can be explained even less as a specific result of the Colombian internal armed conflict.

Through observing these changes, and according to the registered homicides, we have established five characteristic periods in the recent history of Colombian unionism since the founding of the CUT in 1986, as well as three periods before this time. In first place, we characterize the period between 1986-1990 as a time when the violations were concentrated in the state of Antioquia, due to the mafia, military, legal, and political violence there, for the massacres committed against the banana workers in Uraba and the selective assassinations, for which reason we have called this time period *Of multiple*

*victimizers and sinister relations*. A second period stretches from 1991-1994, which we have named *Selective deaths*, particularly characterized for the implementation of selective homicides against union leaders and a strong presence of state sponsored violence. A third period, between the years 1995-1997, we call *Bullets that reinstate the founding ghost*. In this period there is a worsening of the territorial dispute in the region of Uraba and there are massacres of agricultural sector unionists in a violence marked by the violent actions of guerrilla and paramilitary groups. The fourth period, which stretches from 1998-2002 has been named *The unfolding of crude and disperse violence*, which coincides with the Andres Pastrana administration, in which there is an uncontrolled growth in the indicators of violence, a steep increase in homicides, and the displacement of violations against unionists towards new territories. Finally, the fifth period, between 2003-2006, coincides with the first term of the Uribe administration, and we have named it *From tactical changes in the violence to the overvaluing of the statistics*. In this period, we are presented with a setting of strategic changes in the modalities of the violence, particularly characterized by the drop in the homicide statistics

and the wide-reaching publicity campaign emphasizing these statistics.

In addition we analyze three moments that occurred before the founding of the CUT, in a brief recount of the history of the union movement and the sinister presence of the violence in its formation. We initially review the moments before the construction of the union movement, and the quickly instituted strategy to labor conflicts used by business owners and the government, a moment which we name *A quick shot at a nascent movement*. Secondly, we present the massacre of the banana workers in 1928, a historic milestone that has marked the existence of Colombian unionism and which expands to haunt the growing movement in the following years, during which the movement becomes institutionalized, despite errors and violence. We have named this moment *The founding bloodshed and the mobilized resistance*. Thirdly, we have reviewed a moment before the founding of the CUT in which the long process of anti-union violence against the banana workers in Uraba begins, in a context of permanent tensions, confrontations, and territorial disputes which go on until the decade of the 90s. We have named this period *Fatal coincidences: From United Fruit to Chiquita Brands and the banana worker massacres*.

## **A quick shot at a nascent movement**

At the beginning of the 20th century, and specifically with the development of transportation systems –largely river and sea based– and of the first small manufacturing industries (food, beverages, and textiles, among others), the first groupings of salaried manual workers<sup>6</sup> began to organize. The first unions were formed, and with the unions came the strike as a tactic to demand compliance with labor rights, and the figure of violence as a response to these strikes also surfaced. In the decade of the 20s, the union organizations begin to strengthen, during a period

in which the country directs its efforts towards the consolidation of a national economy. The intention of the state was to develop the incipient industries and concentrate its initiatives on the creation of a domestic market. In this period, workers' struggles begin to become tainted with blood and thus the identity of Colombian union becomes strongly linked to violence.

In one of the first artisans' strikes, which occurred in Bogota in 1919 and which was characterized by Mauricio Archila as a protest against the ministry of war's contracting of foreign firms to make Army uniforms, the

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6. The birth of the working class in Colombia, according to Mauricio Archila, traces back to the middle of the 19th century, when the country, without a clear economic model, begins to orient its economy towards an emphasis in exports, which means that the artisans must defend themselves against the free exchange rate. In this period, the first associations to defend workers' interests appear. Later, at the end of that same century, manual workers created mutual aid associations with the particular goal of improving their precarious conditions. Although some isolated strikes occurred during this period, these organizations did not have a political character in a strict sense.

Administration of Marco Fidel Suarez opened fire on the striking workers, leaving a toll of several people killed, injured, and detained. This would not be the only or the last time that the government and business owners utilize weapons as tools to solve labor conflicts. Equal force was used against later strikes, with indeterminate numbers of arbitrary detentions. There are multiple examples, thus it is sufficient to review just a few to strongly corroborate that the intention to annihilate the union movement has been an ongoing strategy for those who consider that movement a threat to the country. In 1924, during the strike of the municipal trolley company of Bogota, a striking worker was murdered by a manager of the company. Other strikes that took place in 1925 ended with hundreds of workers in jail or fired, and with business owners refusing all attempts to negotiate. As Archila affirms, “it seemed as they preferred to annihilate the working class as a

way of preventing it from entering in to the national scenario”.

In 1927, after oil workers in Barrancabermeja declared a pacific strike, bullets once again became the solution to the conflict. While the workers organized a tribute to the mayor leaving office, the police entered their meeting hall and opened fire, leaving several workers dead. The government would respond by declaring illegal the workers’ movement and jailing its principal leaders, including the union leader Raul Mahecha.

One year later, the workers of the United Fruit Company would go on strike, presenting a modest set of collective bargaining demands in hopes of improving their precarious working conditions. The response of the business owners and the government was to fire indiscriminately at the workers, creating a tragic incident which became one of the milestones in the founding of the Colombian union movement.

### **The founding bloodshed and the mobilized resistance**

“[...] esperando un tren que no llegaba, más de tres mil personas, entre trabajadores, mujeres y niños, había desbordado el espacio descubierto frente a la estación y se apretujaban en las calles adyacentes que el ejército cerró con filas de ametralladoras.

- Señoras y señores – dijo el capitán con una voz baja, lenta, un poco cansada-, tienen cinco minutos para abandonar el lugar.



La rechifla y los gritos redoblados ahogaron el toque de clarín que anunció el principio del plazo. Nadie se movió.

- Han pasado cinco minutos –dijo el capitán en el mismo tono-. Un minuto más y se hará fuego.

José Arcadio Segundo, sudando hielo, se bajo al niño de los hombros y se lo entregó a la mujer. “Estos Cabrones son capaces de disparar”, murmuró ella. José Arcadio Segundo no tuvo tiempo de hablar, porque al instante reconoció la voz ronca del coronel Gavilán haciéndoles eco con un grito a las palabras de la mujer. Embriagado por la tensión, por la maravillosa profundidad del silencio y, además, convencido de que nada haría mover a aquella muchedumbre pasmada por fascinación de la muerte, José Arcadio Segundo se empinó por encima de las cabezas que tenía enfrente, y por primera vez en su vida levantó la voz

- ¡Cabrones! –gritó-. Les regalamos el minuto que falta.

Al final de su grito ocurrió algo que no le produjo espanto, sino una especie de alucinación. El capitán dio la orden de fuego y catorce nidos de ametralladoras le respondieron en el acto. Pero todo parecía una farsa. Era como si las ametralladoras hubieran estado cargadas con engañifas de pirotecnia, porque se escuchaba su anhelante tableteo, y se veían sus escupitajos incandescentes, pero no se percibía la más leve reacción, ni una voz, ni siquiera un suspiro, entre la muchedumbre compacta que parecía petrificada por una invulnerabilidad instantánea. De pronto, a un lado de la estación, un grito de muerte desgarró el encantamiento: ‘Aaaay, mi madre.’ Una fuerza sísmica, un aliento volcánico, un rugido de cataclismo, estallaron en el centro de la muchedumbre con una descomunal potencia expansiva. José Arcadio Segundo apenas tuvo tiempo de levantar al niño mientras la madre con el otro era absorbida por la muchedumbre centrifugada por el pánico.

Muchos años después, el niño había de contar todavía, a pesar de que los vecinos seguían creyéndolo un viejo chiflado, que José Arcadio Segundo lo levantó por encima de su cabeza, y se dejó arrastrar, casi en el aire, como flotando en el terror de la muchedumbre, hacia una calle adyacente. La posición privilegiada del niño le permitió ver que en ese momento la masa desbocada empezaba a llegar a la esquina y la fila de ametralladoras abrió fuego.

Los sobrevivientes, en vez de tirarse al suelo, trataron de volver a la plazoleta, y el pánico dio entonces un coletazo de dragón, y los mandó en una oleada compacta contra la otra oleada compacta que se movía en sentido contrario,

despedida por el otro coletazo de dragón de la calle opuesta, donde también las ametralladoras disparaban sin tregua. Estaban acorralados, girando en un torbellino gigantesco que poco a poco se reducía a su epicentro porque sus bordes iban siendo sistemáticamente recortados en redondo, como pelando una cebolla, por las tijeras insaciables y metódicas de la metralla. El niño vio una mujer arrodillada, con los brazos en cruz, en un espacio limpio, misteriosamente vedado a la estampida. Allí lo puso José Arcadio Segundo, en el instante de derrumbarse con la cara bañada en sangre antes de que el tropel colosal arrasara con el espacio vacío, con la mujer arrodillada, con la luz del alto cielo de sequía, y con el puto mundo donde Úrsula Iguarán había vendido tantos animalitos de caramelo.

Tratando de fugarse de la pesadilla, José Arcadio Segundo se arrastró de un vagón a otro, en la dirección en que avanzaba el tren, y en los relámpagos que estallaban por entre los listones de madera al pasar por los pueblos dormidos veía los muertos hombres, los muertos mujeres, los muertos niños, que iban a ser arrojados al mar como el banano de rechazo. [...] Cuando llegó al primer vagón dio un salto en la oscuridad, y se quedó tendido en la zanja hasta que el tren acabó de pasar. Era el más largo que había visto nunca, con casi doscientos vagones de carga, y una locomotora en cada extremo y una tercera en el centro. No llevaba ninguna luz, ni siquiera las rojas y verdes lámparas de posición, y se deslizaba a una velocidad nocturna y sigilosa. Encima de los vagones se veían los bultos oscuros de los soldados con las ametralladoras emplazadas.

Después de media noche se precipitó un aguacero torrencial. José Arcadio Segundo ignoraba dónde había saltado, pero sabía que caminando en sentido contrario al del tren llegaría a Macondo. Al cabo de más de tres horas de marcha, empapado hasta los huesos, con un dolor de cabeza terrible, diviso las primeras casas a la luz del amanecer. Atraído por el olor del café, entró en una cocina donde una mujer con un niño en brazos estaba inclinada sobre el fogón.

Buenos – dijo exhausto- soy José Arcadio Segundo Buendía.

Pronuncio el nombre completo, letra por letra, para convencerse de que estaba vivo. Hizo bien, porque la mujer había pensado que era una aparición al ver en la puerta la figura escuálida, sombría, con la cabeza y la ropa sucias de sangre, y tocada por la solemnidad de la muerte.

Debían ser como tres mil- murmuró

- ¿Qué?

-Los muertos -aclaró él – debían ser todos los que estaban en la estación. La mujer lo midió con una mirada de lástima. “Aquí no ha habido muertos” dijo “Desde los tiempos de tu tío, el coronel, no ha pasado nada en Macondo”  
-Eran más de tres mil- fue todo cuanto dijo José Arcadio Segundo – Ahora estoy seguro que eran todos los estaban en la estación.<sup>7</sup>

The confused massacre of the banana workers in the city of Ciénaga, Magdalena state, in 1928, has become one of the milestones of the founding of the Colombian union movement. As Mauricio Archila has said, “perhaps there is no incident more painful yet at the same time so subject to fictionalization in the history of the country than what happened the night between December 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> in Ciénaga, Magdalena”.<sup>8</sup>

Something more than 10,000 workers without any labor rights, a company –United Fruit – without any legal obligations due to its method of subcontracting, a month-long strike, and rumors of assistance by a government functionary who never arrived were the elements of the scenario in which a massacre, distorted by memories and political interests, took place. The gaps in the history of this event have been filled by the imagination and power of the bitter memory which has been

recreated by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Ricardo Rendon, and Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, among others. According to the different versions, there were nine or thousands of murders; box cars transported the cadavers; the workers were the ones who fired or they were drunk at the time. Many versions that incorporate different rumors are available, describing a massacre or a simple confrontation, from a diffuse image to shocking violence. However, this event has become, beyond the verifiable historical truths, the founding image of the history of Colombian unionism which is part of the collective memory of the country’s workers.

This fact would mark the growing tendency of the dramatic history of labor struggles in Colombia and the insidious presence of violence as a way of regulating the actions of a union movement that had to forge its way while the State and business owners obstaculize its existence.

7. Gabriel García Márquez. *Cien años de soledad*. Ediciones CÁTEDRA, Letras Hispánicas, 2000, pags 417 -430

8. *Masacre de las bananeras, diciembre 6 de 1928*, Revista Credencial Historia. Bogotá, septiembre 1999. No 117

After the massacre of the banana workers, which some authors have called a heroic episode, the union movement began to experience a series of changes, transformations, and reconfigurations that would last throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, until it established itself in the midst of recognition by the state, obstacles, illegality, enemies, persecutions, bullets, and diverse forms of resistance. After the fateful year of 1928, a type of political transition began to occur. The Liberal party came to power and with this change, a complex process to legalize the union movement began to unfold, however this official recognition was tied to strict demands and controls. During the first term of the Alfonso Lopez Pumarejo administration (1934-1938), the process of the institucionalization of the union movement began, and during this period the CTC, the first trade union confederation, is created. However, the support of the national government was linked to a series of controls which limited union freedoms and the capacity to collectively bargain, and which restricted union organization to the company level.<sup>9</sup>

In the period from 1945-1957, the country entered into an epoch ironically known as ‘The Violence’, due to

the efforts—converted into war—of the Conservative party to retake power after the assassination of the presidential candidate Jorge Eliecer Gaitan exacerbated the tendency towards violent actions. During this period, the traditional union movement was forced back into acting clandestinely and illegally, while conservative factions with ties to the Catholic church founded a new union confederation, the UTC.

The following years were marked by the establishment of the National Front, a relative calm, an economic upturn, and in particular the unprecedented growth of the union movement. This growth took place through the consolidation of unions representing a wide sector of professional middle class workers, including teachers, bank workers, health care workers, as well as independent workers. At the beginning of this period, the CSTC was formed, after the CTC expelled the Communist-influenced faction from its structure. The growth of the union movement was marked by an increase in strike actions and, just as in earlier years, confronted by violence and repression. The State responded to the strikes with laws to strengthen company-level union organization and regulations which tied strike actions to

9. Juan Bernardo Rosado, *Sindicalismo actor social en medio del conflicto*, p. 9

the rulings of arbitration tribunals.

Although the union movement grew to historic levels, from a unionization rate of 5.5% of the economically active population in 1959 to 13.5% in 1965, the response by the State to the movement's growing demands was marked by bullets and repression of all forms. The case of the cement workers in Santa Barbara, Antioquia in 1963 is characteristic of this period.

On Saturday, February 23, 1963, thirteen people, including many unionists who worked at the El Cairo cement factory were massacred in the municipality of Santa Barbara, Antioquia by the Army. According to Luis Sierra, then President of the union, a few days before the massacre, the union had gone on strike after the company refused to discuss the workers' demands. The strike was carried out with the intention of not letting the stocks of cement be removed from the factory, and as the President of the union remembers, the governor of the state of Antioquia during this time – Fernando Gomez Martinez – had ordered that the cement be removed even if it is over the lifeless bodies of the workers.

“We waited to hear the response of the company, through the Labor

Ministry and FEDETA, which was supposed to arrive on Monday”, affirmed Luis Sierra. “For that reason, we thought that the presence of soldiers and the arrival of bulldozers was strange. I spoke with Coronel Valencia Paredes that day and expressed by concern. ‘I know what you mean, but I have orders, which are to get this cement out at whatever cost’, he answered me”.<sup>10</sup>

At 5:00 in the afternoon of that same day, the factory workers tried to block the exit of the bulldozers which were loaded with cement and soldiers, and the coronel gave the order to open fire. According to union leader Gonzalo Alvarez, “at first we all thought they were rubber bullets, but the moment when we saw our friends fall down dead or injured, there was no doubt left in anyone's mind that the massacre was carried out intentionally, and was prepared in advance”.

The soldiers fired at the cement workers, at health care workers, and at local residents that were observing the events. The house of one of the strikers, which doubled as the union office, was bombed with tear gas, and the ten year old daughter of one of the union leaders, Maria Edilma Zapata, was killed as she ran out of her house fleeing from the tear gas. The work-

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10. Roberto Rubiano *La masacre de Santa Bárbara* in *Tribuna Roja*. February 1976

ers reiniciated the attack with sticks and stones, but after about an hour and a half, the unionists Rafael Gonzalez, Pastor Cardona, Israel Velez, Ruben Perez, and nine other people were dead. At nightfall, the soldiers searched the houses of the unionists and detained several of them.

The years after the dismanteling of the National Front in 1974 were marked first of all by the assuming of power of President Alfonso Lopez Michelsen during the period 1974-1978, followed by Julio Cesar Turbay (1978-1982) and Belisario Betancur (1982-1986). Secondly, the period was marked by a deep economic repression on a global level which in Colombia spurred the reduction of salaries, low imflation, and fiscal cutbacks. In addition, this period was marked by the creation of highly repressive regimes that used the premise of security to instiutionalize a “state of siege” for prolonged periods, during which all of the movements and social leaders who came from the left were persecuted.

During these Presidential periods, the union movement lived new episodes of state repression, violence, and destabilization. As a response to their demands and protests, the only response was repression in all of its forms, hidden negligence, and bullets. The national strikes promoted by the

union confederations were suffocated by mechanisms of repression, and the union movement’s errors became costly for any person who had sympathy for the workers’ demands.

Some exemplary cases of violence during this period were the assasination of the president of the CTC in 1976, the death of coal workers due to company negligence in 1977, the wave of repression against the participants in the 1977 national strike, and the increase in assassinations against unionists in the Uraba region during the decade of the 80s. The following narratives generally reflect the fundamental aspects of the anti-union violence in this historical moment.

On February 15, 1976, Jose Raquel Mercado, President of the CTC was kidnapped and later assasinated on April 19th of that same year by members of the M-19 guerrilla. The union leader was judged at a political trial held by this guerrilla, and was convicted of treason against the workers and the union movement and of being supportive of the bosses’ interests.<sup>11</sup> The CTC retells this event in this way on its web page:

“Despite the fact that so many of the members of the CTC Executive Committee, CTC federations, and CTC affiliate unions have been assasinated, the assasination of the

CTC President, Jose Raquel Mercado was shocking and caused general uproar. The assassination was committed by the M-19 guerrilla movement on April 19, 1976, after holding the union leader captive for two months. Following this act, other union leaders were assassinated on different occasions, including the Vice Presidents Victor Manuel Almanza and Emilio Vasquez Valencilla and Jose Israel Arias, President of the Tolima Workers' Federation –CTC; Hernar Usuga, President of the Uraba Workers' Federation –CTC; and Libardo Acevedo, President of the Valle del Cauca Workers' Federation –CTC".<sup>12</sup>

On July 14, 1977, a large number of workers also were killed in an unprecedented tragedy that took place in the municipality of Amaga, Antioquia state. The negligent and arbitrary actions of the Industrial Hullera company, which was at the time property of the business consortium that also

controlled the Coltejer, Fabricato, Cervunión, Cementos El Cairo, Cementos Argos, Tejicondor y Vicuña corporations, were responsible for this catastrophe. As Hernan Taborda, President of the Mine Industry Union of Antioquia at that time recalls,

“For Industrial Hullera and the government, the life of a miner is worth less than a sack of coal. For I don't know how many years, we demanded improvements in the working conditions and in the maintenance of the carts and rails. We constantly sued the labor authorities, whose job it was to make the company comply with occupational health regulations, inspect the pits, and test the quality of the ventilation. They never listened to us. Today more than 100 workers are dead, and on top of that, they blame us, but they are the only ones responsible”.<sup>13</sup>

Several days before the tragedy, the miners had denounced the lack of

11. In the *De la urbe digital* newspaper, it was said “One year later, on February 15, 1976, Jose Raquel Mercado, leader of the CTC, was kidnapped and executed, for being considered a traitor to the interests of the Colombian union movement, for being, according to them, on the bosses' and not the workers' side”. Tuesday, November 8, 2005 *Antesala histórica de la toma del Palacio de Justicia* By Henry Amariles\* [delaurbedigital@embera.udea.edu.co](mailto:delaurbedigital@embera.udea.edu.co).

In the editorial of *Tribuna Roja*, No. 20, March 1976, written by Francisco Mosquera, it is affirmed, “The kidnapping of Mercado does not in any moment fit with the forms of struggle that the Colombian working class should carry out in order to unmask, isolate, and expulse from the ranks of the union movement the scabs and sell-outs”.

12. Taken from the CTC web page: <http://www.ctc-colombia.com.co/historia.php>

safe conditions and the repeated violations by the company of the collective bargaining contract, which was signed after a 53-day long strike that same year. On June 26th, the workers had voted to go on strike once again if the company kept violating the contract, and during the morning of July 14th, the union leaders, who were prohibited from entering the mine, organized a protest to denounce the rising temperature in the mine. However, all of their observations were ignored by the company and the miners were forced to go to work. During the morning of July 16th, when both shifts were down in the mine working, there was a huge explosion, causing more than 100 deaths, including children and disabled people. The next day, the Labor Minister ordered that troops occupy the region so that production would not be halted. The company tried to evade its responsibility in regards to the events, and blamed the workers themselves for causing the accident.

**Fatal coincidences: From United Fruit to Chiquita Brands and the banana worker massacres**

“In Uraba, the Army is permitted by law to intervene in labor conflicts”.<sup>14</sup>

Like an absurd or sinister coincidence, the decades of the 80s and 90s in Uraba were colored by a dramatic panorama of anti-union violence with scenes, victimizers, and cadavers which mirrored the historic massacre of the banana workers in 1928.

In a brief contextual digression, it is important to recall the fact that in 1959, the United Fruit Company, which later became Chiquita Brands, began a process of developing banana production in the region of Uraba, which spurred a series of changes in regards to the labor, social, military, and political situation. At the same time that the banana plantations grew, violent territorial disputes reappeared, which would last for over three decades, converting the region in a type of battlefield, with multiple actors and different interests.<sup>15</sup>

Without a doubt, the greatest change in the political, social, and workplace environments, discounting the development of agrarian projects in the zone, was the emergence of unions that represented the

13. Jorge Enrique Robledo *Lo de Amagá, un crimen de la empresa y el gobierno*. In Tribuna Roja No 27. August 1977

14. Coronel Adolfo Clavijo, Operating Commandant No 11, report presented by Sintrabanano and FEDETA to a meeting with the national government, , Medellín February 13, 1986.



workers of the banana industry. This union movement would become one of the most important actors in the region. The precarious conditions in which thousands of banana workers labored, added to the widespread poverty, countless social and political problems, and the lack of local development, stimulated the creation of several unions who could act as regulators and negotiators. It should also be mentioned that the growth of the union movement also coincided with the general abandonment of the region by the government, which did not improve the situation caused by an insufficient presence of State institutions and permanent territorial disputes carried out between guerrilla and paramilitary groups.

The workers' organizations were permeated by the influence of guerrilla groups, and due to this it can be noted that the creation of Sintagro was spurred on by the Popular Liberation Army, EPL, just as Sintrabanano

was guided by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, FARC, and Sindijornaleros was oriented by the National Liberation Army, ELN. This fact became over time one of the principal factors of anti-union violence, in response to changes on the war front, and involving a complex set of victimizers.

These shifts in the conflict determined the position of the enemies and situated the victimizers,<sup>16</sup> in such a way that during the 80s, paramilitary groups attacked the unions with the acquiescence of the military. Years later, after the EPL negotiated its entry into civilian life, and the growth of the Hope, Peace, and Liberty political movement, the guerrilla of the FARC began to attack the unions, while the attacks by paramilitaries and militias continued.

The coincidences, far from being speculations or fictional occurrences, allow us to understand how the patterns of anti-union violence

15. See *Urabá, Región o territorio*, María Teresa Uribe and *Urabá, región, actores y conflicto 1960-1990*, Clara Inés García.

16. To understand more thoroughly the military and political conflicts in the region, Clara Inés García in her book *Urabá, región, actores y conflicto 1960-1990* identifies a first period which she denominates "the regional periphery, characterized by a military confrontation between two actors – guerrilla and state – in a territory located outside of the banana zone. After the decade of the 80s, the relationship changes as well as the significance of the conflict between State, guerrillas, paramilitaries, workers, and companies, and the center of the action is moved to the banana growing zone, going beyond a purely military conflict, and involving new actors.

endured and became entrenched over time. Between distortions, impunity, justifications for war, and stigmatizations, a form of violence is mapped out in which business owners and the State hide in the shadow of the confusion, and the paramilitaries or other irregular armed groups become determining factors in labor conflicts. This is what happened in the case of

Chiquita Brands;<sup>17</sup> the odd relations of the Army with paramilitary groups, and the paramilitaries themselves, become the mediators of labor conflicts, as well as perpetrators of systematic annihilations (in the midst of the upheaval caused by confrontations between guerrillas and paramilitaries) of union leaders and workers. They were named as subversives, slandered

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17. The news agencies DPA, AFP, and REUTERS, in an article published on March 16, 2007, say that “The US based transnational company Chiquita Brands International Inc. will pay a fine of 25 million dollars, after a judicial plea, for having made a series of payments to the AUC paramilitaries in violation of the anti-terrorist laws of the US.” This violation of the anti-terrorist laws took place when the company made secret payments of \$1.7 million dollars to the AUC between 1997-February 2004 through its ex-subsiary in the South American country, as the US Prosecutor Jeffrey Taylor said in a report. Chiquita said that it was “obliged” to make those payments to the AUC, to “protect the life” of its employees in the banana producing zones of Uraba and Santa Marta, Colombia, due to supposed threats by paramilitaries and guerrillas, according to Executive Director Fernando Aguirre in a press release. However, press reports said today that they did not just try to “protect” workers, but to also encourage paramilitary groups to attack union leaders and other “agitators” against the commercial interests of the company. For this reason, according to legal documents, the transnational company paid almost \$2 million dollars to illegal armed groups in Colombia. According to the current investigation, the prosecutors affirm that the company also made similar payments to the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC). In 2001, the US government categorized the AUC as a terrorist group, meaning that the company acted in full knowledge, with direction from the central office of the company in Cincinnati, Ohio. However, the accounting books were altered to hide these payments to the AUC, which began in 1997 in a meeting with the then paramilitary leader Carlos Castano. The ex-branch of Chiquita in Colombia, Banadex, supposedly made more than 100 payments to the AUC in two regions, Uraba and Santa Marta (north); where it had banana production operations. These payments were made directly or indirectly almost every month, and the advice of lawyers to discontinue the practice was ignored, according to prosecutors. A BBC report said that the agreement signed by Chiquita Brands, one day after the company declared its guilt, ends this judicial process in which it has been involved, which began three years ago when the US Justice Department opened an investigation on the topic. The same press release said that in 2004, after acknowledging the existence of these deals with illegal groups, the company sold all of its investments in Colombia to a local producer for more than \$50 million dollars.

against, and persecuted by all of the actors, and became the victims of a violence which was hidden in the justifications of war and territorial disputes, without other causal factors.

It is clear that the scenes and contexts are different from those of 1928, yet the characteristics of the violence, the business practices, the role of the Army, the misinformation and distortion, and the attitude of the government are transformed into focal points that show the central elements of the prolonged anti-union violence, threaded with impunity, confusions, and distortions. Just as in 1928, the fictionalization of the accounts ended in shrouding the explanation for that tragedy in relativism and confusion, the massacres of the banana workers in the 80s and 90s have been lost in the fog of oblivion and surface-level explanations, which justify the annihilation of unions with the rhetoric of subversion and in images of forgiveness and obscurity. For this reason, we recount some of the bloody events that took place during this time, and unlike the acts of 1928, we have been able to recuperate the names of the victims.

On July 15, 1983, Luis Alfonso Gonzalez, leader of Sintagro, was assassinated. This union leader was sick at the time, and was abducted out of his house by paramilitaries. Four days

after his disappearance, his body was found with signs of torture in a location close to the Voltigeros battalion. Luis Alfonso was fired after a labor conflict, after which he was later reinstated and named to the post of union representative.

- On October 22, 1983, Jose Carvajal was assassinated in the village of Currulao. The worker, who aspired to become a member of the Executive Council of Sintagro, was also a victim several months before of an illegal search of his house by the Currulao police.
- On July 2, 1985, the members of Sintagro Oscar Salazar and Jorge Ortega were assassinated.
- On July 14, 1985, Argemiro Giraldo, leader of the union of agricultural workers of Antioquia, Sintagro, was assassinated, along with Bernardo Franco, leader of the Communist Party. According to the reports, the two men had been detained by soldiers of the Pedro Nel Ospina battalion of San Pedro de Uraba after a political event, and in the confines of the battalion, they were tortured until they died.
- On July 15, 1985, while more than 250 members of Sintagro were gathered in a union assembly in the union office in Currulao, the

- Army attacked the unionists with machine guns and grenades. Five unionists and an ice cream vendor were killed and 35 workers were injured. According to the reports, that year the Army had begun an intense campaign to force the workers to renounce their membership in the union, which the military considered a guerrilla union. Workers who dared to hold union meetings were detained by the military for two or three days, or their houses were continuously raided.
- On November 24, 1985, Edilberto Pastrana, worker at the “Las Margaritas” farm and member of the company worker-employer committee, was murdered, along with Elkin Giraldo, Eucaris Gomez, Felipe Mena, and Antul Jimenez, who worked at the “Villanueva” farm.
  - On November 30, 1985, the office of Sintagro in Currulao was attacked five times by grenades and machine guns. Due to the attacks, five workers were murdered and 22 people were injured.
  - On February 27, 1986, Jose Eli Pelaez, Francisco Jiménez and Mario Tabora, members of Sintagro and workers of the “Villanueva” farm, were killed.
  - On March 27, 1986, Walter Roldan, a member of Sintagro in the El Tres village, was assassinated by paramilitaries.
  - On April 13, 1986, Julio Cesar Santacruz, a teacher affiliated to the Antioquia Teachers’ Association ADIDA, was assassinated.
  - On April 13, 1986, Simeon Ramirez, a member of Sintagro and Sintraexpoban and worker at the “La suerte” farm, was assassinated.
  - On April 13, 1986, in the municipality of Apartado, Aurelio de Jesus Ortiz, member of the Sintra-banano grievance committee, was assassinated.
  - On April 20, 1986, Ruben Pineda, President of the union of agrarian workers Sintraagrarios, was murdered by paramilitaries in the municipality of Apartado.
  - On April 23, 1986, Pedro Leon Pineda, leader of the fruit workers’ union Sinaltrafruit, was assassinated in the village of Zungo in the municipality of Apartado. He worked in the banana export company Proban.
  - On April 26, 1986 Antonio Fernandez, Pedro Ezequiel Gil and Juan Lopez, members of Sintagro, were assassinated. They were murdered on the “Balboa” farm in the

municipality of Turbo. That same day, Luis Villadiego, Gabriel Villadiego, Gabriel Holguin, Alberto Builes, and Alvaro Usura, affiliates of Sintagro, were disappeared in the municipality of Mutata.

- On June 28, 1986, Saul Villada, member of the Sintagro grievance committee, was assassinated in Currulao.
- On July 14, 1986, Luis Felipe Murillo, Luis Enrique Espana, and Luis Carlos Torres were murdered. They were active members of Sintagro and were killed by paramilitaries in the “Mali” farm in the municipality of Apartado.
- On August 14, 1986, Ismael Gutierrez, affiliate of Sintagro, was assassinated. Ismael worked at the “Agripina” farm and was killed in the presence of his wife and son.
- On September 6, 1986, Enrique Bello and Manuel Arroyo, workers at the “Balboa” farm and members of Sintagro, were assassinated.
- On October 15, 1986, Jacintos Molina Hernandez and Victor Manuel Urrutia, leaders of Asoimbra, were assassinated. They were killed by MAS (Death to Kidnappers) in the municipality of Turbo.
- On November 11, 1986, Jose Maria Imbet Arrieta, leader of the union of day workers of Antioquia, Sindijornaleros, was assassinated in the municipality of Apartado.



## **Of multiple victimizers and sinister relations (1986-1990)**

I kept secret for many years this bloody shirt, with stains that turned black and shiny with time. I don't know why I kept it. It's as if I wanted to have it there like a pin prick which would prohibit me from forgetting every time that my conscience falls asleep, like an aid for the memory, like a promise that I had to avenge his death. On writing this book, I burned it, as I had learned that the only vengeance, the only memory, and maybe the only possibility to forgive and forget is to tell what happened, and nothing more.

That same Tuesday the 25th, in the morning, the President of the teachers union of Antioquia, Luis Felipe Velez, was assassinated as he was walking in to the office of his union. My father was indignant. Many years later, in a book published in 2001, Carlos Castaño, the head of the paramilitary groups for over ten years, confessed to how his group in Medellín, with intelligence provided by the Army, assassinated, among many other victims, the Senador Pedro Luis Valencia in front of his small childre, as well as the President of the teachers union Luis Felipe Velez. He accused both of them of being kidnappers.

At midday that Tuesday, as my mother tells it, they arrived together to the office, and my father wanted to hear the news about the murder of Luis Felipe Velez, but in all the radio stations they only talked about soccer. For my father, the excessive reporting on sports was the new opium of the people, which kept them asleep without ideas of what in fact happened in the real world, and he had written about this several times. With my mother as witness, he kicked the speaker and said with rage, "The city is falling apart, but they only talk about soccer". My mother says that he was in a strange mood that day, with a mix of rage and sadness, almost to the point of losing hope.

They were involved in these things when his most beloved disciple, Leonardo Betancur, arrived in a motorcycle. My father greeted him warmly, and asked him to come up to the office to sign the latest press release of the Human Rights Committee (he had written it the night before and had already drafted a clean copy), and he invited him to join him in attending the funeral service of the assassinated teacher, just three blocks away in the union office. They left on foot, talking, and my mother and I entered the office, since I needed to prepare for a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Colseguros building, which would start at 6 PM, and my mother had to work on her own affairs. It was about 5:15 in the afternoon.

I didn't see what happened next, but I can reconstruct it according to what several eyewitnesses say, or what I read in Case File 319 of the First Office of the Mobile Criminal Court, for the crime of homicide and personal injuries, opened on August 26, 1987, and archived a few years later, without arrests or convictions, without any kind of clarity, without any kind of result. This investigation, looking at it now almost 20 years later, seems more like an exercise to cover up the truth and favor impunity than a serious investigation. For example, one month after opening the case, the judge in charge was sent on vacation leave, and functionaries from Bogota were then asked to monitor the investigation, which is to say, to avoid that any serious investigating would be done.

My father, Leonardo, and a woman walked from Chile avenue to Argentina street and then turned left, on the north-facing sidewalk. They arrived at the corner of El Palo street and crossed it. They kept walking until Girardot street. They passed Girardot and on the next corner, they knocked at the door of Adida (Teachers Association of Antioquia), the teachers union. Someone opened the door for them and a small crowd formed in the entranceway, as other teachers were also arriving that moment to find out what was going on. Two hours earlier, the corpse of Luis Felipe Velez was brought to a chapel and a protest meeting was held in the Coliseum. My father looked around in suspicion for the woman who had accompanied them to the office, but she did not spot her at his side, she had disappeared.

One of the eyewitnesses says that a motorcycle with two young men aboard headed up Argentina street, first slowly then very rapidly. The men had recently had haircuts, said someone else, with a crew cut that was common on military men and some assassins for hire. They stopped the motorcycle in front of the union office, they left the motor running on the sidewalk, and the



two of them joined the small group gathered in front of the door, at the same time that they took out their guns from the waistband of their pants.

Did my father see them, did he know that they were going to kill him at that moment? For almost twenty years, I have tried to be him in that moment, confronting death. I imagine myself as 65 years old, dressed in a suit, asking about the funeral service of a union leader that took place that morning. If he had asked about the crime that had occurred a few hours earlier, he would have known the fact that Luis Felipe Velez was killed there, in the exact same spot where he was standing. My father looks at the ground, at his feet, as if he wanted to see the blood of the assassinated teacher. He can't see their faces, but he hears some urgent steps coming close to him, and he feels someone's jagged breathing at his neck. He lifts his eyes and sees the evil face of the assassin, he sees the smoke that blasts from the barrel of the gun, hears at the same time the gunshots, and feels a hit to his upper chest. He falls onto his back, his glasses fall off and break, and from the ground, while he thinks about for the last time, I am sure, in all of his loved ones, with his ribs twisted in pain, he manages to confusedly see the mouth of the revolver which shoots fire once again, finishing him off with several shots to the head, the neck and once again in the chest. Six shots, which means that one of the assassins emptied his revolver. In the meantime, the other killer follows Leonardo Betancur inside the union office and kills him there. My father did not see his beloved disciple die, in reality, he already could not see anything, or remember anything, he bled and bled, and in just a few moments his heart stopped and his brain shut down.

At that moment I could not cry. I feel a dry sadness, sin tears. An absolute sadness, but unbelieving, incredulous. Now that I write, I am capable of crying, but in that moment a sensation of stupor invaded me. An almost serene astoundment in awe of the power of evil, a rage without rage, a cry without tears, an interior pain that did not move me but paralyze me, an uncertainty that produces stillness. I try to think, I try to understand. I promise him that I will give my life to fight these assassins, yet I remain calm. I am about to fall down, yet I do not let myself fall down. Motherfuckers!, I scream, it's the only thing I scream, motherfuckers! And inside I still scream the same thing, which is what they are, what they were, what they continue to be if they are still alive: motherfuckers!<sup>1</sup>

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1. Héctor Abad Faciolince *El olvido que seremos*. Bogotá, Planeta, pp. 224-259

...In the decade of the 1980s, the quality of the strike increased, in general terms, in reference to the average number of workers involved in each protest. At the same time, the violations with respect to worker-employer relationships also became more serious than before. The legislation aimed at ending the excessive duration of strikes advanced, as well as did the dirty war, a wave of intolerance was in motion, and all of this caused a sharp decline in the duration of labor conflicts and in their impact on the national economy.<sup>2</sup>

In 1986 and after a series of changes in the configuration and restructuring of the Colombian trade union confederations, the Unitary Workers' Central CUT was born. The confederation appears in a context marked by heavy socio-political violence, the large-scale incursion of the drug trafficking phenomenon, the growth of paramilitarism, the annihilation of the members of the UP political movement, and the demobilization of the M-19 guerrilla and its posterior entry into the political scenario. This period also inherited elements from the previous government's – the administration of President Betancur – intents to exterminate the left, the so-called "dirty war." As Archila affirms, "once again, the war replaced politics".<sup>3</sup>

It was an epoch marked by massive sociopolitical violence, in which the strategy to eliminate the left and in particular members of the UP and

unionists took force. At the same time, the narcotrafficking phenomenon and the growing and confused alliances between mid-ranking Army officers and some regional politicians, added to the collaboration or intermediation of the paramilitaries, began to shape a set of sinister relations. Inside these forces, an anti-union perspective, an anti-guerrilla perspective, and an anti-left wing perspective was confused and intermingled. Although we still do not have exact statistics on the magnitude of the anti-union violence during 1986-1990, which is the period that coincides with the Virgilio Barco administration, the analysis of anti-union violence should be understood within the context of the distinct elements that made up the political scenario at the time. The partial statistics that we have on assassinations during this period show that during these five years, approximately 270 unionists were murdered. The large majority of

2. Álvaro Delgado y Mauricio Archila Neira *¿Dónde está la clase obrera? Huelgas en Colombia 1946-1990*, p. 64

3. Archila Mauricio *25 años de Luchas sociales en Colombia, 1975-2000*, P. 25

them were banana workers in Uraba, members of the Sintagro, Sintrabanaño, and Sindijournaleros unions. The teachers organized in Fecode and the workers of the Union Sindical Obrera (USO) were also victimized. The state of Antioquia is where the homicides were concentrated, followed by the

state of Santander. The assassinations against the banana workers in Uraba were explicitly linked to the consolidation of paramilitary forces in the region and the territorial disputes that began to take place during this period.

Year	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	Total
# of Homicides	37	67	78	50	38	270

Source: SINDERH, ENS.

Although the anti-union violence of this period was linked to diverse political, social, and labor factors in the country, the manifestations of that violence do not diverge from the logic of a systematic and selective violence, and a historical intention to annihilate or exterminate the union movement. Some notable crimes of the period were the assassination of the USO leader Gustavo Chacon in Barrancabermeja, the triple assassination of the human rights defenders and union leaders Luis Felipe Velez, Hector Abad Gomez, and Leonardo Betancur in Medellin, and the massacres against banana workers in Uraba.

On August 25, 1987, Luis Felipe Velez, President of the teachers' union of Antioquia (Adida), was murdered in the union's office in Medellin. The

same day, the human rights defenders and unionists Hector Abad Gomez and Leonardo Betancur were assassinated as they were entering the funeral service for Luis Felipe. Leonardo was a member of the Board of Directors of the ENS and a member of the political group Firmes.

On January 15, 1988, at 10 AM, Manuel Gustavo Chacon, was assassinated in the city of Barrancabermeja, Santander state, by seventeen shots fired from a machine gun. He was a leader of the USO union and a well known cultural worker. Manuel had repeatedly denounced the arbitrary actions and human rights violations committed by some members of the Colombian military in the Magdalena Medio region. According to the USO,

“at the end of the decade of the 80s and at the beginning of the 90s, the campaign of annihilation continued, in the form of selective assassinations. During this period, the physical extermination of leaders of the USO began. From 1988, when a soldier from the National Navy assassinated Manuel Gustavo Chacon Sarmiento until now, more than 80 oil workers have been massacred”.<sup>4</sup>

On March 4, 1988, 21 banana workers affiliated to Sintagro were assassinated. According to various versions, the workers were forced to get off a bus on the Turbo-Medellin

highway, close to the Honduras and La Negra farms, and they were massacred in that spot. The unionists were: Omar Ochoa, Iván Darío Molina, Guillermo León Valencia, José Blanco, Julián Carrillo, Manuel Cogollo Espitia, Guido González Martínez, Bienvenido González Martínez, Pedro González Martínez, Enrique Guisado Miranda, Rito Martínez Reyes, Gilberto Meneses Pineda, Joaquín Mendoza, José Mena Sánchez, Santiago Ortiz, Rodrigo Guzmán, Manuel Durango, Alirio Rojas, José Pineda, Natanael Rojas, Néstor Marino Galvis y Abel Meneses.

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4. *Colombia: la penalización de la actividad social*. Unión Sindical Obrera. July 15, 2004.

## **Selective deaths (1991-1994)**

The panorama before the elections of 1990 presented a country in a profound political crisis, after the assassination of Luis Carlos Galan, the heightened terrorist attacks by narcotraffickers, and the murder of two opposition Presidential candidates, Bernardo Jaramillo on March 22, 1990, and Carlos Pizarro on April 26, 1990. Colombia was fragmented by multiple violences. At the same time, the country began a political debate which led to the Constitutional Assembly out of which the most important political pact in the country materialized, namely the 1991 Political Constitution.

In general terms, this period was characterized by a paradox, since on one side a Constitution which seemed to be the road towards a peace agreement was being constructed, and on the other side, a neoliberal economic

model which would exacerbate social woes and undermine labor rights was beginning to be implemented. This was a contradiction marked by the beginning of the Presidential administration of Cesar Gaviria after the assassination of the Presidential candidate Luis Carlos Galan on August 18, 1989, the development of the new National Constitution of 1991, and the adoption of the neoliberal economic model which would translate in economic reforms to open markets and negative changes in social and labor policies. The laws that reformed labor and social security law, Law 50 of 1990 and Law 100 of 1993, respectively, are the changes that had the largest impact on the country's working population.

This implementation of the neoliberal economic policies without market regulation would cause a lowering

of workers' incomes, unemployment without end, and many layoffs of state employees due to privatizations and fiscal cutbacks. In this context, union protests were considered to be terrorist acts and the relations between the state and the workers were annulled. As Consuelo Ahumada states, cited by Archila, "the justice system lost sight of its prime objective – narcotics traffickers – to instead penalize the workers".<sup>1</sup>

From January 1, 1991 to December 31, 1994, 518 unionists were assassinated – 21 women and 493 men. During this period, the selective homicides committed against union leaders and activists stood out as the most serious and frequent crime in the entire panorama of anti-union violence. The behavior of the statistics during these four years reveals a growing tendency that presents a significant variation in

1994. In that year, the number of homicides decreased by 46% in comparison to 1993. In this context, the unions of agricultural workers, teachers, construction workers, electric workers, and municipal employees were the most affected.

Another determining characteristic of this period was the war against agricultural workers and specifically against banana and palm oil workers. The violence against the unionists affiliated to Sintraproaceites in San Martín, Cesar state and against the unionists affiliated to Sintrainagro in the banana growing region of Uraba was exemplary. In this last case, the assassinations were profoundly linked to the territorial disputes that the FARC and the Self-Defense Forces carried out for control of the state of Córdoba and the Uraba region.

#### **Homicides against unionized workers in Colombia 1991-1994**

Year	1991	1992	1993	1994	Total
Homicides	83	135	196	104	518

Source: Human Rights Database of the ENS

#### **Union leaders assassinated 1991-1994**

Year	1991	1992	1993	1994	Total
Homicides	12	33	24	36	100

Source: Human Rights Database of the ENS

1. Consuelo Ahumada, *El modelo neoliberal y su impacto en la sociedad colombiana*, cited by Mauricio Archila *25 años de Luchas sociales en Colombia, 1975-2000*, p. 30

The table shows us that from 1991 – 1994, 518 assassinations were committed. This statistic is equivalent to 23.03% of the total homicides committed in the 16 years under study, which clearly shows the magnitude of the violations during this period. The victims were principally from the state of Antioquia, where 62.3% of the assassinations took place, corresponding to 323 cases, followed by the Santander state with 42 assassinations and the states of Magdalena and Cesar with 22 and 14 cases, respectively. Sintrainagro in Antioquia and Magdalena, the USO in Santander, Sintraproaceites in Cesar, and the teachers' unions of Santander, Risaralda, Antioquia, Cesar, and Arauca, affiliated to Fedcode, were the most affected by the violence.

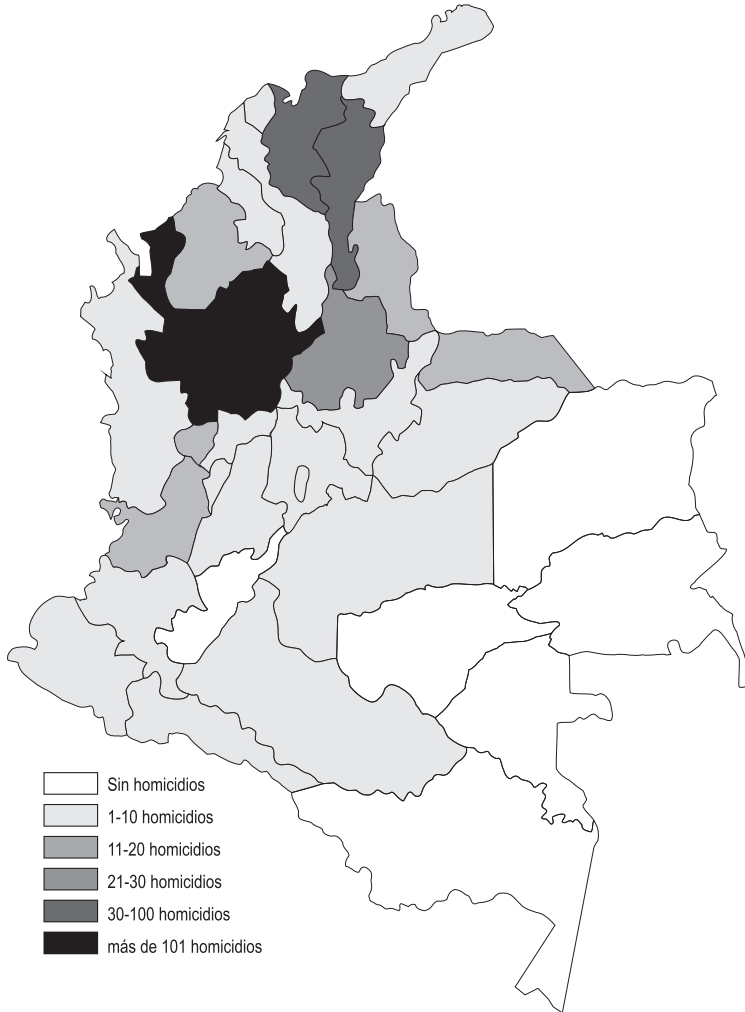
The assassinations of the important union leaders Guillermo Marin in 1994, and Alirio Guevara in 1992 are two of the most representative cases for this period.

Jesus Alirio Guevara was a member of the National Board of Directors of the Unitary Workers Central (CUT) and Vice-President of the National Union of Agroindustrial Workers (Sintrainagro). He was kidnapped and then later assassinated in a place known as Villa Alicia, in the municipality

of Apartado in Uraba on January 28, 1993, when the meeting of the CUT Board of Directors was taking place. One month later, Olivero Molina, General Secretary of Sintrainagro, was assassinated in Medellin on February 26, 1993.

Guillermo Marin, member of the Executive Committee of Futran – Unitary Workers' Federation of Antioquia, was assassinated in July 1994. After leading a meeting in which several union leaders participated, he was shot to death as he left the office of the Social Security workers' union. After this assassination, on September 24, 1994, agents from the intelligence service of the police interviewed Belisario Restrepo, President of Futran, in the organization's offices in the center of Medellin, in regards to the circumstances surrounding the death of Guillermo Marin. Hours later, that same day, five armed men who identified themselves as agents of the national Attorney General's office, broke in to the Futran office and asked to see Belisario. When they learned that he was not there, they fired at the Secretary of Labor Conflicts Hugo Zapata and the Secretary of Human Rights Carlos Posada. These events left Hugo Zapata dead and Carlos Posada injured.

### Panorama de homicidios de sindicalistas en Colombia 1991-1995





## **Bullets that reinstate the founding ghost (1995- 1997)**

This period coincides with the administration of Ernesto Samper Pizano (1994-1998) and with Alvaro Uribe's term of office as Governor of the state of Antioquia (1995-1997). In general, the political context during this period was fundamentally marked by the delegitimization of the Samper government due to the accusations that his campaign was financed by the funds of narcotraffickers, as well as by the increase in guerrilla and paramilitary violence and the deepening of the political crisis.

Socially, this was a moment of expectations and disenchantment. Even though it was clear that the neoliberal economic model would continue to be applied, Samper proposed giving a "human face" to the model through his "social pact." However, the autonomy of the central bank and the crisis which challenged the legitimacy of the

government ended his aspirations in regards to social reforms. The scandal of the "Proceso 8,000" and the efforts made by the government to defend itself and stay in power undermined all possibility of reforming social legislation.

With respect to human rights, the period was marked by deep contradictions. On one hand, the government signed Protocol II of the Geneva Conventions, it accepted responsibility for the massacre of Trujillo and began to train Army troops in human rights norms. On the other hand, this contrasted with the muddled relationship of the government with respect to the "Convivir" private security cooperatives that were created at the end of the previous administration and vigorously promoted by the then Governor of Antioquia, Alvaro Uribe, and the Defense Minister Fernando

Botero. The “Convivir” were soon accused by various human rights organizations of being at the service of the paramilitaries.

Precisely during this period, the paramilitary groups gained strength and carried out a bloody wave of violence without precedents in the state of Antioquia. This violence took place during the mandate of Governor Alvaro Uribe, who cynically defended and promoted the “Convivir.” In 1997, the so-called United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) make their first appearance, due to the supposed unity and coordination between the self-defense forces of Cordoba, Uraba, Magdalena Medio and the plains region. In this way, the Antioquian model of paramilitarism began to spread. The murdered human rights defender Jesus Maria Valle summed up this moment, affirming that “We are exporting violence, through the Convivir, to the entire country (...) and the military and the Convivir can be confused due to their uniforms, due to their offices, due to the vehicles that they use...”<sup>1</sup> He was assassinated in his office, on February 27, 1998.

In a moment marked by the growth of counter-insurgent paramilitary groups, the support of the Antioquian

governor for the “Convivir,” the increase in guerrilla violence and the debilitation of the government due to corruption scandals, the second period of anti-union violence surfaces, from 1995-1997. This period is principally characterized by the frequent use of the modality of massacres in the assassination of unionists, although selective homicides do not completely disappear from the panorama.

During those three years, 694 unionists were assassinated, which is equivalent to 31% of the number of total homicides in 16 years. Leaving aside the dramatic rhetoric, this three year period was the bloodiest episode in the recent history of unionism, with unprecedented statistics. 237 unionists were killed in 1995, 275 in 1996, and 182 in 1997.

The massacres in Antioquia and specifically in the Uraba region constitute the image of terror during a period which exactly coincides with the term of office of Alvaro Uribe as Governor of that state. This historic paradox can be called the first experiment in hard-handed security policies, due to the cynicism of a governor who in 1994 tried to legalize armed groups under the framework of the “Convivir” as part of his security strategy.

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1. Jesús María Valle, cited by por Juan Esteban Mejía Upegui: “Un vistazo a los años en los que el paramilitarismo inundó de sangre a Antioquia”, 01/31/2007, [www.semana.com](http://www.semana.com).

This second period can be particularly characterized by the intensification of the violence against agricultural workers and teachers in Antioquia; by the disproportionate and unprecedented increase in the number of homicides, and especially in the number of indiscriminate massacres; an alarming increase in the number of death threats; and the growing number of forced displacements.

In this period, there is a break in the general pattern of human rights violations against unionists. These violations were concentrated in one single union – Sintrainagro – in the Uraba region, Antioquia state, which suffered the largest number of homicides committed against unionists throughout the country. According to information in the ENS database, of the 694 homicides registered during those three years, 405 were committed against members of Sintrainagro, which equals 58.3% of the total number of homicides. The panorama is even more alarming if we take into account that between January 1991 and December 2006, 668 members of Sintrainagro have been assassinated, making this union far and away the organization most affected by anti-union violence in the recent history of Colombian unionism.

In second place are the teachers'

unions that are grouped together in Fedecode, which suffered 160 homicides. Of these organizations, the Association of Educators of Antioquia – ADIDA – appears as the union most affected by the violence, with 61 homicides registered. The teachers of Cordoba, organized in Ademacor, were victims of 22 assassinations, those of Cesar in the Aducesar union reported 12 assassinated, and the teachers of Bolivar organized in SUDEB were victims of 15 assassinations. It is particularly telling that during these three years, Antioquia and Cordoba register the highest levels of violence, if the statistics are compared throughout the entire 16 year period. This is due to the strategy of territorial disputes and paramilitary control which manifested itself during this time. Of the 58 assassinations registered during the 16 year period in Cordoba, 21 took place during the 1995-1997 period, which equals 38% of the total. And of all the assassinations that have occurred in Antioquia, 47% occurred during this period.

Antioquia is registered as the state most affected by the violence, with 501 assassinations, equalling 72.1% of the total homicides committed in the country. The main explanatory factor for this is the worsening of the conflict in the Uraba region in Antioquia

state. The state of Cesar follows with 34 assassinations, Cordoba with 26, Magdalena with 25, Bolivar with 16, and Santander with 15. A relationship between the places where homicides are committed and the territories in which the paramilitaries are consolidating their strength begins to take shape.

With respect to economic sectors, as we have mentioned earlier, the agricultural sector unions and in particular Sintrainagro are without a doubt the most affected. However, it should be noted that the violations are not concentrated exclusively in that sector. Unionists of the education sector affiliated to Fecode were victims of 184 assassinations, of which 61 correspond to teachers affiliated to ADIDA. Unionists from the mining sector were victims of 19 homicides, and unionists in the manufacturing industry suffered 37 homicides.

Without a doubt, 1996 is the year with the most anti-union violence in Colombia, in comparison with the last 15 years. That year was marked by the greatest number of homicides against unionists, the most massacres of workers, and the highest number of human rights violations against workers. In that year, 275 unionists were

assassinated throughout the country, and out of that number, 105 died in massacres committed by armed actors in the banana growing zone of Uraba. It is necessary to state that the serious humanitarian crisis suffered by the union movement in the Uraba region during that year was a consequence of the implementation of the so-called “armed pacification project” in that region. This project was none other than the annihilation of everything and everyone who was tainted by the “insurgents,” including left-wing political leaders and union leaders in particular.

In 1997 and 1998, the homicides against unionized workers drop significantly, going from 275 homicides registered in 1996 to 182 homicides in 1997. However, these statistics contrast with the increase in the number of death threats, which increase by 67% - from 182 to 307 – and the number of forced displacements, which rise from four to 361. The drop in assassinations coincide with the lessening of territorial disputes in Uraba, the rise in homicides and death threats against union leaders, and with the appearance of new territorial disputes by armed actors.

**Homicides, death threats, and forced displacements  
of unionized workers in Colombia, 1995-1997**

Year	1995	1996	1997	Total
Homicides	237	275	182	694
Death threats	6	182	307	495
Displacement	-	4	361	365

Source: Human Rights database of the ENS

**Homicides, death threats, and forced  
displacements of union leaders**

Year	1995	1996	1997	Total
Homicides	36	28	39	103
Death threats	4	17	47	68
Displacement		2	47	49

Source – Human Rights database of the ENS

The tables above allow us to observe the changes in the intensity of the violations and the changes in their forms, with respect to the transformations of the contexts. Once the region of Uraba was “pacified,” the violence spreads throughout the country in the same way that the armed conflict also spreads, impacting more and more day-to-day life and the bloody resolution of social and labor conflicts. In this same time period, selective homicides continue, as a way of intimidating and regulating union activity in the country. It is notable that there is no unified information on

the massacres in Uraba, especially the statistics on the number of massacres and victims.<sup>2</sup>

We now present some cases that illustrate the complexity of the homicides during this period, and the multiplicity of the victimizers of Colombian unionists. And although we have affirmed that the massacres of workers affiliated to Sintrainagro are the some of the most characteristic human rights violations against unionists in this period, it is important to observe that at the same time, union leaders are persecuted for their union activity, and that their murders do not

2. The human rights observatory of the Vice-President’s office, in a review of the massacres committed during the period 1993-2004, states that in 1993 14 cases with 79 victims were registered, in 1994 there were three massacres with 46 victims, in 1995, there were 15 massacres and 116 victims, in 1996, 11 massacres and 71 victims, in 1997 seven massacres with 38 victims, and in 1998, two massacres with 15 victims.

exclusively correspond to the logic of territorial disputes and confrontations by armed actors.

One of the cases occurred on September 20, 1995. That day, FARC soldiers stopped a bus with 29 passengers in an area known as Bajo del Oso in the municipality of Apartado. The FARC made all the passengers get off the bus, making them lie face down on the ground with their hands bound. The guerrilla members then executed 24 of the workers, while the others were injured in the attack.<sup>3</sup>

Another massacre was committed against the banana workers of the “Osaka” farm, located in the El Zungo village. They were murdered around 6:30 AM, when they arrived to the farm by bus. According to the survivors, when they got to about 200 meters before the entrance of the farm, a group of ten men armed with AK-47 and R-15 guns lept out from the vegetation and told the driver to pull over the bus. After making the workers get off the bus, the men began to ask them what they did, and in that way they began to select some of them. After separating out ten men, they began to shoot at them. According to different

versions, three or four of the vicimizers were masked, one was wearing a sweatsuit and green sweater, and the rest were dressed in common clothes. According to testimonies, the massacre was committed by alleged members of the V Front of the FARC, led by someone called “Papujo.” According to witnesses, the workers had asked for protection, but patrols by the Army had ended in January.<sup>4</sup>

During this period, many selective homicidas were also registered, such as the one which was committed on May 9, 1996. That day, Oswaldo Ovidio Agudelo, leader of the Sintrainagro union and the UP political party, was shot to death in the “El Ganadero” bar, located at 47<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 50<sup>th</sup> Street in downtown Medellin. Moments earlier, he had participated in a public event in which he had announced that once again he was threatened with death. The union and political leader was forced to leave the Uraba region just two days earlier, due to the continued threats against his life.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, on March 9, 1997, in the municipality of Remedios, Antioquia, Army troops from

3. Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, third report on the human rights situation in Colombia.

4. Justicia y paz magazine, p. 36, volume 9, No 1, 1996.

5. Justicia y paz magazine, p. 44, volume 9, No 2, 1996

the Bombona battalion of the XIV brigade, executed six members of the human rights committee of Northeast Antioquia and Bajo Cauca. Later, the bodies were presented by the Army as combatants of the ELN who died in battle. One of the victims, Nazareno de Jesus Rivera, a well known community and union leader in the region, was identified the day of the massacre. Another victim, Jaime Ortiz

Londono, was reported as disappeared and was buried in an unmarked grave in the Segovia cementary in order to create confusion, as the soldiers had deliberately placed his ID cards besides the body of another victim. Later, investigations confirmed the identity of Jaime and determined that he was murdered as part of the same incident.<sup>6</sup>

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6. Noche y Niebla magazine No 3, p. 49, March 1997.





## **The unfolding of crude and disperse violence (1999-2002)**

After the complex crisis that the country lived through during the delegitimized and isolated Samper administration, Andres Pastrana became President in 1998. With his arrival, the country embarked on another crisis of greater proportions. Utilizing the semantic game of images, Pastrana posed for a picture with Manuel Marulanda, commander of the FARC, simulating the possibility of peace in a country devastated by war.

With the intention of seeking peace, the Pastrana administration was inaugurated, utilizing a contradictory strategy. Simultaneously, while a peace process with the FARC unfolded, Plan Colombia was inaugurated, which deliberately promoted a military solution to the war. Without a doubt, the peace talks ended in strengthening the armed actors instead of arriving at a possible solution.

As human rights reports on Colombia show, during this time, rights violations escalated significantly, forced displacements linked to massacres increased, and the so-called ceasefire ended up becoming more of an illusion than Pastrana's campaign photo. At the same time, paramilitary groups proliferated and their actions became even bloodier, if that is possible, unleashing a wave of terror in new territories and concentrating its forces in extermination any voice that even vaguely sounded left-wing.

Regarding the labor situation, the crisis revealed the weakness of the government and the wide impacts of unchecked neoliberal economic policies. Unemployment surged to 19.8% in 1999, the number of people living in poverty increased as incomes disproportionately dropped. The national strikes organized by the trade union

confederations grew in strength and the official persecution of the workers' protests was made even more evident. In this context, anti-union violence spread throughout the national territory, while the official discourse tried to confuse it within the complex panorama of a diffuse war.

With the beginning of the Pastrana administration and his intent to start peace talks with the guerrilla, the strategy of using selective assassinations to control and intimidate union activity in the country resurged with even greater force. And even though these assassinations appeared in the context of an apparently diffuse and indiscriminate violence in the middle of an expanding wave of all kinds of human rights violations, the murders of unionists appear in selective ways and generally linked to a specific context of labor conflicts. Anti-union violence was no longer concentrated almost exclusively in the state of Antioquia. It now extended throughout the national geography, manifesting

itself in multiple forms. In fact, this period presented the greatest increase in the number of murder attempts, disappearances, and kidnappings, among other forms of violations.

During these four years, 600 Colombian workers were assassinated, 1,292 workers were victims of direct death threats, 70 murder attempts with guns and explosive artifacts were carried out against unionists, and 113 workers were kidnapped. In this period, selective assassinations against high-ranking union leaders were carried out as a special strategy to terrorize and immobilize union activity. In no other period were unionists persecuted in such a direct and generalized way, and at no other time did such a disperse violence affect the bulk of the union movement (including union leaders, rank-and-file members, and relatives of unionists). The causes of this violence were mixed up with the armed conflict, union activities, and common crime.

**Violations to life, liberty, and personal integrity  
of union leaders Comparative table**

Type of violation	1996-1998	1999-2002
Death threats	198	794
Assassination attempts	23	45
Dissappearances	11	12
Homicides	96	171
Harrassment	-	26
Kidnappings	2	23
Torture	-	3

Source: ENS Human Rights database

In this period, levels of violence equal to the tragic year of 1996 were reached, yet in that year the territorial disputes in the Uraba region partially explained the exaggerated numbers of homicides that year. However, during the 1999-2002 period, there is no overriding factor that can explain the violence, it is basically a systematic and discriminate violence against unionists due to their union activities, a fact which highlights the dimension of the anti-union prejudice during those years.

A comparative study of those four years allows us to observe that during this time, the homicidas against unionized workers grew more specialized over time, with an unchecked growth in the years 2000-2001. At the same time, the assassinations against high-ranking union leaders increased to historic levels. In this way, accord-

ing to the records in the human rights database of the ENS, from 1999-2000, the number of assassinations of unionists increased in 69%, from 80 homicides in 1999 to 137 in 2000, and the murders of union leaders increased by 39% during this same period. From 2000-2001, the murders of unionized workers increased in 45%, from 137 assassinations in 2000 to 197 in 2001. At the same time, the number of assassinations of union leaders experienced an historic increase of 97%, from 32 in 2000 to 65 in 2001. Between 2001 and 2002, there was a small reduction in assassinations, from 197 in 2001 to 186 in 2002, which equals a 6% decrease in murders of unionists. The number of assassinations against union leaders also dropped by 21%, from 65 assassinations in 2001 to 50 in 2002.

**Homicides of Colombian unionists, 1999-2002**

Year	1999	2000	2001	2002
Homicides	80	137	197	186

Source: ENS human rights database

**Assassinated union leaders, 1999-2002**

Year	1999	2000	2001	2002
Homicides	23	33	65	50

Source: ENS human rights database

In this period, the state of Antioquia continues to be the most dangerous territory for union activity, with 177 homicides of unionists registered, equivalent to 30% of the total assassinations. However, during this period, the geography of homicides extends itself, as new scenarios appear in the panorama of violence. This extension is linked to the expansion of the paramilitary project to new geographic territories, something quite significant if we take into account that over 50% of homicides were registered in Antioquia in earlier periods. The state of Valle del Cauca appears as a new scenario of violence, recording 51 unionists assassinated during the period, and the state of Santander continues to register a high number of cases, with 53 homicides during this time. In addition, the violence moves towards other states, such as Atlántico with 22 homicides registered, Cesar with 28, Magdalena with 23, Norte de Santander with 25, Meta with 22 and

Nariño with 25. In the other states, from 5-20 assassinations were committed. This unfolding of anti-union violence under the modality of selective homicides in new territories is one of the particularities that characterize the 1999-2002 period.

Service sector unions were most affected by anti-union assassinations during this period, in particular education sector unions affiliated to Fecode were those that reported the greatest number of homicides, with 325 unionized teachers murdered, which is equivalent to 55% of the total assassinations during this time. Unionized workers of the public administration sector were victims of 31 homicides, judicial branch workers suffered 29 murders, and health care workers were victims of 32 assassinations. In addition, unionized workers of the public utilities sector were also hit hard, with 45 assassinations registered, as well as agricultural sector unions, especially those of small farmers organized in

Fensuagro, who were victims of 44 assassinations.

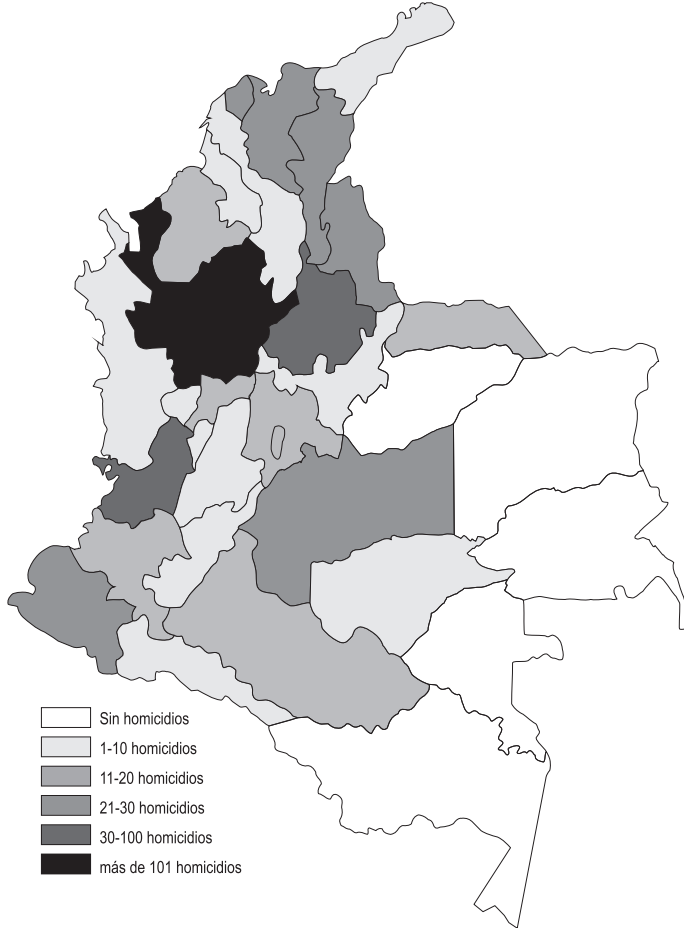
Some of the assassinations that marked this period embody the dimension of the anti-union violence in the country and the depth of its implementation. Two emblematic cases open and close this bloody epoch –the murder of Jorge Ortega in 1998 and the murder of Aury Sara Marruego at the end of 2001. Although the murder of Ortega technically occurred during the previous period, it can be analysed as an emblematic case which closes and opens two especially complex periods of anti-union violence, due to the different forms in which it manifested itself as well as its direct and forceful expressions.

On Tuesday, October 20, 1998, during a fifteen-day national strike organized by the CUT, Jorge Luis Ortega Garcia was assassinated. At the time, he was Vice-President of the CUT. Ortega was also a worker of the *Electricadora de Bolivar* for nineteen years, as well as the father of two children. He was shot six times in the head and chest, as he was walking into his house in south Bogota. The outstanding union work of Jorge Ortega Garcia had converted him into a target of constant death threats. On September 22 of that year, Ortega and Domingo Tovar, two leaders of the CUT, had denounced

the continuous death threats that they received, and that same day, a group of unidentified people assaulted Jorge's house and attacked and bound his wife. According to the CUT, the police did not arrive at the house until 24 hours after the crime took place. These events took place in the context of the national strike organized by the confederation. During the 21 days of this same strike in 1998, another eight union leaders were assassinated in different regions of the country.

On November 30, 2001, at 8:35 AM while he was in transit from his residence towards the office of the USO in Cartagena, the leader of the USO Aury Sara Marrugo was kidnapped along with his bodyguard Enrique Arellano. They were stopped by several armed men who were riding in three vehicles identified as property of paramilitares who operate in a region under the control of Carlos Castano, the paramilitary leader is accused of being the intellectual author of the crime. According to union sources, Castano had promised to respect the life of the union leader, yet on December 5, 2001, he and his bodyguard were found dead of gunshot wounds with signs of torture. Near the bodies, a list of unionists who were targeted for assassination by the paramilitary group was found.

**Panorama de homicidios de sindicalistas en Colombia  
1999-2002**



## **From tactical changes in the violence to the overvaluing of the statistics (2003-2006)**

As the Pastrana administration drew to a close, the country was faced with an humanitarian crisis of unthinkable proportions, in which growing poverty, unemployment without end, and geographically widespread violence mixed with citizens' discontent and lack of confidence in their political leaders and their false promises of peace and development. In this context, the Presidential candidate Alvaro Uribe won the elections, with his rhetoric of security, firm policies, and a military solution to the war.

Using a discourse based on security and adopting as his image of referente a firm hand, the first Uribe administration was particularly characterized by his "communitarian state" political project. This project was based on the implementation of the "democratic security" policy, which was widely questioned by

national and international human rights organizations, the continuing neoliberal policies that led to a reform of existing labor law which severely affected Colombian workers, the process of demobilization and talks with paramilitary groups, and reforms to the 1991 Constitution to allow the possibility of Presidential re-election.

Without a doubt, four factors significantly marked the union and labor panorama during this period. First of all, the labor law reforms incorporated in Law 789 of December 27, 2002, eliminated job security for workers and produced fat profits for big business owners, instead of promoting job growth. Secondly, the democratic security policies put unionists on the side of enemies of national security. They were observed and treated as possible subversives, which translated into illegal searches, arbitrary deten-

tions, and unfounded judicial processes against high-ranking union leaders. Thirdly, the paramilitary demobilization process along with peace and reconciliation processes were carried out under the supposition that there would be a cease in hostilities, however this was transformed into publicity touting good results on paper, yet the terror continued to unfold tactically. Instead of stopping their anti-union actions, the paramilitary groups began to recreate new strategies to camouflage the same violence. Another factor was the discovery of sinister alliances between state intelligence agents of the DAS and paramilitary groups, with the intention of murdering unionists. The horrific practices shown in the crimes against Colombian union leaders confirmed the denouncements and put into question the

In this period, there was a strategic change in the forms of violence against unionized workers, which can be principally characterized by a decrease in homicides, the accelerated increase in detentions, the increase in violations of the human rights of women unionists, the powerful restrictions to union freedoms, a significant increase in death threats, the increase in crimes committed by State actors, and the use of a variety of strategies to invisibilize the magnitude of the violence. In par-

ticular, the government manipulated the use of statistics and responded inadequately to the recommendations of the international community in regards to the rights violations against unionized workers.

One of the most characteristic aspects of the panorama of violations during this period is the significant drop in the number of murders, in comparison with earlier periods. According to statistics from the ENS human rights database, there was a 50.5% reduction in the number of homicides in 2003 in comparison to 2002, which means that the number of homicides dropped from 186 in 2002 to 94 in 2003. In 2004, the number of homicides is roughly the same; although a slight 2.12% increase is registered, meaning that there were two more murder cases registered in 2004 than in 2003. This tendency continues in 2005 with a 27.08% reduction in homicides in comparison with 2004, equivalent to 26 less cases. However, in 2006, there is a slight 2.8% increase in comparison with the year before, with two additional assassination cases registered. Overall, during this period 332 homicides were committed against unionists, which can be divided into 262 men and 69 women. Of this total number, 88 were union leaders, 239 were rank and file unionists, and 5 were union advisors.



Regarding the presumed actors responsible for the crimes, according to the ENS human rights database, 33 cases were committed by paramilitary groups, nine by state organisms, nine by guerrilla groups, 194 by unidentified armed groups, and 87 cases without any information. During this period, education sector unions affiliated to Fecode continue to be the most affected, with 178 assassinations, representing 53.6% of the total homicides registered during this time. Agricultural sector unions follow, with 36 assassinations, health sector unions with 19, electric sector unions with 18, manufacturing sector unions with 15, and mining sector unions with nine.

In regards to the geography of the homicides, it is important to state that except for the states of Vaupes, Guaviare, Quindio and San Andres, homicides against unionists occurred in all other states. Even though the state of Antioquia continued to lead the list of anti-union assassinations, with 31 murders registered, the participation of this state in the total number of homicides declines significantly in comparison to earlier periods, in which 212 homicides occurred in Antioquia from 1998 – 2002. In the later period, there were only 31 murders, an even more drastic drop if it is compared

with the statistics from the 1995-1998 period, when more than 50% of the total anti-union murders were committed in Antioquia. This fact proves the relationship between territorial disputes and the consolidation of regional paramilitary groups and the assassinations of unionists, since as the paramilitaries install themselves in the territory and exercise control, the number of assassinations drop, and as they invade new territories, the number of murders begin to increase in those places. In this sense, we can observe that during this period, the violence is concentrated in states with strong paramilitary incursions, such as the state of Arauca, which equalled the number of assassinations in Antioquia state in just four years, with a total of 30 assassinations registered. Norte de Santander registered 18 assassinations, Atlantico registered 25, Bolivar 16, Cordoba was the scene of nine murders, Putumayo registered eight, Caldas had the same number, and Caqueta registered six. However, this new geography does not erase or disappear the old territories where the violence has historically been concentrated. Even though there are ups and downs, in general, the violence permaneces over time. For example, the state of Valle del Cauca registered 32 assassinations, an interesting statis-

tic since in the 16 years studied, this is the first time that a state other than Antioquia occupies the top of the list in anti-union murders. In addition to Valle del Cauca, Santander state also registered 18 assassinations and in Cesar state, 14 assassinations were registered.

The reduction in the number of homicides should be interpreted in the general context of a decrease in the number of homicides committed by paramilitary organizations, due to the processes of demobilization, reinsertion and negotiation with these groups. At the same time, the positive variations of other indicators can be explained by the changes attempted by the guerrilla groups in the context of a full blown war with the State. The Army offensive has led the FARC to regroup, which has had some positive repercussions in regards to some human rights indicators. For example, the 77% decrease in kidnappings in 2003 can only be understood in the framework of the changes in the tactics of the guerrilla violence, since during the years 2001-2002, these organizations were responsible for twenty kidnappings of unionists.

During the Uribe administration, the turns and variations in the general panorama of human rights violations against unionists linked to strategy changes of the victimizers with respect to their actions against unionists, and for that reason, the variations should be understood in the context of these tactical maneuvers, in which anti-union violence gets caught up in a complex strategic fabric.

These tactical maneuvers have been conducted with the goal of undermining the credibility of the denouncements of human rights violations, creating an atmosphere of confusion, and making it seem as that the situation of extended and systematic violence has been solved and that government initiatives such as the democratic security policies have been proven to be effective. All of this linked to the fact that these strategies are supported by a broad-based public relations initiative which allows the government to divulge its confused successes as fast as possible, at the same time generating a favorable public opinion and popular legitimacy.

During this period, the paramilitary groups camouflage themselves in the social scenario, mimicking

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1.. On May 4, 2005, different union leaders in the state of Atlantico were threatened with death by a group called MAS (death to unionists) in a pamphlet which stated “Despite the fact that MAS identifies with the struggle that armed groups are waging throughout national

social organizations,<sup>1</sup> to justify their actions with a rhetoric in defense of the interests of the community and the business sector. They have adopted names such as ‘Defenders of Cauca’, ‘citizens committed to development’, ‘MASIN (death to unionists)’, and ‘black eagles’, among others, as a way of simulating their independence from the paramilitary groups, who use these tactics as a distraction to avoid being questioned about or held responsible for these actions.

On the other hand, we can see a systematic increase in the detentions of union leaders beginning at the end of 2002. These acts have become a new variable in the panorama of human rights violations against unionists. It is equally notable that the majority of these detentions exhibit similar characteristics: previous

investigations by agents of the State, arrests on charges of rebellion against the State, presentations in the mass media as if they were guerrilla members, and then their subsequent release due to an absolute lack of evidence against them. In addition, informants and ex-guerrillas are frequently used as “witnesses” in the judicial proceedings against union leaders. For example, there were irregularities in the case against university professor Alfredo de Andreis Correa, and the Human Rights Committee of Arauca has regularly denounced the use of demobilized guerrillas who are members of the network of informants as “witnesses” in these kinds of cases.<sup>2</sup>

The increase in violence against women unionists is another characteristic aspect of this period. In the 2003 human rights report prepared

territory, it does not have any kind of link with them, we act on conviction and knowledge”. Similarly, a group that called itself the “Defensores norte caucanos” threatened with death union leaders in the sugar cane sector with the same arguments, through a pamphlet that was distributed in the states of Cauca and Valle del Cauca.

2. To cite various cases, we can mention the detention of Hernando Hernandez, leader of Fensuagro, detained on June 1, 2007, arraigned and presented to the mass media as a guerrilla; the detention of Javier Dorado Rosero, leader of Simana, also arraigned and presented to the mass media as a guerrilla; the detention of Ricardo Santrich Pernet on May 26, arraigned and presented as a guerrilla; and the denunciations made by various human rights organizations related to the use of demobilized guerrillas as witnesses in the trials against Alfredo Correa in Atlantico state and Luz Perly Cordoba in Arauca state in 2004. After it was determined that there was a lack of evidence to substantiate these detentions, Profesor Alfredo Correa was assassinated and the agricultural sector leader Luz Perly Cordoba was forced to flee to Venezuela, without being exonerated of the charges, despite the lack of evidence.

by the ENS,<sup>3</sup> a worrying disproportional increase in human rights violations against women unionists is revealed, with an almost 500% increase in the number of violations in comparison to 2002. This level of violence continued in 2004, in fact it increased by 20%. However, over the following two years, there were changes and reductions in the total number of violations, yet the violence continued to cause profound impacts. During 2003, there were 160 more violations registered than in 2002, of which 28 were murders of women

unionists. In 2004, this violence grew by 20%, with 41 additional violations in comparison with 2003. In 2005, 152 cases of human rights violations against unionists were registered, of which 15 were murders of female unionists. In 2006, 86 violations were registered, of which ten were murders of female unionists. Although these statistics show relative fluctuations, the powerful impacts and increase in anti-union violence against women workers during this period cannot be denied, a phenomenon which was not observed in earlier periods.

**Comparative table of violations  
1999-2002 y 2003-2006**

Type of violation	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Homicides	80	137	197	186	94	96	70	72
Death threats	679	180	235	198	301	455	260	244
Arbitrary detentions	29	38	12	13	50	79	56	16

Source: ENS human rights database

**Violations to the life, liberty, and personal  
integrity of women unionists, 2001-2006**

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Number of violations	56	41	203	242	154	86

Source: ENS human rights database

3. Al respecto véase *Cuando lo imposible en términos jurídicos se hace posible en términos políticos*, Cuaderno de Derechos Humanos No 14, Escuela Nacional Sindical.

## **Sinister alliances and cynical responses**

Without a doubt, another determining characteristic of this period is the scandalous revelation of links between members of the DAS – involving high-ranking functionaries of this institution – and paramilitary groups, especially in the Caribbean region of Colombia. In 2006, the declarations of the ex-director of information systems of the DAS Rafael Garcia were widely published in the *Semana* and *Cambio* magazines. His testimony revealed plans to exterminate union leaders, orchestrated by paramilitaries and some DAS detectives. According to these denouncements, several unionists were included in a list given by functionaries of the DAS analysis office to paramilitaries.

According to information presented by Garcia to the prosecutor's office, and cross-referencing that information with the statistics from the

ENS human rights database, it can be macabrely proven that each one of the union leaders who appear on the list were killed or forcibly displaced due to constant death threats. Below we briefly reference some of the cases.

- The cadavers of the Fonseca Casiani brothers –Cesar, Rafael, and Ramon– were found severed by a chainsaw in an unmarked grave on September 3, 2003, in the “La Montana” farm in the municipality of Ponedora. The three brothers were unionists affiliated to Sintragricolas, the union of agricultural workers of Atlantico.
- Saul Colpas Castro, President of Sintragricolas in Atlantico state and Secretary of Agricultural Affairs of the CUT Atlantico, was killed by six gunshots in front of his family on July 13, 2001 at 10:30 PM in the village of Puerto

Giraldo in the municipality of Ponedera, Atlantico.

- On October 22, 2002, Victor Jiménez Fruto, Vice-President of Sintragricolas Atlantico, was disappeared in the municipality of Ponedera, Atlantico. This union leader had replaced Saul Colpas Castro, assassinated in 2001. According to union sources, Victor had denounced to the Attorney General's office on July 24, 2002 that he had received death threats on multiple occasions. However, the government did not give him a sufficient level of protection.
- On Friday, September 17, 2004, the university profesor Alfredo Correa de Andreis and his bodyguard Edward Ochoa Martinez were assassinted in the middle of the day in a residencial neighborhood in Barranquilla. Correa was a sociologist and agronomist, ex-rector of the Universidad de Magdalena, member of the Network of Universities for Peace, and Professor at the Universidad del Norte and Universidad de Simon Bolivar. At the moment of his death, he was working on an investigation of displaced people in Bolivar and Atlantico. He had been arrested on June 17, 2004, accused by a reinserted guerrilla of being a commander of the FARC. After being detained for a month, he was freed by the judges due to a lack of evidence. According to denouncements made by his family and his lawyer Antonio Nieto, the professor was a victim of a conspiracy by the DAS, and for that reason he refused to let that institution provide security for him.
- On January 13, 2004, an envelope containing a condolence card was left in the office of the Atlantico branch of Anthoc. The card threatened with death the Board of Directors of this union, and in particular, the names of Gilberto Martinez, member of the national Board of Directors, Carmen Torres, member of the state Board of Directors, Alvaro Marquez, member of the state Board of Directors, Jose Merino, member of the state Board of Directors, and Angel Salas, member of the national Board of Directors, were mentioned. The card was signed by Antonio Uparela Castro and the letters AUC (United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia) also appeared at the bottom.

**Comparative table of violations, 1999-2002 & 2003-2006**

Type of violation	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Homicides	80	137	197	186	94	96	70	72
Death threats	679	180	235	198	301	455	260	244
Arbitrary Detentions	29	38	12	13	50	79	56	16

Source: ENS human rights database

In this complex panorama, the triple assassination of union leaders in Arauca and the assassination of Luciano Romero, leader of Sinaltrainal, have become emblematic and representative cases of this period of violence, marked by the implementation of disorienting strategies, framings of unionists, and the concealment of the violent manifestations.

The facts occurred on August 5, 2003, when three union leaders from Arauca were extrajudicially executed by troops from the Reveis Pizarro Mechanized group of the Colombian Army, according to what the National Human Rights Unit of the Attorney General's Office has been able to establish. The victims were Leonel Goyeneche, Treasurer of the CUT branch in that state, Jorge Eduardo Prieto Chamucero, Presidente of the local Anthoc branch, and Alirio Martinez, President of the Agricultural Workers Union. As part of this same incident, the President of the CUT Arauca, Samuel Morales Florez, and Raquel Castro, member of the Educators Association of Arauca (Asedar), were also detained. These three assas-

inations were marked by a confused panorama of distortions and frame-ups, in which the National Army manipulated and diverted the information about the incident, in order to cloak its involvement. According to statements by the Army, the three union leaders attacked a military unit which was trying to rescue a kidnap victim, and that reason justified the violent response by the military, who also guaranteed that they found weapons and munitions with the unionists. Later, the Vice-Prosecutor General Luis Alberto Santana stated that the unionists did not die in combat as the Army had claimed, and instead they had been assassinated. It is important to mention that, at the time of their death, the union leaders mentioned above had precautionary measures assigned to them by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights.

As another example, Luciano Enrique Romero Molina, leader of Sinaltrainal, was assassinated in the city of Valledupar, Cesar. According to his union, Luciano was last seen alive at approximately 9 PM at night on September 10, 2005. In the morn-

ing of September 11, his body was found bound, tortured, and stabbed to death with 40 knife wounds. The union leader also had precautionary protection measures assigned to him by the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights of the Organization of American States. Luciano was 47 years old, and had four children and a partner, Ledys Mendoza. He had worked for 20 years at the Nestle-Cicolac plant in Valledupar, until he was fired on October 22, 2002, for a supposed work stoppage which was declared illegal by the Social Protection Ministry. In the labor courts of Valledupar, there was a lawsuit pending at the time of his death, filed by Luciano Romero against the companies Nestle de Colombia S.A., Cicolac Ltda., and Dairy Partners America Manufacturing Colombia, demanding that he be reinstated at his job.

Luciano was an outstanding leader of Sinaltrainal and at the time of his death, was also a leader of the Solidarity with Political Prisoners Committee, in which he carried out solidarity and humanitarian actions for detainees.

Due to death threats, he was forced to leave Valledupar on several occasions. In 2004, he spent a number of months in Gijon, Spain in a protectiona and solidarity program, but he had

returned to the country at the beginning of 2005. This case is part of the generalized tendency in this period to question the connections that some murdered leaders had with the union movement, as one of the tactics used by the national government to lower assassination statistics. The government did not report this case as an assassination against a union leader, since at the moment of his murder, Luciano did not have any kind of link to the company at the time of his death.

One of the important cases with regards to the analysis of anti-union violence against women workers is the assassination of the union leader Carmen Eliza Nova on July 15, 2004 in the city of Bucaramanga. She was a union leader who was committed to the workers movement for over 28 years, and had occupied different posts within union Boards of Directors. At the time of her death, she had been elected to the leadership of the Union of Hospital and Clinic Workers of Santander, Sintraclínicas, and she left a five year old daughter orphaned. It is important to mention that after Carmen Eliza's murder, a wave of permanent harassment against union leaders in the city of Bucaramanga was unleashed. In particular, the President of Sintraclínicas, Teresa Baez, received many death threats during this period.



## **The impact of the bullets. Anti-union violence in numbers**

In the 16 years between 1991-2006, 2,245 unionists have been murdered in Colombia. Of this total number of victims, 2,016 have been men and 229 women. If we take into account the 21 years between 1986 and the present moment, 2,515 unionists have been murdered. In general, it is possible to say that on average in Colombia 140 unionists are murdered annually, even though if we take the last 21 years as our reference, this average drops slightly to the equally scandalous statistic of 120 murders per year.

22% of the assassinations during the 1986-2006 period have been committed against union leaders who are members of the Board of Directors of their union organizations, which is equivalent to 484 murdered leaders, with an annual average of 32 assassinations. If we look at the number of murdered leaders during the last

15 years, the statistic is more or less constant, with a few variations, such as the drop in 2005 and the peaks in 2001 and 2002.

The paramilitary groups are presumably responsible for 276 assassinations, which equals 12.7%, with guerrilla groups responsible for 140, or 6.4%, and state agents responsible for 19 cases, or 0.8% of the total. In 39.2% of the cases, there is no information whatsoever, and in 40.2% the actor responsible for the crime was not able to be identified. Of the 446 cases with clear information on the presumed responsible, the paramilitary groups are presumably responsible for 62% of the murders, the guerrillas for 31.3%, the armed forces for 4.2% and common criminals for 2.4%.

In 1996, the greatest number of homicides was registered during the 15 year period, with a record number

of 275 assassinations. The years 1995, with 237 assassinations, 2001 with 196, and 2002 with 186 also registered high numbers of anti-union murders.

In 2005, the least number of assassinations was registered, with 70 unionists murdered, followed by 2006 with 72 assassinations, 1999 with 80 cases registered, and 1991 with murder cases.

In relation to sectors, the unionists of the education sector have been

the most affected by the homicides, with 825 education sector workers assassinated. They are followed by the agricultural sector, with 790 homicides, as well as the manufacturing sector unionists with 92, the mining sector unionists with 97, the electric sector unionists with 85, the public administration sector with 53, and the health care sector with 52 unionists assassinated.

#### **Total number of unionists assassinated 1991-2006**

Year	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06
No.	83	135	196	104	237	275	182	101	80	137	197	186	94	96	70	72

#### **Total number of union leaders assassinated 1991-2006**

Year	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06
No.	12	33	24	36	36	28	39	29	23	33	65	50	38	26	12	12

**Homicides of unionists by state  
January 1, 1991 – December 31, 2005**

State	Number of homicides
Antioquia	1078
Atlántico	49
Amazonas	1
Arauca	64
Bogotá D.C.	37
Bolívar	51
Boyacá	12
Caldas	36
Caquetá	28
Casanare	13
Cauca	32
Cesar	93
Chocó	7
Córdoba	60
Cundinamarca	20
Guajira	12
Guaviare	8
Huila	13
Magdalena	86
Meta	35
Nariño	44
Norte de Santander	63
Putumayo	24
Quindío	6
Risaralda	40
Santander	141
Sucre	25
Tolima	30
Valle	107
Without information	30
Total	2,245

From the table above, we can definitively conclude that without a doubt, Antioquia has been the most dangerous state in Colombia for union activity. Of all the homicides committed against unionized workers throughout national territory, 48% have occurred in Antioquian territory. This is equivalent to 1,078 homicides, a statistic that contunently reveals the difficult situation that Antioquian unions have had to face, especially during the 90s, when the great majority of the crimes were committed. Of the 1,078 assassinations registered, 947, or 89%, occurred in the period 1991 – 2000. Antioquia is distantly followed by other states, with Santander registering 141 assassinations, Valle del Cauca with 107, Cesar with 93, and Magdalena with 86. The rest of the states have statistics that oscilate from 10-50 murders registered.

From this panorama we can also conclude that the anti-union violence expressed in homicides has unfolded in almost the entire national territory. Colombia is divided into 32 states, and in 29 of them assassinations of unionists hae taken place, which is to say, in 91% of the national territory.

Another important consideration with regards to the displacement of

the violence towards other regions can be made if we compare the homicide statistics by year, in which we can see that in some states, the murder statistics are concentrated in the years posterior to 1998. For example, of the 57 homicides registered in the state of Arauca, 41 murders, or 75% occurred from 1998 – 2004. Of the 47 homicides registered in the state of Atlantico, 95% or 41 murders took place during that same period. In the same way, 79% of the homicides registered in the state of Valle del Cauca, or 79 of the 100 murders registered, occurred after 1999. These statistics allow us to corroborate that since approximately 1998, anti-union violence has moved towards different regions of the country, and in particular towards places where territorial disputes by armed actors – and more specifically by paramilitaries – were taking place.

In an inverse sense, we can corroborate that as anti-union violence spread to other regions of the country, the homicides against unionists in Antioquia began to decline. This tendency can be framed in the context of the “pacification” of the state, which is to say, the installation and consolidation of a paramilitary project which dominates the territory.

**Homicides against unionists  
in the state of Antioquia  
1991-2006**

Año	91	92	93	94	95	96	97	98	99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06
Homicidios	31	72	179	41	197	209	97	36	34	51	44	47	12	11	4	10

The table above allows us to analyze the tendencies of the murder statistics in the state of Antioquia during the last 16 years. We can see how the statistics rise from 1991 to 1996 (the year in which the greatest number of murders are committed), and how they

decline from 1997 to 2006. During this latter period, the paramilitary project to pacify Antioquian territory has already achieved its objective, and thus paramilitary action spreads towards other regions.



## **Workers struggles and selective assassinations, a map of bullets and resistance**

### **Final conclusions**

During these 16 years of research, systematization, and analysis of the violations to the rights to life, liberty, and physical integrity of Colombian unionists, and taking in to consideration the patterns and manifestations of the observed violence, with respect to the methods and modes of the carrying out of that violence as well as the presumed victimizers and victims, we have drawn the following considerations.

The majority of violations of the rights of Colombian unionists are connected to labor conflicts, namely protests, work stoppages, collective bargaining processes, and the creation of new unions. Although these violations occurred in the context of the civil war, and were committed, in the majority of the cases, by one of the armed actors in the war, it

should be taken in to account that in Colombia, the war and the armed actors act as parallel, illegal institutions that regulate labor conflicts. For that reason, the anti-union violence can be described as a deliberate, strategic, and systematic behavior which obeys a specific interest, which is the annulment of union activities in the defense and promotion of labor rights. These considerations show that the violations have been committed in moments marked by the increase in number of labor struggles and not as part or consequence of the armed conflict, meaning that the unionists are not casual or collateral victims of the armed conflict. According to Alvaro Delgado Guzman's analysis of labor struggles in Colombia from 1975-2000, it can be said that:

“On observing the phenomenon by region, we can find that the larg-

est number of strikes is concentrated in seven states, in order of importance: Antioquia, Valle del Cauca, Santander, Bogota, Atlantico, Bolivar, and Magdalena. If we compare the participation of these states in the total number of labor conflicts, these regions housed more than half of the strikes during the period (52.3%). A second group, made up of La Guajira, Cundinamarca, Cauca, Cordoba, Narino, Caldas, and Cesar, was the scene of 24% of the conflicts, and the rest of the country contributed just 5%".<sup>1</sup>

It is striking how a map of the homicides against unionists in Colombia exactly coincides with the map of strike actions during the period in consideration. As we stated earlier, more than half of the murders of unionists in the country are concentrated in Antioquia, and likewise, a similar percentage of labor protests have occurred in that state, if we look at the national context. We can observe a similar phenomenon with respect to the states of Valle del Cauca and Santander. Although these territories cannot compare with the state of Antioquia, they both appear on the national scene in second and third place in the number of both labor pro-

tests and murders of unionists. These statements do not imply a direct or exclusive correlation between strikes and homicides, yet there is some kind of undeniable relation between labor conflicts and anti-union violence.

The crisis of the Colombian union movement cannot be explained by the existence of a diffuse and indiscriminate violence, as it is presented in order to shroud the real dimension of the problem. On the contrary, this crisis is marked by systematic, permanent, and selective human rights violations of Colombian workers, in a general context of impunity which proves the fragility of our democracy, and as it has been said, the distance that exists between the country on paper, which respects the fundamental right to association, and the real country, where the rights of unionists are constantly violated.

The humanitarian crisis that the Colombian union movement is experiencing evidences, among other things, the historical incapacity of the State to guarantee the full realization of union freedoms, as well as the delivery of State mediation functions to private agents or illegal armed actors. In addition, this crisis brings to light the vast network of institutions

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1. Álvaro Delgado Guzmán *25 años de luchas sociales*, p. 52-53.



and connections between legal and illegal organizations that carry out the function of regulating labor conflicts through the use of coercion, arms, and terror. To illustrate this tendency, we can point to the alliances between the DAS and paramilitary groups made with the intention of assassinating unionists, or to the assassinations of the three union leaders in Arauca by Army soldiers.

The 1986-1990 period was fundamentally marked by assassinations against union leaders and human rights defenders, in a scenario of murky relations between Army officials, politicians, narcotraffickers, and paramilitaries, in which these sinister anti-union actions have been covered up in a desperate interest to create a confused history without memory. This period is also characterized by the intense violence against agricultural workers in Uraba at the beginning of a regional conflict.

The five year period from 1991 – 1995 was marked by the reconfiguration of the war against the agricultural sector, and specifically against agricultural workers affiliated to Sintrainagro in the banana producing zone of Uraba. 1996 was characterized by the increase in number of assassinations of Colombian workers. The greatest number of homicides

of unionists occurred during this year, as well as the largest number of workers killed in massacres, and the highest number of total human rights violations against Colombian workers. Concretely, during that year, 284 unionists were assassinated throughout the country, with 105 of them killed in massacres committed by armed actors in the banana producing zone of Uraba. It should be repeated that the serious humanitarian crisis that the union movement in the Uraba region suffered during that year was the consequence of confrontations between the FARC, EPL, and AUC.

In 1997, the paramilitary project begins to expand throughout the national territory, and so new areas in dispute by armed actors begin to surface. Along with these new territorial disputes, the geographic spaces in which the human rights of workers are violated also begin to expand. The phenomenon of forced displacement of unionists begins to appear, taking shape as an important instrument in the war strategy implemented by armed actors in order to take over territories in which they can exercise sovereign control.

In the period from 1998-2000, anti-union human rights violations were marked by an increase in intimidations, threats, violations of union

freedoms, and assassinations of high-ranking union leaders. The national state sector strike, which lasted from October 7-26, 1998, left a final balance of nine unionists assassinated, permanent battles with the police and Army, intimidation of the participants in the workers' marches, and an increase in repression.

In the general context of the changes and links between labor conflicts and the war, in 2001, an increase in violence against union leaders can be observed. In that year, the greatest number of homicides against union leaders is reported, with 63 cases. A parallel tendency is the increase in violence by guerrillas against workers, especially in the kidnappings of unionists. We can also observe the use of armed actors by municipal administrations to create repressive contexts that would allow the application of Law 617, which mandated budget cuts for local and state administrations. In addition there was an increase in the violations of the human rights of unionists in the important urban centers of the country, such as Bogota, Cali, Barrancabermeja,

Bucaramanga, and Medellin, as a consequence of the process of urbanization of the armed conflict.

Finally, the chronological link of the chain which corresponds to the 2002-2006 period is characterized by changes in the global logic of relations between the war and labor conflicts. These changes are positive with respect to the decrease in some indicators, but at the same time, there are increases in some now traditional forms of anti-union violence, such as threats, forced displacement, murder attempts, arrests, and harassment.

The information that has been systematized and analyzed during these 21 years<sup>2</sup> allows us to conclude that there has been no structural change in the general panorama of human rights violations against Colombian unionists, since although during this period there has been different modalities and expressions of violence, the crimes continue to occur. This proves that anti-union violence, far from being a momentary event or an expression of the internal armed conflict, strategically transforms it-

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2. It was mentioned earlier that the ENS human rights database has records of the violations to life, liberty and physical integrity since 1991, however in the process of information recovery, we have added cases of homicides from the 1986-1990 period. However, for this period we have not recovered information on other types of violations, thus for this reason the analysis in this text of other types of violations distinct to murders is limited to the 16 year period (1991-2006).

self in accordance with regional and provisional contexts, at the same time maintaining its deliberate interest in quelling union action. In this way, the tactical turns that occurred during the 2002-2006 period are part of the registered tendencies that are evidenced throughout the entire 1986-2002 period. The current variations do not alter the fundamental character of a selective, deliberate, and permanent violence. In addition, these changes do not transform the anti-union culture, which pegs unionized workers as a threat to the country's internal order. For that reason, we insist that in Colombia the armed and unarmed actors have a deliberate and calculated intention of weakening, ending, or restricting union activities.

On the other hand, it is important to state that the general changes in the forms of violence is related to the changes in war strategies, the territorial mobility of the actors in relation to the solution or diminishment of armed territorial disputes, and the implementation of processes aimed to stimulate peace talks and specific agreements between the paramilitaries and the government. During this latest period, the positive variations in some indicators are not the result of the application of governmental policies deliberately oriented to guarantee and protect

the right to union association in the country. Instead, they are a contingent result of the logics of action and the political and strategic calculations of the actors in the armed conflict. The unilateral ceasefire decreed by some sectors of paramilitarism impacted favorably on the reduction of the number of assassinations of unionists.

The mark of the peace – or security – policies presents us with a historical fact, which is the scandalous increase in the repression of the right to union association, the tipification of any union protest as illegal, the harrassment of the State security forces of any kind of protest movement, and a surge in the number of death threats against unionists during crucial moments of labor conflicts. This can be substantiated with the arrests and restrictions to citizen mobilizations during the years 1998 and 1999 (when peace negotiations with the FARC were taking place), as well as the increase in arbitrary detentions, searches, and harrassment by State security forces against unions in the context of the current Uribe administration. The relations of the current government with the unions of Telecom, Bancafe, Ecopetrol, and Seguro Social prove the existence, just as the *El Tiempo* newspaper stated in its May 1, 2005 edition, of a “State that dialogues with

more facility with armed groups than with legitimate workers' organizations, and which tends to criminalize social protest".

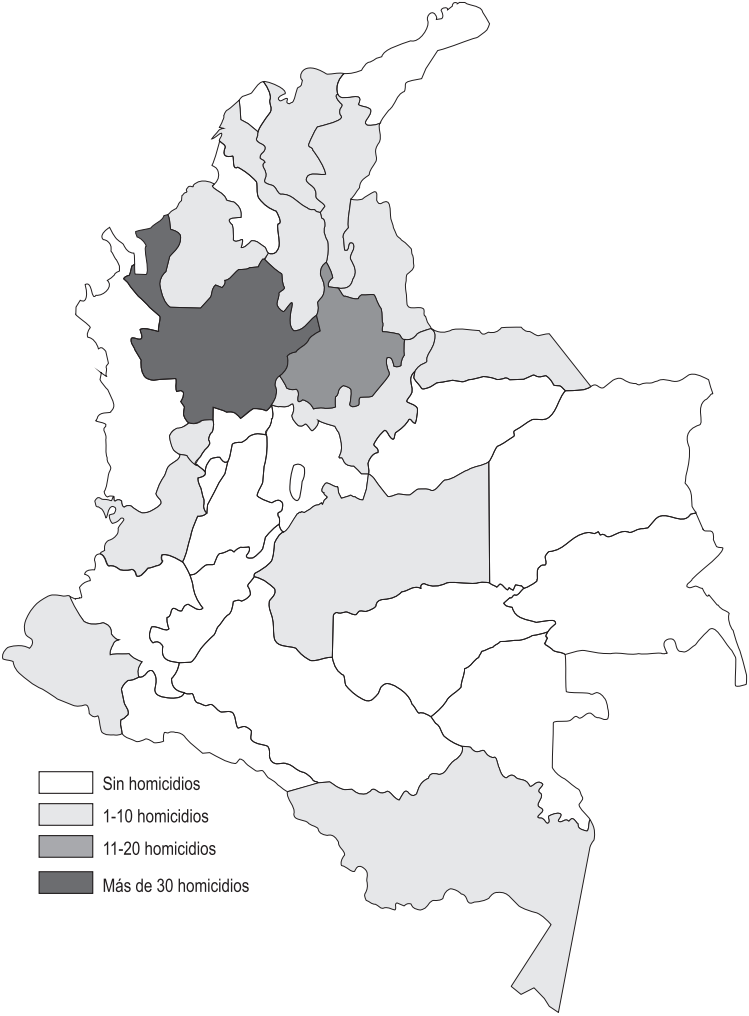
Finally, it is necessary to reaffirm that for the ENS, the sinister relations between DAS functionaries and members of paramilitary groups, as well as any type of link between State agents and irregular armed groups are the cause of great concern. The Colombian government is obliged to investigate and clearly respond to all of the violations in which it is possibly implicated in. It is equally worrying that an institution that is in charge of guaranteeing national security has put itself at the service of illegal groups. Until the national government assumes its political responsibilities and

has offered the necessary explanations with respect to this situation, it is not acceptable from any point of view that the President evades his responsibilities through his customary tactic of sidetracking the charges by making light of them and counter-attacking the people who interrogate him about the facts. The victims of anti-union violence are not just simple statistics that can be manipulated according to government interests. A process to achieve truth, justice, and reparations based on a law that has been highly questioned, and lead by a government which cynically occults and dilutes its responsibilities, is not just unviable, but also from an ethical and political viewpoint, absolutely absurd.

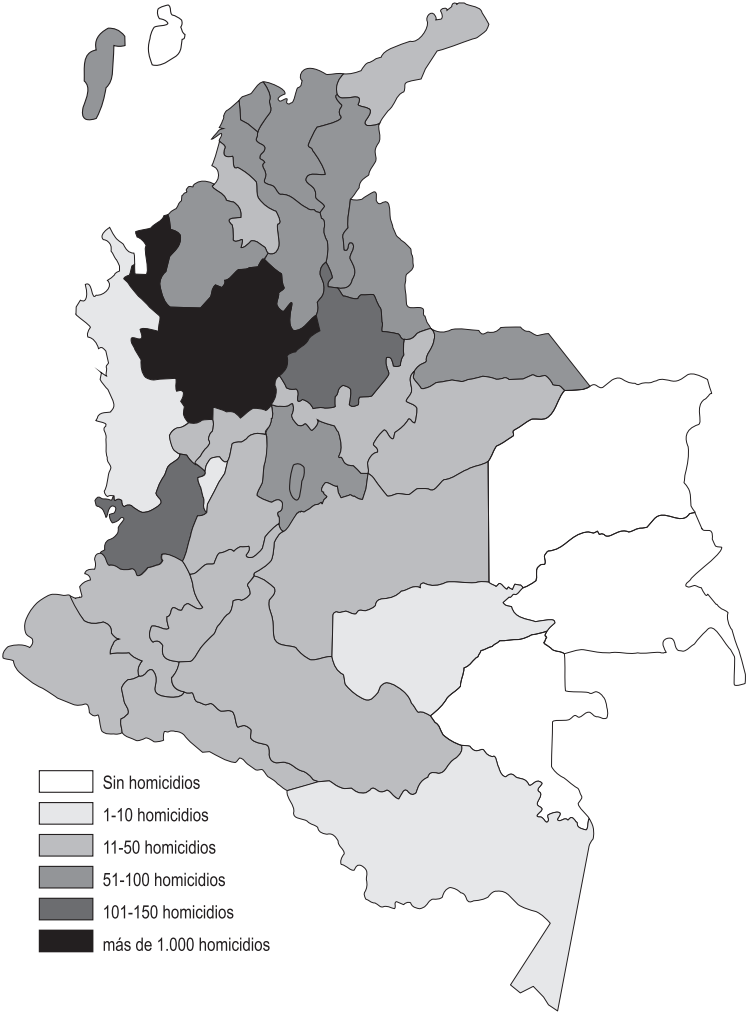
**Panorama de homicidios de sindicalistas en Colombia  
1986**



**Panorama de homicidios de sindicalistas en Colombia  
1991**



**Panorama de homicidios de sindicalistas en Colombia  
1991-2006**







# **The unforgotten names List of the Colombian unionized workers who have been victims of assassinations, 1986-2006<sup>1</sup>**

“We live in a country that forgets its best faces, its best instincts, and life continues in its unrepairable monotony, turning its back on those who give us a reason to be and to keep on living. I know that they will lament your absence, and legitimate tears will wetten the eyes that saw you and knew you. Afterwards, everything will be erased, since this is a land which finds it easy to forget what we most treasure. Life here is turning into a frightening oblivion. This oblivion will arrive, and become a monster that razes everything, and they will forget everything, including your name. I know your death will be useless, and that your heroism will be added to everything else that is now absent”.<sup>2</sup>

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1. The list of homicides that we present in this text is the result of meticulous on-going research of the assassination of Colombian unionists, through communication with unions, review of the national press, press releases, and information from other human rights databases. However, some assassinations are not registered due to the precariousness of the information or lack of knowledge of the events. We apologize for the names that do not appear in the list, and we also apologize for any possible errors that appear in the list. We hope that the readers of this text and the unions will work together with us to advance in the on-going process to dignify the Colombian unionists who have been victims of human rights violations.
  2. Speech of Manuel Mejía Vallejo cited in the book *El olvido que seremos* of Héctor Abad Faciolince, Bogotá, Planeta, 2006 p. 247