

Colombia: Free Huber Ballesteros

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A LabourStart Campaign in partnership with Justice for Colombia, a British NGO that campaigns for human rights, workers' rights and the search for peace with social justice in Colombia. JFC is currently part of an international coalition together with Colombian organizations campaigning for the release of Huber Ballesteros.

Colombia is the most dangerous country in the world to be a trade unionist. According to UN figures almost 3,000 trade unionists have been killed since 1986. In the first six months of 2013 at least 11 trade unionists were killed. State authorities are directly involved in many of these killings. In addition to physical attacks, imprisonment is often used to punish and silence trade unionists. On Sunday 25 August 2013, trade union leader Huber Ballesteros was arrested and imprisoned. Huber is one of Colombia's most recognised trade union leaders. He sits on the Executive Committee of Colombia's largest trade union federation, the CUT, as well as being Vice President of FENSUAGRO Agricultural Workers' Union and National Organiser for the union-backed Patriotic March movement. At the time of his arrest he was organising mass strikes across the country. His arrest is a clear attempt by Colombian authorities to punish him for his trade union activities and has been condemned by the ETUC and the ITUC. His release must be secured to send a clear message to the Colombian authorities that persecuting trade unionists will not be accepted.

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Letter

Dear President Santos,

We, the undersigned, are writing to call for the immediate release from prison of Colombian trade union leader, Huber Ballesteros. Mr Ballesteros was arrested on Sunday 25 August, and accused of "rebellion" and "financing terrorism".

We believe that Mr Ballesteros has been jailed for his political beliefs and his trade union activism rather than for any crime. Mr Ballesteros is an elected member of the CUT National Executive, a leader of the FENSUAGRO agricultural workers' trade union, a leader of the Patriotic March social and political movement, as well as a spokesperson and negotiator in the current wave of strikes affecting Colombia.

We believe that Mr Ballesteros is innocent and that his detention is a severe violation of human rights. That a senior and internationally respected trade unionist such as Mr Ballesteros can be

arrested in the midst of large scale strikes and social protest which have been brutally repressed by state forces shows that your government does not truly respect the right to protest, and does not respect the legitimate right of trade unionists to struggle for improvements to workers' lives.

Furthermore, within the framework of the peace talks currently being held in Havana, violations such as these, which demonstrate persecution of the political opposition, cast doubt on your administration's commitment to democracy and human rights.

We therefore urge you to take the necessary steps to release Mr Ballesteros immediately and cease the criminalisation of social and political protest.

Sincerely,

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