

# COLOMBIA

## TRADE UNIONISTS



## IMPRISONED FOR STANDING UP FOR THEIR RIGHTS



Justice for  
Colombia

[www.justiceforcolombia.org](http://www.justiceforcolombia.org)



# ABOUT COLOMBIA

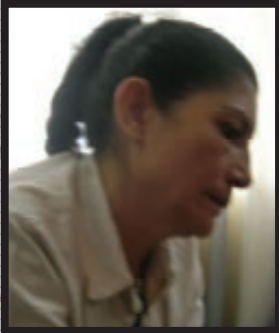
A war has been raging in Colombia for over 50 years between the Colombian Government and leftwing rebel groups. Every year thousands of civilians are killed – the vast majority of them by the Colombian military and rightwing paramilitary death squads that work with them. The situation has also forced millions of people to flee their homes.

Although many people think that the Colombian war is all about drugs, in fact there were no drugs in Colombia when the war began. The roots of the conflict are extreme social and economic inequalities – over 65% of the population live in poverty. People who speak out against the Colombian Government and the war become military targets of the Colombian army, with the Government often using the paramilitaries to carry out their most extreme barbaric acts, including massacres, rapes, torture and disappearances. Amongst those most persecuted are trade unionists:

In the last 15 years over 3,500 trade union members have been murdered in Colombia - an average of more than four each week. Many others have been 'disappeared', falsely imprisoned, threatened, tortured or forced from their homes and jobs.

Virtually nobody has been arrested for the crimes committed against Colombian trade unionists.

## CASE STUDY



Raquel Castro, a teacher and active trade unionist, was detained and imprisoned on August 5th, 2004. In the same army operation, a male colleague was also detained and three other trade unionists were executed by soldiers. Raquel remains in El Buen Pastor Women's Prison and has still not been charged with any crime.

Another colleague in the Buen Pastor Women's Prison is Maria Luisa Nino from the public sector trade union. She describes what happened to her: *"They put me in a communal cell, it was suffocating and very hot and they locked us up at 8pm for the whole night. I felt like dying of rage and indignation. I argued with the guards, I told them to open up the cells, and said how could it be possible that they would not let us go freely to the toilet....I ask for solidarity, and that you assist us in our demand for freedom and human rights."*

# Political Prisoners: Trade Unionists Silenced

Hundreds of Colombian trade unionists are currently being held in jail as political prisoners. The only crime they have committed is to speak out for workers rights. Many of our Colombian trade union colleagues have been held for many years without trial.

Justice for Colombia has launched a campaign to help women trade unionists who face inhumane and unjust treatment in Colombia's jails.

## The Facts:

- Some of our colleagues have been held for up to seven years with no trial and many face up to 40 years in prison for 'rebellion' – a trumped-up charge regularly used against trade unionists and others who oppose Colombian Government policy.
- Upon arrest many 'disappear' for days during which time they are brutally tortured.
- Some have had their children imprisoned with them. The children are not recognised by the prison authorities, meaning that they receive no food allowance. Access to medical care is often denied.
- Prisoners are kept in tiny cells with up to 10 women and their children together.
- For pregnant prisoners, or mothers, the lack of nappies, powdered milk, clothes and other necessities make the conditions even worse.
- Many trade unionists who have been released due to lack of evidence are later murdered by the Colombian army or paramilitaries.

## What Amicus is Doing:

Amicus and Justice for Colombia are working together to help our Colombian colleagues and their children by providing them with practical assistance. The project will supply basic necessities such as nappies, powdered milk, baby clothes, medication, pens and books. The project will also engage lawyers to take on the cases of imprisoned trade unionists.

Amicus is supporting this project at a national level and is encouraging individual members and branches to consider making a donation too.

In addition members can protest directly to the Colombian Government and demand the release of our Colombian trade union colleagues. A sample letter of protest can be found on the Amicus website: [www.amicustheunion.org](http://www.amicustheunion.org)

