

# Colombia: A Murderous "Democracy"

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Colombia is considered the oldest democracy in Latin America. In fact, it is an authoritarian regime that has waged war against the population for over 100 years. How does the population resist? How do workers organize against injustice? Colombia: More than labor struggle!



## The oldest Democracy of Latinamerica?

Historically, the trade union movement achieved significant successes, such as the transfer of private oil production concessions back to the state and the creation of the state oil company Ecopetrol, as a result of an oil workers' strike. Today, union membership is almost equally divided between the private sector (52%) and the public sector (48%). The strongest unions are in the public sector. 69.23% of teachers are union members. Membership is concentrated in the three largest cities. Outside, there is fear of the paramilitary groups. For instance, in the palm oil plantations. In the 1980s and 1990s, unions were so successful there that oil palm producers called for the unions to be purged of "subversive elements." Beginning in 1995, during collective bargaining with the largest producer, paramilitaries escalated their attacks. They murdered 95 union leaders, 15 disappeared, and 50 were violently expelled.



Paramilitaries with close ties to politics, the military, business, and drug trafficking have murdered more than 240,000 people in 50 years. 1973-2018, there were 14,842 attacks on unions, including 3,186 murders. As a result, 65.7% of the labor force is informally employed and only 4.6% is unionized.

## **The murders continue...**

The central role in the struggle against the neoliberal order has been played by peasant, indigenous, Afro, and student movements. Most of them were not trade unionists.

## **The Exception**

An exception is the food workers' union Sinaltrainal, which represents a class-struggle perspective beyond wages and working conditions. Many of its members have been murdered.



In 2019, 279 leading activists of social movements were murdered. 85 percent of the victims had previously been threatened, either individually or as part of a group in which they worked.

On 21.11.2019, trade unions called for a nationwide strike against the government's labor, pension and tax reforms. Surprisingly, 1.5 million people participated in protests. The unions left it at a one-time call. However, students and neighborhood organizations continued the protests. The murder of Dylan Cruz, a young working-class student, by the police, unleashed a wave of protests in almost every city in the country.

Dylan Cruz was one of three people killed. Mobilization now rested on mostly newly formed grassroots, neighborhood organizations. Unions felt compelled to call further protests until the Covid 19 pandemic led to the suspension of most protests. Amid the initially strict curfew, protests arose in poorer neighborhoods to force the government to distribute food. The state responded with repression.



In 2020, 310 people were murdered. Furthermore, and in addition to the deaths caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, there were killings by official forces of people who did not comply with the curfew or who took to the streets to demand government aid.

The year 2020 was one of the worst years for social leaders and human rights defenders in Colombia. 310 people were murdered for political and economic reasons. According to reports, the murder of this population increased by 60% this year, mostly by paramilitary groups and the heirs of paramilitarism, without any real or effective measures taken by the state authorities to protect the safety of the civilian population.



And in 2021, there were 171 people murdered. On April 28, numerous organizations called a nationwide strike against the planned taxation of low incomes. After massive mobilizations, the tax reform was withdrawn.

Nevertheless, the protests lasted five days until they were crushed with great brutality by the state: 83 people were killed by the police and 93 lost an eye to rubber bullets. To this day, these state crimes remain unpunished.



The population independently organized popular tribunals with the participation of the victims, the relatives of the victims, local and national social, political and cultural organizations, national and international figures and jurists to advance a collective process and demand justice, recognition and reparation for the atrocities.