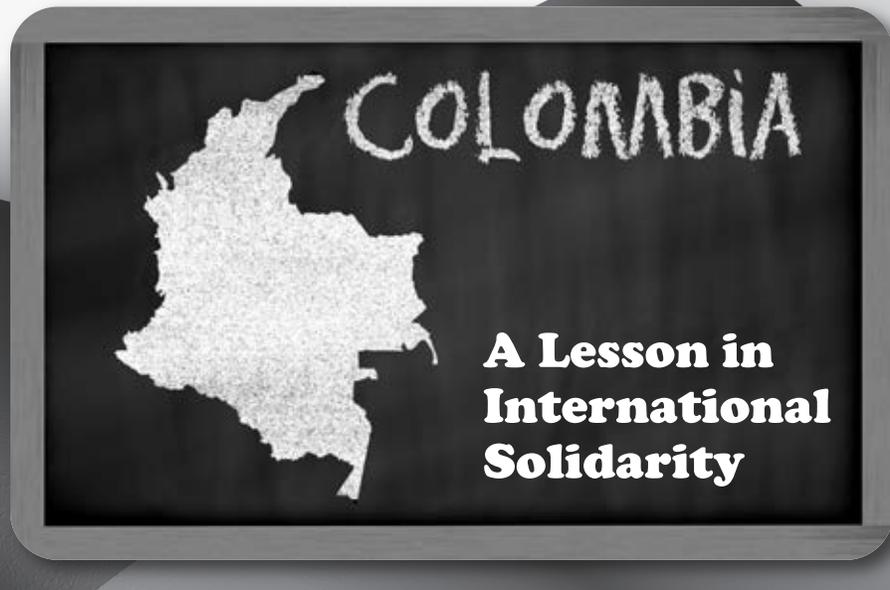


# TEACHERS & HOPE IN



By Janet Nicol

**A** MAN IS FACE DOWN on the ground, clutching a diploma in his outstretched arm. He could be Alejandro Penata, a 35-year-old social studies teacher who taught in a village in Colombia. A year ago Penata was strangled with a wire, his corpse left in a ditch. But the fallen man is, in fact, a statue, part of a monument to remember all the teachers, Penata included, who have been victims of targeted killings in Colombia. The "monument to the fallen teachers" was installed in 2009 at the front entrance of the heavily fortified building of the teachers' union, ADEMACOR (Asociación de Maestros de Córdoba), in Córdoba.

Colombia is, in fact, the most dangerous place in the world to be a union activist — including a teacher union activist. Shockingly, nearly 900 teachers throughout the country have been murdered over the past 25 years. Few of the individuals responsible have been arrested. Teachers continue to be victims of extortion, death threats and murder. That's why a unique and disturbing clause exists in teachers' union contracts. The clause guarantees threatened members with assistance to relocate to another school.

"Colombian teachers have to fight for the right to life," says John Ávila, a secondary-school social-

sciences teacher. "The struggle for the right to live is a categorical imperative." Currently the director of the Centre for Studies and Educational Research (CEID) at the Colombia Federation of Educators (FECODE), he adds: "The current situation is quite complex. The challenge for teachers is to resist, and fight against, neo-liberal policies in education, which have been implemented aggressively in recent decades." These policies, Ávila says, have reduced funding for education and are what's behind the privatization and commercialization of schools, and the restructuring of educational institutions "to function as businesses." The neo-liberal agenda includes standardized curriculum and evaluations, and undermines teachers' working conditions. This agenda also doesn't like people organizing for improved working conditions, and against exploitation by multinational corporations.

"I admire the drive of Colombian teachers and their determination," says Barbara Ryeburn, a teacher in Cranbrook, B.C. and a member of the B.C. Teachers' Federation's International Solidarity Committee. "Given all the dangers, they don't waver. They put up a fight."

Ryeburn was one of four BCTF representatives who saw the fallen-teacher monument last December, when she was part of an international solidarity delegation to Colombia. Escorted through

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Left to Right: BCTF members Joanna Larsen and Rick Guenther; Luis Eduardo Varela, general secretary, FECODE; Larry Kuehn, director of the BCTF's research and technology division; Steve Stewart, Co-Dev's education program director; BCTF member Barbara Ryeburn; Domenic Bellissimo, communications/political action department head for the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF).

RIGHT: "Given all the dangers, they don't waver," says B.C. teacher Barbara Ryeburn, of her Colombian peers. Left to Right: Barbara Ryeburn, Joanna Larson, Irene Lanzinger, in front of the Canadian embassy in Bogotá, the capital of Colombia.



a well-secured gate to the union offices of their colleagues in Córdoba, they were accompanied by Irene Lanzinger, secretary-treasurer of the B.C. Federation of Labour (BCFL); Domenic Bellissimo, department head of communications and political action for the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF); and Steve Stewart, education program director of Co-Development Canada (Co-Dev), a Vancouver-based non-profit group committed to solidarity work in Latin America. The delegation met several teacher union leaders, some who had been travelling with bodyguards supplied by the government since 1991.

A Spanish-rooted elite dominates Colombia, a rigidly socially stratified country of indigenous Indian, African and mixed-race populations. And, despite the nation's democratic institutions, violence has been a part of people's lives for decades, between deadly drug dealing, the violent dispossession of indigenous communities from their land; and anti-union attacks on workers trying to organize.

Colombia human rights lawyer Yessika Hoyos Morales spoke recently, by Skype, to a Co-Development Vancouver workshop, saying, "My hope is human rights are respected; that young people do not lose their fathers and mothers; indigenous people get to stay on their land; and farmers are able to cultivate their land. My hope is that life will dominate over death because, now, in Colombia, it is the opposite."

Her father, trade union leader Jorge Darío Hoyos Franco, was one of those murdered, and whose case remains unsolved. "The simple act of signing a peace agreement doesn't mean these issues are resolved," says Morales. "Crimes have been committed directly

by the government and military and paramilitary." The Colombian government recently entered into peace negotiations with FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), after 40 years of war.

"They just sat us down and told us stories," says Ryeburn of the teachers in Córdoba, "including about the occupation of the university by the paramilitary and how people began disappearing. You would think these teachers would be fleeing, but they aren't. And they weren't afraid to tell us these stories."

Teachers and students are caught in the middle of their country's violence and so the teachers' union has instigated a campaign to push out armed groups from the schools. "They want to ensure schools are 'Zones of Peace,'" says Larry Kuehn, director of the BCTF International Solidarity Committee, and part of the delegation. "The proposal for schools as neutral territory — 'Zones of Peace' — calls not only for keeping the social violence outside the school," he says, "but also to introduce programs on non-violent ways of solving disputes, among adults as well as children."

While the concept is worthy, implementing peaceful zones on school property is an uphill battle. Left-wing guerilla groups, such as FARC, gather members of the community to the schools to encourage their support. Military staff land helicopters on the school grounds and soldiers sleep inside the schools at night. Drug dealers warehouse

## **Teachers are prime targets because they bring ideas of reform and hope to youth**

cocaine in the schools. Paramilitaries — armed groups of men hired by various organizations to serve their interests — target key people within school communities.

Teachers are prime targets of violence because they bring ideas of reform and hope to youth. They also have some economic stability. Their status counts in a country rife with land dispossession and poverty, despite its wealth in oil and minerals. The 30,000 members of the teachers' national union, FECODE, make up the largest block of unionized workers among a national workforce where only four per cent of employees are organized. "We have free trade agreements with Canada and the United States, but there is no protection on basic labour rights, and this is taken advantage of with low pay, and preventing unions from forming," says human rights activist Morales.

Kuehn says Colombia's unions have set up a "Committee for Threatened Teachers" in reaction to the school and community violence. Reflecting the bravery of Colombian teachers, in a recent local union election, five teachers actually *competed* for the position of chair. "The fact that there was a contest for the position of working with threatened teachers tells a story about the determination of teachers to prevail, regardless of the consequences."

The BCTF began their solidarity work with Colombia, in conjunction with the OSSTF and the Centrale des syndicats du Québec (CSQ), following their first fact-finding trip in 2010. "The first visit by delegates to Colombia was aimed at developing links with FECODE," says Kuehn, who was also among those participants, "and getting to understand the complexity of the situation in a country where teacher union leaders have been primary targets of assassinations."

As a result, the three unions provided additional funds for FECODE's "pedagogical circles" program, which had already been running for 30 years. The circles aim to improve teaching through research and reflection on educational practices. Since their second



PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY BARBARA RYEBURN

The monument in memory of murdered Colombian teachers (called "the monument to the fallen teachers") is at the front entrance of the teachers' union, ADEMACOR (Asociación de Maestros de Córdoba), in Córdoba.

## SOME WAYS TO SUPPORT COLOMBIA'S UNIONISTS

**ADOPT A LAWYER:** Canadians are encouraged to support human rights lawyers defending teachers and other Colombians' rights, through the "Adopt a Lawyer" campaign. For more information contact the BCTF International Solidarity Committee. (See [www.bctf.ca](http://www.bctf.ca).)

**DEMAND IMPARTIAL INPUT:** The Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement includes the stipulation that human rights violations be part of the annual report. Canadians can contact MPs and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to express concern that input from impartial sources of information, such as Colombian human rights lawyers, be included in the Free Trade Agreement annual human rights report.

**CHECK YOUR PENSION PLANS:** Canadian trade unionists can look at pension plans to ensure retirement funds are not linked to the actions of companies that are operating in regions where Colombian teachers are victims of extortion, forced exile, death threats, torture and assassination.

**SUPPORT CO-DEV:** Join, contribute to, and support, CoDevelopment Canada in their solidarity work in Colombia and other Latin American countries. (See [www.codev.org](http://www.codev.org).) – J.N.

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trip, the BCTF has expanded its solidarity efforts to include a \$10,000 grant to help Colombians fight for compensation for families of murdered teachers.

Chillingly, Sergio Castro, president of the University of Córdoba's professors' union, told the delegation that the government's "Law of Victim Compensation" will never fully compensate the families of the thousands of disappeared victims because, in many cases, the perpetrators used methods to ensure the bodies could not be recovered. Direct testimony from former members of paramilitaries, now involved in the government's current demilitarization and amnesty process, confirms their horrific uses of torture and murder.

Still, Castro and his colleague, Avelino Madera, secretary of legal affairs for ADEMACOR, are not discouraged, Ryeburn says. The Córdoba union plans to hire five investigators who will gather information from families of victims in Córdoba. Ryeburn and other Canadian delegates learned it will be a costly process because the investigators are unsure of the exact whereabouts of victims, and their families are scattered all over the region. Their union will also hire lawyers to analyse evidence and present cases to court, within a 10-year deadline of the crime's occurrence.

Domingo Ayala, president of ADEMACOR, told Ryeburn and the other delegates that his union doesn't know what the consequences of the investigations will be. He acknowledged the danger involved but said his union has "a moral, ethical and ideological responsibility to the victims and their families."

Families have been stigmatized in cases where perpetrators tampered with their deceased victims by re-dressing them in guerilla clothing, a fraudulent and manipulative action. Some families moved away after a loved one was murdered, ashamed or not wanting to talk about what happened. "First and foremost is acknowledging the truth that these people were not guerrillas," says John Ávila, "but were targeted simply because they chose to defend human rights."

The Canadian group also attended a world-wide gathering of educators, held in the capital of Bogotá, high in the Andes mountains. "We were there to take part in a pedagogical congress sponsored by the Education International Latin America region," Kuehn says. "The teacher unions throughout Latin America are increasing their role in the changes that are taking place, with many countries now breaking from neo-liberal models in a range of economic and social areas, including education."

While some South American countries are rejecting the neo-liberal model, nearly all of Colombia's public services and publicly owned industries have been privatized and their unions attacked. Education is being privatized as well. Small schools are being closed and students are being moved to larger, centralized schools, contracted out by the government to churches and private companies.

"The challenge is to get Canadian teachers to relate to Colombia," says Joanna Larson, president of the Prince Rupert District Teachers' Union in B.C., and also a participant on the trip. "A better society starts in schools," she says. "But who controls education — educators, or government and corporations?" Larson says the push to control and privatize education in Colombia is obviously more violent than in Canada — but the overall policy agendas of conservative forces in both countries are the same.

When it comes to protesting, Colombian teachers "really know how to take to the streets," she also observes. But she says progress is slow. "Making teachers here in Canada more aware is

## **I believe in the pedagogy of hope — hope that things can change**

important. That's partly why the Education International conference was held in Colombia." Larson says the presence and awareness of the international community "keeps teachers safe."

In September 2012, teachers and students in the capital city of Bogotá, as well as the provincial capitals, took to the streets once again in a demonstration to reject President Juan Manuel Santos' neo-liberal agenda to privatize public institutions. The protestors called for a freezing of the process of privatizing education, protection of teachers, and respect for their human rights.

Colombia's national teachers' union also supports the broader peace and land justice movements. Kuehn says he is hopeful current peace negotiations between the Colombian government and FARC, the main guerilla group, begun in October in Norway and Cuba, will produce results.

"Negotiations have happened before and broken down," he says. "But I have seen some assessments that the current president would not have made a public announcement if he didn't think there was a good chance of success."

"However, many people we talked to said that just ending the armed struggle will not settle things

until the extreme inequality and land issues are addressed," Kuehn added. "Four million people are internal exiles because they have been driven from their land in order to allow international (mostly Canadian) mines to be developed and the creation of African palm plantations for biofuel."

Solidarity work continues between the teachers' unions in other ways. Kuehn says John Ávila is scheduled to come to Vancouver in early 2013 to "share information about the work they are doing and the approach they are taking. We are hoping he will be able to visit other organizations supporting the projects with FECODE, as well."

"It was a life-changing 10 days," Joanna Larson says of her time in Colombia. "I had very little knowledge. Many Canadians are like me. We think there's lots of drug violence. It doesn't explain the whole story and it doesn't give an excuse to dismiss all the reasons for violence."

"As teachers, they have a deep understanding, not just about students but about society," Larson says of her Latin American colleagues. "It's given me a deeper sense of responsibility here in Canada. If they can risk their lives, we can risk something here as well."

"I believe in the pedagogy of hope — hope that things can change," says Ávila. "We must make every effort to re-learn the meaning of solidarity." ("Solidarity is not just money," says human rights lawyer Yessika Hoyos Morales. "It is love and commitment. It can never be seen as charity.") Ávila thanks Canadian unions for their solidarity, saying "we have to rebuild social ties and realize, again, that we are a group. We need your minds and hands in the task of weaving this dream [of] another kind of education in a better world. Let us join our hands to fight together."

Janet Nicol is a Vancouver-based freelance writer, high school teacher, and a member of the BCTF. The author would like to thank Yom Shamash for translating her interview with John Ávila. She is donating a portion of her writer's fee to the Colombia Adopt a Lawyer campaign.

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