

Defending Public Services: Canadian and Colombian Workers on the Frontlines

Kelti Cameron,¹ Louise Casselman² and Evert Hoogers³

ABSTRACT: At the beginning of the new century, the international union movement became aware that Colombia was neoliberalism's killing field, making it the most dangerous country in the world to be a unionist. Despite the killings, the courageous resistance of the labour and social movements galvanized the interest of the 4 largest public sector unions in Canada, Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and the National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE). The mutual solidarity initiative that emerged helped Canadian workers understand the global nature of the attacks they are facing, the power of an organized workforce, and the role and potential of unions in society beyond collective bargaining. This initiative has become the most extensive and longest lasting initiative of its kind involving Canadian unions to date.

KEYWORDS: International Labour Solidarity; Public Sector Unions; Anti-Privatization

Introduction

The global struggle to defend public services exposes the devastating impact of capital expansion into every corner of life. Facilitated by neoliberal austerity, deregulation, destruction of unions, and violence against communities,

¹ Kelti Cameron is the International Solidarity Officer at the Canadian Union of Public Employees.

² Louise Casselman is the Social Justice Fund Officer at the Public Service Alliance of Canada

³ Evert Hoogers is a Retired National Union Representative responsible for coordinating International solidarity with the Canadian Union of Postal Workers.

and the environment, the very substance of life is turned into a commodity. Thus, the defense of public services and assets becomes one of the most important fights of this millennium. As capital consolidates power globally, public sector unions are increasingly engaged in solidarity with workers in other countries. Labour internationalism reinforces the urgency for members to understand the attacks they are facing, the collective power of workers, and the social imperative to strengthen collective bargaining while moving beyond it. Workers in Canada have more in common with the working class in other countries than with the owners of wealth in Canada. However, it remains a challenge to connect these messages with workers' local experiences.

It is not unusual for trade unions that engage in international solidarity, to be asked by members “why focus on unions in other countries when we have so many problems here in Canada?” For workers on the frontlines of public sector cuts, and concessions at the bargaining table, this is a fair question reflecting their lived experiences. While public sector unions fight budget cuts, job loss, wage freezes alongside private sector unions, their opposition to privatization further renders them the target of right-wing attacks. The current political context presents new opportunities and challenges for public sector internationalism. What was formerly considered a domestic struggle is now globalized with significant international dimensions.

Consequently, the courageous resistance of the Colombian labour and social movements galvanized the interest of Canada's largest public sector unions: Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC), Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) and National Union of Public and General Employees (NUPGE). The solidarity initiative that emerged was called, *Defending Public Services: Canadian and Colombian Workers on the Frontlines* (hereafter referred to as the *Frontlines Initiative*). It has since become the most extensive and longest lasting initiative of its kind involving Canadian unions to date. At the heart of this initiative is building worker-to-worker solidarity and raising consciousness about the economic and social context in Colombia, by exposing Canadian members to forms of resistance necessitated by the shift toward coercive rather than consensual public sector labour relations under neo-liberalism.

Colombia in the Eye of the Storm

The new century revealed labour's growing awareness that Colombia was neoliberalism's killing field. Global Union Federations such as the Public Services

International (PSI) and UNI Global Union focused on Colombia as reports emerged that it was the most dangerous country in the world to be a trade unionist. In 2000, US President Bill Clinton signed into law *Plan Colombia*, a huge military aid package that was promoted as a counter narcotic offensive, but in reality, became a vehicle for land grabbing and the proliferation of paramilitaries who engaged in violence against activists who dared resist (LAWG).

Plan Colombia also promoted neoliberal policies that opened Colombia's markets and natural resources to foreign investors while cutting government social spending. It called for "tough austerity and adjustment measures, to boost economic activity and recover the historically excellent prestige of Colombia in the international financial markets" (Leech). It called for the privatization of public companies and banks, including the utility companies and the state coal company.

In 2002, the far-right candidate, Alvaro Uribe, was elected President amid allegations he was connected to drug cartels and the paramilitary. He wasted no time implementing his notorious *Democratic Security Policy* aimed at eliminating the guerrilla forces, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Army of National Liberation (ELN). He emboldened the right-wing paramilitaries to act with impunity.

Making the Connection

Following the successful negotiation of the International Postal Fund with Canada Post, CUPW launched a 2002 cross-Canada tour of two leaders from the Colombian Union of Workers of the National Postal Administration (SINTRAPOSTAL). They exchanged information about the onslaught of privatization and the threat to public services in both countries. One of the leaders, Dora Lilia Gomez, subsequently played a key role in the life of the Frontlines Initiative.

Workers in Canada learned that Colombian public sector workers were deprived of their rights to collective bargaining and to strike and faced unjust dismissal and blacklisting. Labour reforms under Uribe were geared toward massively expanding the informal economy on the backs of public sector workers (Schurman & Eaton, 2013).

While in Canada, SINTRAPOSTAL explained the danger of privatization and contracting out in the post office using Associated Work Cooperatives (CTAs), a form of outsourcing aimed at union busting. CTAs were

not bound by the Labour Code because workers were considered independent owners, receiving compensation rather than wages and benefits.

Under Uribe, vibrant unions were being destroyed within the public sector such as healthcare, the ports and the post office. The pressure on unions was so great that many succumbed to creating CTAs to assure their survival, precipitating a spiral of corruption that continues today (Hawkins, 2017). Many SINTRAPOSTAL leaders subsequently accepted the expansion of CTAs. Workers rejecting this capitulation went on to create the Union of Colombian Postal Workers (STPC), with Porfirio Rivas as President and Dora Lilia Gomez as General Secretary.

The struggle of the Colombian postal workers struck a solidarity chord among public sector unions in Canada. CUPW and PSAC, also representing Canada Post employees, began exploring the possibility of embarking on a more ambitious project that would bring together public sector workers in Canada and Colombia at a time when a major international solidarity commitment was needed. Canada's largest union, CUPE, readily joined the initiative.

Frontlines Initiative

The first Frontlines Initiative emerged in 2004 when the three public sector unions, with CLC support, hosted five Colombian union leaders and social activists for a cross-Canada tour. The delegation included representatives from the Central Union of Workers (CUT), the STPC, the Union of Workers for the Ombudsmen's Office (ASDEP), the Public Service Association of Public Comptrollers⁴ (ASDECCOL), and CORPENCA, an environmental organization fighting water privatization.

The visit featured worker-to-worker exchanges, meetings with local and regional councils, workplace visits and public events across Canada with the full support and involvement of national and local leadership of all unions involved. The Canadian organizers adopted an important worker-to-worker perspective: despite major differences in economic development and the nature of political repression, the situation facing unions and workers in both countries revealed major points of convergence.

This message became a cornerstone of the Frontlines Initiative, providing insight into each other's workplace struggles including the fight for

⁴ Comptrollers are financial officers responsible for the fiscal management of public institutions.

equality and against discrimination. The union leaders committed to a plan of action for future collaboration and support, including worker education, leadership capacity building, communications, and solidarity (CUPE, CUPW and PSAC 2004).

The Union Resists the Privatization of the Colombian Postal Service

These commitments were tested in early 2005 when the Uribe Government and the corrupt administration of ADPOSTAL, the state-run post office, launched a furious attack on the postal service and its unionized workforce. All workers were issued notices of “voluntary dismissal” within 24 hours - they either signed or lost their jobs. Those who signed would have to renounce their collective agreement and receive minimal compensation. Many members of the STPC, with full support from their union leadership, refused to sign.

An emergency resolution at the 2005 CUPW Convention called for a solidarity campaign, quickly taken up by the Frontlines unions and the CLC. Pressure from Canadian unions and global federations forced the Colombian government to briefly conduct consultations on the proposed privatization. Nevertheless, in November 2005, the government initiated a process to liquidate the postal service.

The coercion placed on permanent postal workers took a toll. Dora Lilia Gomez, STPC General Secretary received death threats. Other executive members were also threatened. The STPC President, Porfirio Rivas became the prime target of harassment and death threats and was forced into hiding after his home was shot up. The Fédération des travailleurs et travailleuses du Québec (FTQ) ended up bringing him and his family to Quebec where they remain in exile.

In a strong letter to Uribe, also aimed at the Canadian government, the 4 national public sector unions protested the liquidation of the remaining postal services, admonishing the negotiations of a US/Colombia bilateral FTA as behind a long list of liquidations and privatizations that were undermining the delivery of quality public services (Letter to Uribe 2006). This letter bolstered the resolve of workers in resistance and was distributed in workplaces across Colombia.

The continued resistance of the STPC elicited a militarized attack that shut down postal plants in simultaneous police raids across the country. Workers were terrorized. In the Bogota plant, approximately one hundred workers, the majority women, were on the night shift when two hundred heavily armed anti-riot police arrived and surrounded the building with armoured tanks. The workers were forcibly corralled into a nearby soccer field. Dora Lilia Gomez was

working at the time and distributing copies of the support letter from Canadian union leaders. The police harassed and intimidated her and others for carrying “subversive propaganda” which they ripped up in the women’s faces. Once released, Dora Lilia contacted supporters in Canada who immediately circulated information via social media.

The liquidation of ADPOSTAL, and the transfer of lucrative postal contracts to corrupt groups and demobilized paramilitary, triggered a STPC-led campaign in the media, the courts and in the Colombian Congress. With support from Canadian counterparts, the STPC organized a national forum to build solidarity by reintegrating members into union activities. It also reformed its statutes to allow all workers in the public and private mail delivery services to become members of the STPC, including contract and temporary workers.

Broadening the scope of the union to protect all postal workers was a lesson for Canadian workers about how unions can overcome adversity and find new and creative ways to resist. Despite being deprived of the ability to strike, the STPC found new ways to fight back, including new strategies for organizing, building community support and promoting the social dimensions of public postal services.

Worker-to-Worker Solidarity in Colombia

As conditions deteriorated in Colombia, the Frontlines Initiative, now including NUPGE, was increasingly committed to the solidarity work in Colombia. At the request of Colombian counterparts, 2 trade union delegations to Colombia were organized in July and November 2006.⁵ Both visits provided an opportunity for Canadian union members to learn from many examples of collective resistance developed by Colombian unions in the oil and gas, healthcare, municipal and education sectors to keep services public and to stop the sale of state assets to multinational corporations.

Most emblematic was the union of workers in the municipality of Cali, SINTRAEMCALI, that fought for years against the privatization of the city’s telecommunications, water and energy services. SINTRAEMCALI, employed militant and creative methods to draw attention to the importance of public services in opposition to privatization. Their tactics included two occupations of

⁵ Stage one, from June 29 – July 11, 2006, involved 12 activists from CUPE, PSAC, CUPW and BCGEU/NUPGE. Stage two, from November 4 -15, 2006, involved 9 activists from CUPW, PSAC and CUPE.

the municipal administration building, numerous marches, international delegations and a public debate with President Uribe. Their militancy came at a price. The union suffered direct attacks, more than 15 of its members were killed and others were forced into exile or living under constant threat. The summary report of the November 2006 Frontlines Initiative concluded: “Privatization is not just a change in ownership and control of public services, it is a key force in consolidating the power and the privilege of national elites as they restructure their economies to fit within global capitalist interests...Any campaign against privatization requires a politically conscious and motivated union membership...if there is to be any success” (Arsenault, 2006).

On November 9, the delegation participated along with thousands of public and private sector union members in the ‘Great National University March’ protesting the killing of students, the incursions of security forces onto campuses and the defunding and privatization of public education. Simultaneous marches across the country lambasted Uribe’s *educational revolution*, based on privatizing and divesting public institutions, and pushing universities to the brink of collapse (colectivo). The Canadian presence was very encouraging for our Colombian counterparts but even more inspiring to Canadians was the level of cross-sector organizing they had witnessed.

The Frontlines Initiative was a mutually reinforcing effort that over time, through both political and financial support, provided important opportunities for learning, and raised political consciousness and trust amongst the organizations in both countries. Frontlines unions jointly provided political support for critical struggles in Colombia, while the individual unions provided sector specific support for union building, education and organizing programs of counterparts or “partners” in Colombia.

In Canada, sector support strengthened the potential for worker-to-worker solidarity. For example, CUPW was maintaining critical support to the rebuilding efforts of the postal workers. PSAC was supporting the union of human rights advocates for the ombudsman office and other federal public employees who faced abysmal working conditions, particularly in the zones of conflict. CUPE supported NOMADESC, a human rights organization formed by the municipal workers of Cali during their struggle to stop the privatization of public utilities.

During the July 2006 visit, union members were invited by the leadership of the Indigenous movement to meet in La Maria Piendamó in the Valle del Cauca. Considered a political and spiritual centre of convergence for Indigenous

peoples, the territory had suffered a violent government attack during a popular gathering of 15,000 community members. The relationship with Colombian Indigenous peoples, including Afro-descendants, became critical to the Frontlines Initiative and would increasingly influence its future work.

Public Service Unions Reject Free Trade Agreement

Colombia's ability to secure trading partners and foreign investors became impacted by the intense human rights campaigns carried out by unions, human rights organizations and faith-based communities. Most countries were reluctant to ratify trade deals, while the massacres of civilians were making headlines around the world. The Harper government reversed this trend when it announced the start of negotiations for a Canada/Colombia FTA at the end of 2007.

On May 20, 2008, the Frontlines unions issued a press release condemning the trade deal and the labour side agreement allowing for a monetary settlement if the Colombian government violated fundamental labour rights. It stated:

“We agree with others who have stated that the idea of a country simply paying a fine for murder, as if it were paying a parking ticket, is not only non-negotiable but also an unforgivable violation of the principles of all democracies... We urge you again now, in the name of one million Canadian public sector workers, to halt the negotiations until Colombia ceases the abuse of human rights and the murder of trade unionists and civil society leaders (Frontlines, 2008).”

With a trade deal on the horizon, the Frontlines Initiative organized a union leadership visit to Colombia in July 2008. The delegation including the National Presidents of PSAC, CUPE, CUPW and the International Vice-President of NUPGE. During this visit, the leaders examined human and labour rights conditions, and the impact of privatization in the absence of guaranteed rights recognition.

The leaders were shocked to learn that 41 trade unionists had been assassinated in the first six months of 2008. Furthermore, Colombia had no legal framework for collective bargaining in the public service leaving over 95 percent of the public sector workforce without enforceable rights.

The leaders attended the closing session of the Permanent People's Tribunal. After two and a half years of hearings, the Tribunal delivered its final judgement on Colombia's human and labour rights record before a crowd of 2,000 people in Bogota. The tribunal findings confirmed what the Canadian leaders had seen and heard during their visit:

“The government consciously facilitated the creation of a paramilitary system to exert control over the population through massacres, assassinations, threats and harassment. This has allowed massive displacement of people to free up large tracts of land for growing coca to supply the \$6 billion annual cocaine-exporting business. It has also decimated social movements, including the trade union movement (Frontlines, 2008).”

Four months later, Harper signed the Canada/Colombia FTA (CCOFTA) in advance of a federal election. The agreement still had to be ratified by Parliament. Frontlines unions worked closely with civil society to stop its ratification. Reports were published on the delegation findings, challenging the logic of signing an agreement with a government notorious for human and labour rights violations. A comic book, “Top ten reasons why Canada should cancel Harper's “Free Trade” deal with Colombia”, was produced by the CLC and circulated across the country to thousands of union locals. A core group from the trade union, faith-based, and NGO sector was established to educate the public, circulate petitions and letters, and participate in parliamentary hearings. Colombian trade unionists, political leaders, human rights advocates and Indigenous leaders travelled extensively to Canada during that period.

Ratification was stalled for nearly two years, thanks to this collective effort. Due to the acquiescence of the Liberal Party, the implementing legislation for CCOFTA was however passed on June 21, 2010. Canada's ratification opened the dykes leading to the ratification of the US and EU agreements.

Frontlines Returns to Colombia

In 2013 and 2015, the Frontlines Initiative organized two solidarity delegations to Colombia to explore how CCOFTA facilitated Canadian private investment in public services and how this impacted workers. It was imperative to understand the threat of Canadian resource extraction on farmers, Indigenous and Afro-Colombian peoples. These exchanges provided an opportunity to share

the impact of austerity in Canada and the full-frontal attack against the union movement by the Harper government.

A leader from the 2013 delegation described his impressions:

For me, as a Canadian and a trade unionist, it was sobering to learn first-hand of Canada's implication in the oppression and misery of ordinary Colombians. Those memorable face-to-face meetings were an education in themselves. But I came back energized and inspired by the raw courage of our Colombian counterparts. If they can join together and stand up in the face of such unimaginable risk—what is stopping us? (Aylward)

Under President Juan Manuel Santos, elected in 2010, Colombia embarked on a quest for international respectability. In 2012, Santos bowed to international pressure to recognize the right of public sector workers to bargain collectively. Until then, 70% of the public sector labour force had been contracted out. When the Canadian delegation visited in 2013, the national labour centrals were presenting their first sectoral bargaining demands to the Santos government. However, employers continued to ignore collective bargaining.

To prepare for this challenge, the PSAC Social Justice Fund and CoDevelopment Canada partnered with the National Federation of State Employees (FENALTRASE) of Antioquia to develop training for 150 public sector workers to equip them with the knowledge and tools in defense of quality public services and the right to organize and bargain collectively.

In the state of Antioquia, the heart of paramilitarism, Frontlines worked with state workers in the judicial system, tax and customs department, comptrollers and hospital workers whose fight to stop privatization and to gain collective bargaining rights included close relationships with citizens' organizations, Indigenous peoples, displaced communities and the impoverished. The judicial workers' union, one of the strongest unions in the national public service plays a key role in preventing paramilitarism from completely permeating the judicial apparatus, defending an ethical justice system and the right to prosecute perpetrators of crimes against humanity.

In this period, NUPGE developed an important bilateral relationship with the Lawyers Collective José Alvear Restrepo (CCAJAR) that had worked closely with Frontlines since 2006. CCAJAR lawyers defended many seminal cases regarding trade union repression, Indigenous rights and political prisoners. The

STPC has remained an anchor for the Frontlines Initiative and CUPW continues to support the union in its efforts to create new and innovative methods of organizing and maintaining resistance among workers in the postal services.

New Relationships Emerge

In 2012, a key relationship was formed between the water workers' union SINTRACUAVALLE, and CUPE. This proved especially important because Canadian unions were fighting against the entry of multinational water corporations into the public sector as a result of the Canada-EU free trade negotiations. SINTRACUAVALLE had become a key example of how unions, public utilities and communities can work together to create a public-community water project as an alternative to public private partnerships (P3's).

Frontlines also established a more direct relationship with the Union of Petroleum Workers (USO). USO works with displaced and marginal communities to ensure electrical energy at a reasonable price. It provides displaced communities with educational tools, legal support and sent work brigades into the neighbourhoods to hook up electricity and other services. USO is a critical union in the Colombian labour movement as a defender of state control over oil reserves and for organizing efforts in the privatized oil sector controlled by the Canadian company Frontera Energy Corporation, formerly known as Pacific Rubiales. Frontera Energy is notoriously anti-union and fired 2,000 newly organized workers in 2001, while pretending to negotiate a new contract with USO.

The relationship with NOMADESC has become a pillar of Frontlines. As a social action and research network, it emerged out of the municipal workers' privatization struggle and became deeply integrated into the land-based struggles of Indigenous peoples. It has a deep analysis of neoliberal economic development and the linkage between ancestral land rights and the important role of the state. In addition to facilitating entry into Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities, NOMADESC has helped Canadian unions develop linkages with workers in the Pacific port of Buenaventura.

Since 2015, Buenaventura has been included in the Frontlines itinerary because it is an important site of struggle following the signing of multiple trade agreements. To facilitate the shipment of goods to the world markets, the highway from Cali to Buenaventura was expanded and tunnels drilled into the mountains, violently displacing many Afro-Colombian and Indigenous families who lived

along that route. These communities have been an important source of resistance and a real inspiration for Canadian union members.

The port authority in Buenaventura was restructured in 1993 into a P3. Ten thousand unionized workers lost their jobs, while 4,000 were rehired under a CTA or other forms of contracting out, that subjected workers to depressed wages, precarious employment and dangerous working conditions. Horrific violence intensified throughout the territory with the arrival of paramilitaries that accompanied the privatization, presumably to protect drug routes. They murdered and dismembered Afro-Colombian leaders, displaced entire families, stole their lands and established territorial control over much of the city and its surroundings.

These experiences of violence and repression are difficult to connect to union member's experiences in Canada, but when workers genuinely understand the difference between charity vs. solidarity, the experiences can be powerful. Despite the seemingly insurmountable pressure and threat unions and communities face, that they continue to resist is something that often stays with workers when they return home. Important learning takes place when Canadian workers start to connect their experiences with the shared impact of neoliberal globalization on workers, and in turn start to consider the potential of collective power and lessons they can draw from diverse fightback strategies used in the south (i.e. developing strong links between trade unions and oppressed communities).

The Struggle Continues

Today Colombian workers are facing unprecedented levels of precarious work, contracting-out, privatization, informality and flexibilization. These trends are being documented in virtually every sector and industry. Moreover, the right to organize and bargain collectively continues to be threatened. Subcontracting has become an increasingly common means to eschew labour law obligations. Collective pacts which have largely replaced CTAs⁶ are the new tools used to undermine union efforts and are broadly recognized by our Colombian partners and international observers as impediments to form unions and effectively defend the collective rights of members.

⁶ Under the "Colombia Action Plan related to Labor Rights", announced by President Obama and Santos on April 7, 2011, as part of the US imposed Trade Act of 2012, the government of President Santos promised to curb the influence of CTAs.

Labour and workers' rights have worsened since Colombia signed multiple FTAs, including CCOFTA. Foreign direct investment (FDI) has grown by more than 900% between 2005 and 2014. Explicit policies by the last four Colombian governments have provided new guarantees, protections and tax breaks to investors, leading to a large-scale restructuring of Colombia's production in favour of extractive industries, and to the detriment of national industry, public services and decent jobs. As explained by the National Labour School (ENS), oil, coal and gold account for 52.2 percent of FDI, but only 1 percent of jobs.⁷

Mass corruption in the Colombian government threatens the public sector, as does the weak tax base. Unions representing the workers of public comptrollers for the municipalities of Medellin and Antioquia believe that in order to guarantee equitable quality public services, state corruption must be eliminated and transparent fiscal management must be guaranteed through public, arm's length territorial offices of comptrollers.

The Union of Taxation and Excise workers has taken similar concerns to the streets. While it was negotiating a pay increase, it was also demanding that the government invest in the institution to provide better services to the population. It organized information kiosks on the streets to reach the general population about why tax justice is an important part of a post conflict economy to provide social services to the population. The resolve of this union to implant an honest and transparent fiscal system to protect public services is an inspiration to Canadian unions on how to gain the backing of the population as the global tax justice movement is gaining momentum.

The potential role for Colombian public sector unions in rebuilding the labour movement should not be underestimated. Only 6.5% of Colombia's 25 million workers are covered by a collective agreement, but nearly 60% of these agreements are in the public sector. The National Labour School predicts that the future of the Colombian labour movement relies on the ability of public sector unions, including the powerful teachers' federation, FECODE, to advance the collective rights and conditions of the workers. PSAC is currently supporting FENALTRASE to enhance collective bargaining in the public service.

Overwhelming political challenges and contradictions face the Colombian movement today. Since the signing of the Peace Agreement between

⁷ Cedetrabajo, CUT and ENS, 2017, Colombia's joining the OECD: a wrong political decision.

the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) and the Colombian Government, ending 50 years of armed conflict, hundreds of union organizers, human right defenders, Afro-Colombian and Indigenous activists have been murdered at the hands of paramilitary forces. These paramilitary forces, often linked to the country's elites, are murdering and threatening community leaders, and forcing communities off their lands to make way for corporate expansion in the extractive industry, hydro-energy projects and big agri-business, and the expansion of the drug trade. The fragile peace agreement exposes that it is the economic development model favouring foreign investment and privatization that is fueling the violence, not necessarily the armed conflict.

The Pacific port city of Buenaventura is ground zero and where these contradictions are clearly evident. Structural racism and exclusion largely explain why a city that is 90% Afro-Colombian, and that contributes nearly US\$ 2 billion a year to the national budget, suffers from crumbling infrastructure and a lack of safe drinking water, decent schools and basic health services.

In May 2017, 114 social organizations mounted a civic strike that shut down the city for 22 days. A hundred thousand inhabitants were in the streets to protest the lack of public services and government neglect. For 3 weeks they mobilized, held community kitchens, cultural festivals and literally shut down Colombia's most important trade route, the gateway for international free trade. While the strike won important concessions from the government to improve community infrastructure and the collective rights and safety of the inhabitants, threats against community leaders continues to grow exponentially with the plans to expand and modernize the port for oil and mineral exports, many of which are linked to Canadian investments.

In November 2018, the Frontlines initiative with CoDevelopment Canada, Common Frontiers and others invited three leaders from Buenaventura on a cross-Canada speaking tour. The goal was to learn more about the strategies developed, the lessons learned in labour and community alliance building, and to raise the international profile of the Buenaventura Strike Committee.

International Solidarity is Long-Term Work

Since the Canadian and Colombian Frontlines Initiative took shape in 2002, the experience of globalization has changed, as have capitalist relations between nation-states. Canadian and Colombian workers have suffered under the imposition of these changes. The erosion of the public sector, and the promotion of free trade, privatization and global corporate interests are taking place to the

detriment of working people. In Colombia, state sponsored terrorism has been used to implement this neo-liberal agenda. Meanwhile, Canadian workers were subjected to similar neo-conservative policies that undermined public services, accelerated corporate-led trade deals, and attacked workers and union rights.

The solidarity work encompassing the struggle around the ratification of CCOFTA must now pay attention to the way in which Canada is contributing to the expropriation of wealth and growing exploitation of Colombian workers and communities. In recent years, unions in the north have made considerable strides in developing solidarity-based international relations as a necessary way forward. However, it remains challenging to integrate international analysis and solidarity into the difficult domestic fights around collective bargaining, workers' rights and representation in Canada.

Worker-to-worker exchanges have attempted to bridge divides and engage Canadian union members with the social movements and public sector workers who are on the frontlines of resistance in Colombia. This work has contributed over the years to a deeper understanding within unions of the interconnected nature of the global economy and its impact on workers and oppressed communities and has underscored the complicity of the Canadian government in these processes.

The Frontlines Initiative has revealed the enormity of the work ahead for public sector unions. It is paramount for unions to develop a deep and sustained dialogue among members about capitalism and how it has undermined their power. Capital has carried out a determined war for three decades on the very existence of a public realm and on the organizations and workers that have defended it. It is imperative that long-term international solidarity becomes core work. Public sector unions that provide leadership in building an internationalist agenda open new and hopeful avenues for surviving and advancing.

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