

The War on Campuses

Notes from the Trenches of Colombia

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and James Britain

The Colombian government and paramilitary organizations are waging war against the country's academics and students. Attacks by state armed forces and the paramilitary against school teachers, university professors, and university students are by no means new but have reached emergency proportions, with hundreds being threatened, detained, tortured, kidnapped, and killed. For these men and women, speaking out against neoliberal reforms has proved deadly.

Yet, voicing resistance is more important now than ever. Drastic market-oriented reforms are seriously aggravating the already precarious living conditions of millions of people. Seven million Colombians are unable to afford even one meal a day, half of the country's children suffer from hunger, and 65% of the urban and 85% of the rural population live in poverty. Popular peaceful movements struggling against deteriorating living conditions, elites' continuous manipulation of the state, and increasing foreign control over natural resources are now targeted as the "internal enemy." The Government and military are devoting their attention and resources to destroying this "internal enemy."

According to FECODE, the Colombian teachers' union, 83 teachers were murdered in 2002. Since September of 2003, when teachers and academics organized to protest

the neoliberal assault on public education, an average of two educators are murdered every week. Most of the time their stories have been rendered invisible by the dominant free-market, counter-insurgency, and security discourses. The following are some of the members of the teachers' union who have been assassinated by the paramilitary since September 2003: September 15, 2003—Margot Londoño Medina—city of Medellín, Department of Antioquia; September 17, 2003—Renzo Vargas—Villarrica, Department of Tolima; March 28, 2004—Alexander Parra—Chiquinquirá, Department of Boyacá; April 1, 2004—Juan Javier Giraldo—city of Medellín, Department of Antioquia.

University workers have also been victims of the neoliberal model and its military counterpart. In 1990, around 90% of university employees had permanent contracts, by 2003 this figure had dropped to 10% (Dearden, 2003). Between 1985 and 2004, 6 university workers (not including teaching staff) were killed and 4 disappeared.

Those who are committed to critical, transformative education have paid with their lives. Between 1985 and 2004, at least 27 university teaching staff were murdered. On June 17, 2004 Alfredo Correa de Aldreis, a prominent academic—an engineer, sociologist, professor in the University of the North and the Simón Bolívar University, and

Vice Chancellor of the University of the Magdalena, was detained by the Department of Security Administration on a charge of rebellion while he was carrying out a study of forced displacement.

Interestingly, he was released on the basis of lack of evidence, but only three months later on September 17 he was assassinated in the paramilitary-dominated city of Barranquilla.

Anyone who attempts to voice opposition to the government's deadly neoliberal policies and its indiscriminate assault on human rights and civil liberties can easily become a victim of its strategy of terror. Between 1985 and 2004 at least 29 students were killed and 9 disappeared. Although the student movement has been historically a target for violence, in the 1990s repression became acute in response to resistance by the remaining public universities to the complete privatization of higher education.

On September 22, 2003 in the city of Cali, the military and riot police confronted a student protest against the privatization of public services. A student, Jhon Edward Osorio, was hit in the throat and back, dragged by the police, and severely beaten. María del Rosario Perdomo and the student leader Dimas Orejuela were separately dragged into tanks and taken to the headquarters of the secret police. Six other students were detained by riot police.

On September 25, 2004 a rally was held by students and faculty at the Francisco José de Caldas University in Bogotá against the referendum proposed by President Uribe. Once again, riot police and military tanks arrived at the site, beating and injuring many of the participants. Four of the 138 student detainees disappeared.

The Colombian and Western media have actively portrayed universities as dangerous grounds used by the guerrilla to manufacture revolutionaries. Therefore, university students are viewed as a potential threat to the government. However, it is clear that the main threat to peace and security is created and maintained by those in power. Students' and teachers' persistent and courageous resistance against economic exploitation and deprivation, political oppression, and military violence show that hope cannot be destroyed. Their resistance confirms the important role that the education system can play in building an equitable society that respects human rights. ♦

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