

## Speech at UCU Congress 2012

Before doing anything else, I would like to give a warm and brotherly greeting to my colleagues, Sally Hunt, General Secretary of UCU; Terry Hoad, UCU President; to the members of the presiding table, and to the representatives of Justice for Colombia and all of you present today. Exactly one year ago, I regained my freedom, and for me it is very emotional to share this space with you, to be able to personally thank you for all the moral and material support you gave me during that long process. The intense work of solidarity that you carried out, your letters, your messages, your words of strength, your international accompaniment, were decisive in bringing about my freedom.

Those governing Colombia boast about it being one of the countries with the longest established democracy in the Latin American continent. They claim that while in the last 100 years countries such as Argentina, Chile, Uruguay y Bolivia, suffered cruel dictatorships, Colombia lived, more than half a century ago, through a military coup that at the time was qualified as a “coup of opinion” and since then has enjoyed uninterrupted elections, in addition to the 1991 Political Constitution that consecrated a series of mechanisms for the protection of human rights and popular participation; the recognition of cultural and territorial rights for ethnic minorities and the promotion of processes of negotiation with armed movements, that concluded in their demobilisation, allowing some of their leaders to today make up part of the state apparatus.

But, behind that fictitious democracy, is hidden a cruel reality: Colombia has one of the militaries that receives most funding from the United States in the world and has been responsible for the assassinations of thousands of citizens; the UN recognises close to 60,000 forced disappearances in the country; while the number of people forcibly displaced by paramilitary groups- in collaboration with the state- is over 5 million. Since the creation of the CUT trade union confederation in 1986, close to 3,000 trade unionists have been assassinated, and 60% of trade unionists killed in the world are Colombian. All this carried out as part of a strategy of state terror that criminalises any expression of political or social opposition and critical thought.

In addition, Colombia has lived for the last 50 years, through an acute internal conflict that has deep political and social roots, in a country of 47 million inhabitants, where 20 million live under the poverty line and seven million in absolute poverty; where 1% of land owners own more than 60% of productive land in the country. But this reality has been covered up systematically by each government in power, and by the mainstream media. Particularly during the government of former President Alvaro Uribe Vélez, a presidential directive prohibited that in Colombia we talk about the existence of the social armed conflict, with the fallacy that what we are in fact living through is a supposed “terrorist threat” from illegal armed groups. Those of us, who, within academia, the social movements or political opposition have tried to uncover this falsehood, have been accused of being the friends of terrorism.

I am a university teacher and member of ASPU, the Colombian union of university teachers, an organisation with a long tradition of struggle that for decades has defended public universities, academic freedom and the interests of its members. In 2008 I was carrying out post doctorate

studies in Mexico, as a guest of CELA, the Centre for Latin American Studies of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, when I was kidnapped by the Mexican immigration authorities (the INM) and in a joint operation with the Colombian state intelligence, was transferred to Bogota and presented as an important guerrilla leader. The day following my detention, then Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, violating my right to due process and the presumption of innocence, publically accused me of being a dangerous international terrorist.

After a long process plagued with irregularities – where they retroactively legalised an arrest that was clearly arbitrary at the time; where they used illicit evidence such as the supposed computers of defunct FARC commander Raul Reyes; where they took my academic writing published in national and international journals as supposed proof of my being a member of the guerrilla; where they denied me fundamental rights – I was absolved of the charges of “rebellion” and “conspiracy to commit a crime” put against me by the Attorney General’s Office. Finally it became clear that the case against me was fabricated, in order to silence me and threaten those who dare to question the official truths of the Colombian State.

During the two long years of my trial, my status as a public employee was never recognised and I continued to be held in a high security patio, mixed with dangerous drug traffickers, paramilitaries, social criminals, and guerrillas. I wasn’t the only one; under the badly named “Policy of Democratic Security” numerous critical academics human rights defenders and members of the political opposition had false legal cases brought against them as a result of their critical thought. For example, the cases of Lilianny Obando, trade unionist and academic, and the school teacher William Javier Díaz. In some cases, such as that of my colleague and fellow teacher at the National University of Colombia, Fredy Julián Cortés, those accused were pressured to declare themselves guilty of crimes that they never committed, under a perverse legal system that rewards and favours self incrimination.

The situation under President Santos has not changed significantly. The government claims that the numbers of trade unionists being assassinated has gone down, but this is not the case. Since President Santos came to power on 7<sup>th</sup> August 2010, 61 trade unionists have been assassinated. Officially these cases are presented as the result of common crime or are attributed to events outside of the conflict, as a way of misinforming national and international public opinion. Persecution against the opposition has continued. Recently, Omar Alfonso Combita, member of the FECOPDE teachers’ trade union, and Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, member of the FEU, Colombian students’ federation, together with five other colleagues that participated actively in the protests against reforms to higher education were imprisoned, falsely accused of supporting the guerrillas. Others have been subject to violations of their right to employment and expelled from their universities, such as the case of Robert Ferrel Ortega, active member of the ASPU university teachers’ trade union; or stigmatised and threatened, such as our colleague from the National Pedagogical University and recognised intellectual Renán Vega Cantor. This is a way of silencing the legitimate struggle against the privatisation of education in Colombia and of gagging critical thought.

The Santos government claims that in Colombia there are no political prisoners. I can give first hand testimony that this is not true. In the more than 150 prisons in Colombia, there are over 9,000 political prisoners, held in inhumane conditions that violate basic international norms for the treatment of people deprived of their liberty. Severe overcrowding, lack of medical attention, inadequate nutrition, violation of due process, bad treatment and torture are the harsh reality that the Colombian State attempts to cover up. For this reason the authorities repeatedly deny entry to the prisons for international delegations.

In my case, I had the fortune to be able to count on a chain of national and international solidarity; the decided commitment of Justice for Colombia and UCU, whose delegates are present here, was a fundamental factor in ensuring justice was carried out in my situation. For this reason I would like to take this opportunity to express to you all my feelings of gratitude, but at the same time tell you that unfortunately, thousands of political prisoners remain held in prisons across our country. They need your support to guarantee their physical and psychological well-being and to ensure that they receive due process and are returned to freedom.

This leads me to insist in the necessity of uniting our efforts in search of a negotiated political solution to the social armed conflict. This is the desire of our people, who are tired of a war they have had to carry on their shoulders; the FARC guerrillas have expressed in their press releases that they want peace and have made gestures towards that sentiment. President Santos in his speeches has spoken repeatedly of peace, but his actions have gone in the opposite direction. Justice for Colombia, Colombians for Peace, the Patriotic March and other social and political organisations have held up the flag for a political solution to the conflict. I invite you to add your voices to their efforts.

Colombia is clamouring for a peace with social justice, where children can go to school and the armed path of violence is not their only option; where trade unionists can carry out their activities without fear of assassination; where peasant farmers can recuperate the land that was seized from them through violence; where ordinary people can have access to education, health and work; where critical thought can circulate freely. Other peoples of Latin America have demonstrated that this is possible, and we are sure that it will happen, because we are spurred on by the conviction that Another Colombia is Possible.

Thank you.

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