

The world's most dangerous country for trade unionists

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Gideon Long

Business reporter

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The bullet holes are clearly visible in the windscreen of Jesús Cometa's vehicle after the attempt on his life

In July last year, Jesús Cometa was shot at as he was driving through the Cauca Valley in southwest Colombia.

Gunmen on motorbikes pulled up alongside his car and sprayed it with bullets. Mr Cometa escaped uninjured but his bodyguard was hit.

"He still has a bullet lodged in his chest," he says.

Mr Cometa is one of thousands of trade unionists who have been attacked in recent years in Colombia which, by some measurements, is the most dangerous place in the world for organised labour.

The Cauca Valley is home to the country's sugar industry, and he is a local representative of Sintrainagro, Colombia's largest agricultural trade union.

"When you take on these roles in the union, you lose your social life," Mr Cometa says. "You can't just go and hang out in a crowded bar, or on a street corner, because you never know when you might be targeted.

"Your family suffers too because they know that they're also targets."

This is a problem with a long history.

In his ground-breaking novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Colombia's Nobel Prize-winning writer Gabriel García Márquez famously highlighted the massacre of workers on banana plantations in the country in the 1920s.

The Labour Ministry says that since the early 1970s, well over 3,000 trade unionists have been murdered in Colombia.

And even though the nation is more peaceful than it once was, the attacks continue.

"For many years now already, unfortunately, Colombia is the deadliest country in the world for trade unionists and for trade union work," says Luc Triangle, general secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), a global umbrella organization based in Brussels.

Every year the ITUC publishes a survey of the atrocities carried out against trade unionists around the world. Its most recent edition covers the year to the end of March 2024.

It found that in those 12 months, 22 trade unionists were killed for their activism around the world. Eleven of them [were murdered in Colombia](#).

"Generally, these are targeted murders," Mr Triangle says. "They know what they are doing. They know who they want to murder.

"It's not targeting the big bosses of the trade unions or the leaders. They are targeting in small villages people that are doing active trade union work.

"Between 2020 and 2023, we recorded 45 murders in Colombia. In 2022, 29 murders. It's less violent than it once was, but it's still very violent, certainly if you compare it with other countries."



Despite the risk to their person safety, union members still hold protests in Colombia

Why is this happening?

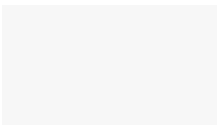
Fabio Arias, the head of Colombia's largest trade union federation, the CUT, says it is all part of Colombia's long and complex civil conflict, which pitted left-wing rebel groups against right-wing paramilitaries, drug traffickers and the Colombian state, and which still rumbles on in some parts of the country.

"The trade union movement has always been linked to the parties of the left and unfortunately the many right-wing governments we've had in Colombia have always claimed that anyone who is a leftist is a guerrilla, a terrorist," Mr Arias says.

"And once you've established that, then people feel justified in attacking them."

He says the attacks on workers are also linked to Colombia's illegal economies, notably the cocaine trade and illegal mining.

"If you look at where these attacks are happening, it's in the departments of Cauca, Nariño, Putumayo, Arauca, Norte de Santander and Caquetá, because that's where the biggest coca plantations are, and where the illegal mining is."





It is not clear who is carrying out these killings and who is ordering them. Some trade unionists blame the private sector, saying businesses, desperate to stifle any attempt by workers to organize, are paying armed groups to carry out these atrocities.

They point to the fact that threats and attacks tend to spike at times when businesses and unions are in wage negotiations.

But as many of the attacks go unpunished, it is difficult to know who exactly is to blame.

"In the Cauca Valley there are so many different armed groups you never really know who's behind the attacks, who's carrying them out, who's ordering them," says Zenón Escobar, another sugar cane worker and local representative of Sintrainagro.

The threats in the Cauca Valley are not limited to the sugar industry.

"In 2007, I was in a van, and guys drew up next to us on a motorbike and asked for me, and then opened fire," recalls Jimmy Núñez, the leader of a union that represents street traders in the regional capital Cali.

"My colleague who was sitting next to me was killed, and my wife was injured. In 2010 they attacked me again, on the road between Cauca and Cali.

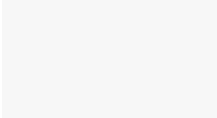
"They opened fire on my car. In 2012 we were attacked in a shopping centre in Cali and one of us was killed. And in 2013 my family had to leave Cauca due to threats.

"In this country social leaders and trade union leaders are killed every day."

The government says it is doing what it can to protect trade unionists. Colombia's president, Gustavo Petro, heads a left-wing administration that is broadly sympathetic to the country's workers.

In 2023, it took a step towards redressing the past by formally recognizing the trade union movement – collectively, and for the first time – as a victim of Colombia's conflict. That gives victims a greater chance of having their cases investigated.

"We consider this as an important step to recognize the violence against trade unionists in Colombia, which was not the case before," says Luc Triangle of the ITUC.



Getty Images

Luc Triangle says union organisers in Colombia are being specifically targeted

He also says foreign companies with operations in Colombia must do more.

"If I were the CEO of a multinational, I would question my activities in Colombia," he says.

"There is a huge responsibility for multinational companies. They cannot have a nice code of conduct, and at the same time remain silent when trade unionists are killed.

"That's not acceptable. Global companies and foreign investors in Colombia must step up."

Additional reporting by Immie Rhodes.