

H.E. Álvaro Gómez Jaramillo
Embassy of Colombia
3 Hans Crescent
London
SW1X 0LN

C.C. Justice for Colombia

12 May 2022

Dear Ambassador,

I am writing on behalf of more than 130,000 members of the University and College Union to express our absolute condemnation of the recent murders of two trade unionists who worked at the University del Valle in Cali.

UCU has long campaigned on issues of trade unionism, human rights and peace in Colombia through our partnership with the campaign organisation Justice for Colombia. Our members have met with Colombian trade unionists, politicians and conflict victims in both Colombia and Britain. We have also lobbied for implementation of the 2016 peace agreement, which is supported by Colombian trade unions, and for an end to attacks on trade unionists and social leaders, as well as accountability for state agents responsible for human rights violations.

The two latest killings demonstrate the violence that makes Colombia the world's most dangerous country for organised labour. On 1 May, Misael Fernando Ávila Solarte of the SINTRAUNICOL trade union for university workers was killed. Two days later, Mauricio Fory Balanta was killed on his way to work. He sat on the human rights committee of the SINTRAEMPUVALLE trade union for University del Valle employees. According to the International Trade Union Confederation, 22 trade unionists were murdered from March 2020 to April 2021.

UCU is deeply concerned that, despite decades of appalling violence, the Colombian authorities remain unable to ensure the safety of trade unionists and social leaders. What's worse, we are aware of persistent smears and attacks on trade unions, including the FECODE teacher union, by certain politicians in the Democratic Centre. We call on the Colombian government to immediately ensure an end to inflammatory discourse that potentially encourages hostility towards trade unionists.

Furthermore, in its annual report on Colombia, released in February, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights referred to it being the second-most unequal country in the Americas. For conditions to genuinely improve for millions of Colombians, trade unions and other social organisations must be permitted to organise democratically and peacefully for a fairer society. The Colombian government can take steps towards this by implementing security mechanisms contained in the 2016 peace agreement, immediately demanding an end to stigmatisation of trade unionists and expanding investigations into both the material assailants and intellectual authors of these attacks.

Ahead of the upcoming presidential election, UCU hopes that outgoing and incoming administrations will cooperate fully in order to address the issues raised herein and to demonstrate a commitment to the safety of Colombian trade unionists. We also ask you to provide information as to the direction of the investigations into the murders of Mr Ávila Solarte and Mr Fory Balanta.

Finally, we offer condolences to the families of our colleagues and to all those who have lost loved ones to violence in Colombia.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jo Grady". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Dr Jo Grady
General Secretary, UCU