“La Escuela: Territorio Neutral en el Conflicto Armado”:
Political Violence against Teachers in Colombia: A Critical Analysis

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**Introduction**

Over recent years there has been a growing awareness of the scale of human rights violations against Colombian trade unionists. According to the Colombian National Trade Union School (ENS) between 1999 and 2005, of the 1174 reported murders of trade unionists throughout the world, 816 were Colombian. What is less well known is that more than half of these (416) were working in the education sector (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

1999-2005 Comparison between world statistics on trade union homicides and Colombia

While these figures are shocking they represent only a partial representation of the nature and scale of violence, death threats, forced disappearances and displacement that the education community in Colombia
continues to endure on a daily basis\textsuperscript{1}. According to FECODE (the major national teacher’s federation) this ongoing repression represents one of the biggest challenges for the trade union organisation (Fecode, 2007).

During a United Nations mission to Colombia in 2003 on the ‘right to education’, Katarina Tomasevski, the then Special Rapporteur for the UN Commission on Human Rights, was presented with a range of detailed information on violence against the education community in Colombia, and was shocked at both the levels of persecution and the failure of the Colombian government to bring to justice the perpetrators of these violations. She noted that:

The realization of the right to education cannot be imagined without the protection of the human, professional, trade union and academic rights and freedoms of teachers. The Special Rapporteur recommends that immediate measures be taken to remedy the absence of their protection in Colombia. (UN Economic and Social Council, 2004: paragraph 41)

In early 2007 FECODE launched a national campaign ‘La Escuela: Territorio Neutral en el Conflicto Armado\textsuperscript{2}’ to try to encourage all of the armed actors in the Colombian conflict to respect international human rights and humanitarian law and keep the education system and the education community out of the armed conflict. This research seeks to analyse the ways in which political violence is affecting teachers, and what ‘opportunities for change’ exist to remedy the absence of protection for education workers in Colombia.

\textsuperscript{1} Due to the highly sensitive nature of the research, and the widely contested views relating to the numbers of human rights violations in Colombia I have been particularly scrupulous in the handling of statistics. The statistics presented here err on the side of caution and are much less than the ‘official’ statistics provided by the main Colombian trade union federation the CUT. This is because the three databases that I have drawn on utilise a very robust level of proof of each alleged human rights violation. In a highly politicised and dangerous environment such as Colombia this documentation is not always available. Therefore it is likely that the figures presented here represent an underestimate of the actual figures for human rights violations against educators specifically, and trade unionists more generally.

\textsuperscript{2} Literally translated “The School: A neutral territory in the armed conflict”.

There are two major aspects that differentiate this chapter from others in the collection. Firstly Colombia is not in a post-conflict situation but remains in the middle of an ongoing armed conflict. This work then tries to explore what strategies and initiatives have been developed during this ongoing conflict situation, and what have been, and might prove to be in the future, successful strategies to limit, reduce and hopefully end these violations against educators. Secondly, rather than focus on ‘opportunities for change’ for Education Ministers, planners and government officials this research focuses on the strategies and opportunities for change that exist for education trade unions’ in Colombia. This is an important distinction because as we will see, by omission or commission, sections of the Colombian state are deeply implicated in the ongoing human rights violations against educators. In this type of situation it is important to listen to victims of this violence, as individuals and institutions, and to work towards solutions from their perspective (Sluka, 2000).

Furthermore, it is also important to recognise that when we talk about ‘opportunities for change’ we have to raise the issue of the competing interest groups within education systems. There are a range of stakeholders within any education system (parents, students, teachers unions, local government, national education ministries, international donors etc) and their interests do not necessarily coincide. Teachers unions in Colombia may have very different interests to the national government and define positive change in very different ways. In recent reports from the World Bank and other International Organisations there is an emerging consensus that poverty and inequality are central obstacles to development (ILO, 2004; UN, 2005) and that in order to overcome this there is a need to strengthen the participation of civil society
movements of the marginalized and excluded if a more equitable development model is to be achieved. In its report on Latin American and the Caribbean the World Bank (2003) suggests that reforms “need to enhance access not only to education and opportunities, but also to political influence and power, thereby correcting a long historical process in the region”. In the 2006 World Development Report, the World Bank (2006) argued that ‘high levels of political inequality can lead to the design of economic institutions and social arrangements that systematically favour the interests of those with more influence’, which they find alarming because ‘economic, political and social inequalities tend to reproduce themselves over time and across generations’. In order to overcome this, strong civil society movements need to be developed to pressure these highly unequal states to reform, and trade unions have historically played a key role in this process.

This chapter then seeks to explore the issue of political violence from the perspective of one key stakeholder in Colombia– teachers unions – and to understand what insights can be drawn from their perspective as individual and institutional victims of ongoing systematic political violence and also as a key organ of civil society that is tasked with both defending its members interests but also public education more generally in a situation of widening inequality and poverty (World Bank, 2002).

**Teachers Unions and Political Violence**

For the purpose of this research I define ‘violence’ as being “a specific form of human interaction in which force produces harm or injury to others to achieve a given purpose” (Franco 2003: 2-3) and ‘political’ violence as “violence which occurs between individuals or groups where the dominant
motivation is based on political difference or the competing desire for political power” (Simpson, Mokwena & Segal, 1991:197).

The nature of this violence can take a range of forms: conflicts between states, between political and military organisations, by political and military organisations against civilian population etc. In instances of intra-state war (such as that occurring in Colombia) these differences have important legal and political ramifications in terms of internationally accepted norms of behaviour during armed conflicts. In a recent study on political violence in Colombia (Gonzalez, Bolivar, Vasquez, 2002), the authors draw on these legal distinctions to differentiate between ‘legitimate’ acts of violence by armed combatants against other armed combatants in contexts of civil war, governed by International Humanitarian Law, and infractions of these laws through the use of political violence against the civilian population. It is to this type of violence against ‘non-combatants’ that this research is focussed, infractions of International Human Rights law which represent war crimes.

Unfortunately, there remains very little research that focuses specifically on political violence directed against the education community\(^3\). However, there has recently been recognition of the scale of the problem, with UNESCO commissioning a new report (O’Malley, 2007). Education International, as the major international federation of education sector trade unions, runs a designated office and webpage on violations of the human and trade union rights of educators which covers a wide range of ongoing violations across the world\(^4\). In this sense, Colombia, as an extreme example

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\(^3\) See Current Issues in Comparative Education, 1999, Vol.2(1) as an exception.
of this type of political violence, may offer insights, experience, and strategies to address political violence that might prove useful elsewhere.

Classical studies of education such as Bowles and Gintis (1976) understand teachers as state functionaries, an essentially conservative force involved in the reproduction of the status quo and social control tasked with reproducing the next generation of compliant workers. On the other hand, teachers have been in the forefront over recent years, in Colombia and elsewhere, in opposing processes of neoliberal educational reform and particularly ‘austerity measures’, ‘privatisation’ and decentralization’ which have become the central ingredients of education reform measures globalised via multilateral institutions, particularly the World Bank (Robertson et al., 2007). This contradictory role of teachers is reflected in ongoing debates over teachers being seen (both by themselves and others) as workers or professionals (Loyo, 2001). As professionals, tasked with socializing the next generation, it has been argued that they should not form trade unions, should not strike, and should not be subjected to national collective union organization that would hamper their professional ‘autonomy’. However, as civil servants they are often faced with low status and low financial compensation which forces them to act collectively to defend their interests (Torres et al, 2006).

While these issues apply to teachers globally, there also appear to be differences between teachers and teachers unions in the North and South. Vongalis (2004) notes a more confrontational attitude of teachers unions in the ‘South’ towards challenging neoliberal educational reform and also of the social role and responsibility of teachers to socialize children into challenging
the status-quo. This perhaps reflects the fact that neoliberal restructuring, while a global phenomenon, has effected North and South in different ways and to different extremes, increasing inequality both within countries, but also between North and South. This also might reflect differences in the histories of ‘Northern’ trade unions and their ‘Southern’ counterparts, particularly in relation to the Cold war and national independence struggles.

Teachers trade unions, as representatives of members largely within the state sector, also have a tendency to be driven both to defend their members’ interests, but also some notion of ‘public education’, which in the current climate of educational reform often forces them into conflict with the state. The difference between public sector and private sector unions has been explored by Johnston:

In contrast to private sector unionism, public worker movements can be expected to identify their interests with some interpretation of public needs. To be sure, whatever notion of public needs they embrace is certain to be shaped by their private interests: not the surrender of private interests to some external public good, but rather the constant compulsion to bring these together. Not only a political struggle, for example, by health care or education workers for more jobs (or fewer layoffs) but also a struggle for health care and for education. Each bloc of workers, in other words, can be expected to identify with and participate in a larger political bloc organised on some terms around, by and for the production (and depending upon the political conjuncture – the reform of production) of the particular public need which defines their vocation and sustains their organisation. (Johnston, 1988: 57).

These twin phenomena of, on the one hand, the drive of public service unions, in this case teachers, to express the interests of the ‘general public’ as well as their specific ‘workplace’ demands tends to politicise the work of teachers unions, which in a climate like Colombia has powerful repercussions.

While it is not my intention to essentialise teachers practices, nor to develop false binaries, these issues may be analytically helpful for exploring
and understanding unionised teachers as collective political actors working both with, against and beyond the state (Harvie, 2006). Beyond this it is also necessary to understand teachers’ activities outside of the school and in the community as members of ‘civil society’, perhaps engaged in a range of different political activities and part of a range of actor projects. Teachers could be for example, trade union activists, members of political organisations, members of community organisations. Indeed, involvement with any of these organisations as ‘social actors’ could have led them into conflict with other ‘social actors’ who seek to utilise the power of political violence to neutralise their activities.

**Methodology**

The fieldwork for this research was carried out in Colombia between April 3rd and June 5th, 2007 in conjunction with the Colombian human rights organisation NOMADESC and in consultation and coordination with Education International, FECODE, the major Colombian Teachers Trade Union and several other trade union and social organisations involved in education in Colombia. During this period I travelled to the major Colombian cities of Cali, Bogota, Medellin, Antioquia, Buenaventura, and several surrounding rural areas and carried out over 50 semi-structured interviews with teacher trade unionists, teachers, human rights workers and social movement and political leaders and met informally with many more. I also gathered a wide range of literature documenting specific cases of human rights violations carried out against educators across Colombia (legal testimonies, urgent actions, press

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5 FECODE, ASPU, SINTRAUNICOL, CINEP, ENS, NOMADESC, Polo Democratico Alternativa, Comision Colombiana de Juristas, SINALTRAINAL
clippings, internal memos and emails) and collected statistical data on human rights violations against educators from three well known and internationally endorsed datasets produced by the Colombian National Trade Union School (ENS), The Colombian Commission of Jurists (CCJ) and the Centre for Research and Popular Education (CINEP). I also gathered a wide range of secondary literature produced by Colombian trade union and human rights organisations which I will draw upon selectively in this chapter. In the next section I will provide some background to the conflict in Colombia in general and to the ways in which the Colombian trade union movement has been affected by political violence.

**Background to Case: Political Violence in Colombia**

In Colombia a low level civil war has been fought out between Marxist inspired guerrilla and state and para-state forces since the early 1960’s. The two largest contemporary guerrilla organisations are the ELN (National Liberation Army) and the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). The roots of this armed confrontation can be traced to conflicts over the highly unequal distribution of wealth and political power in a country bestowed with a wide range of natural and human resources. The country has vast deposits of coal, emeralds, oil, ferronickel, gold, and water; and a fertile agricultural terrain which makes Colombia a leading producer of coffee, flowers, and bananas (Fernandez 2003). Geopolitically and geostrategically it is located at the crossroads both by land and sea to a range of crucial transnational communication links (Petras, 2001).

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6 This chapter is an initial product of the research and it envisaged that the research will be ongoing for several years and entail follow up fieldwork in Colombia, which will include interviews with Colombian government officials.
Despite these strategic advantages conflict and violence has never been far from the surface, and political violence has been a constant feature of state/civil society relations for decades. The bullet and the bomb have been the preferred option for conflict resolution from the assassination of Liberal presidential candidate Gaitan in 1948 which lead to 200,000 deaths, to the systematic elimination of oppositional forces and trade union leaders which continues to date. In 1985 the FARC’s attempts to enter into the electoral political process with the formation of the Union Patriotica (UP) led to widespread bloodshed with over 3000 members murdered by 1994, which once again thwarted the potential for peaceful social reform (Pearce, 1990:281; Reiniciar, 1995). The assassination of Gaitan and the elimination of the UP are just two examples in a long history reflecting the intransigence of the Colombian establishment and their willingness to resort to extreme violence in their struggle to maintain control and block attempts aimed at social reform and land redistribution.

The conflict has been fuelled since the 1980s by the increasingly important role that Colombia occupies in the international drugs trade, a trade that has enriched many of the warring factions and increased broader societal conflict. The situation has also been complicated since the 1990s by government attempts to introduce a wide range of political and economic restructuring and austerity measures which have led to national and regional confrontations between trade unions, social movements and the state over processes of privatisation of national industries and natural resources, and budget cuts in public services such as health and education (Ahumada, 1998, 2001; Castillo, 1998). These multi-dimensional aspects to the conflict in
Colombia (resource wars, drugs, austerity and restructuring) have since the 1980s increased both its intensity and impact. This is reflected in the fact that an estimated 3 million people are now internally displaced, political homicides per annum range from 3000 to 6000 and Colombia has one of the highest murder rates in the world, all in a country with only 45 million people (Duncan, 2006; RET, 2004).

In common with other US allies during the Cold War, Colombia received extensive military support and training in ‘counterinsurgency’, beginning in the wake of the Cuban revolution in 1959. The doctrine of counterinsurgency, and the training manuals upon which they were based, often led to the conscious blurring of the line between combatant and civilian with trade union and social movements systematically targeted by both state and para state forces as potential guerrilla supporters (Stokes, 2004). Within the trade union sector, which is the central focus of this research, leaders and activists appear to have suffered from a systematic policy of assassination, intimidation and persecution carried out mainly by paramilitary organisations (‘death squads’), with well-documented links to the Colombian state (c.f Human Rights, 1996; 2000, 2001), which took the lives of over 2515 between 1986-2006 (Correa Montoya, 2007). It is to these organisations that I will now turn.

**Paramilitarism and the war against trade unionism**

Paramilitary organisations in Colombia were originally set up in the 1960’s, with military support, by large landowners as a means of protection
against guerrilla incursion and to suppress peasant demand for land reform\textsuperscript{7}. They developed in a range of different directions during the 1980s. During the 1990s they became well-funded and well-armed units that prosecuted a terror campaign against leftist insurgents and their alleged ‘social base’, and have complex and conflicting relationships with both drug cartels, particular local elite interests, and sections of the military (Human Rights Watch, 1996; 2000; 2001).

In the 1990’s, the relationship between the state and these paramilitary organisations appears to have been solidified, particularly in Antioquia, by the introduction of laws under the Presidency of Samper to allow for the setting up of armed self-defence organisations known as ‘CONVIVIR’. This policy was vigorously supported by the then Governor of Antioquia, and now President of Colombia, Alvaro Uribe Velez. The CONVIVIR appear to have been taken over by already existing right wing paramilitary groups and drug traffickers and went on to commit widespread human rights violations before being ‘disbanded’ in 1998 (Romero, 2007). They went on to form the illegal AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia) which then became the most powerful national paramilitary organisation and continued committing widespread massacres and human rights violations under the leadership of the notorious AUC commander Carlos Castano (Duncan, 2007).

The debate over the relationship between the Colombian state and paramilitary forces remains controversial in contemporary Colombia, and successive Colombian governments have fiercely denied any direct

\textsuperscript{7} The legislation for allowing the right of the military to arm civilians was provided in Decree 3398 of 1968 (World Bank, 1999:36).
relationship. Despite these protestations there appears to be clear evidence (c.f Human Rights Watch 1996; 2000; 2001) of more direct involvement by Colombian military forces in paramilitary operations or, at the very least, non-interference into those operations. In its third Special Report on Colombia, Inter-American Commission of Human Rights, an organ of the Organisation of American States (1999, paragraph 18), argued that:

The apparent convergence of interests between the paramilitary groups which attack labor unions and official persecution lends credence to allegations that State agents are either directly involved in the violent attacks against labor union members or encourage and support such attacks. It is also suggested that paramilitary groups receive intelligence information necessary to carry out attacks against union member targets from the State's security forces. These allegations are further supported by the fact that the State's security forces have in fact prepared intelligence reports, sometimes made public or used in criminal proceedings in the regional justice system, which identify labor union leaders as guerrilla collaborators based on their union work.

Political violence across Colombia increased markedly during the 1990’s in tandem with this rapid growth of Paramilitarism (World Bank, 1999), and the paramilitaries appear responsible for the overwhelming majority of human rights violations (Human Rights Watch, 2000; 1996). The paramilitaries saw trade unionists, along with social movements and popular organizations, as legitimate military targets. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights annual reports (c.f UNHCHR, 2001, paragraph 178) regularly note that FECODE, the major teachers union had been one of the worst effected by this paramilitary policy.

**Recent Political Developments in Colombia**

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8 According to the Colombian government the numbers of paramilitary members has increased from 93 in 1986 to 8150 in 2000 (Observatory on Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law, 2000).
In 1998, under the Presidency of Andres Pastrana, Colombia became the biggest recipient of US aid via Plan Colombia, a multi-billion dollar, largely military aid package aimed at eliminating the drug trade. After a peace process with the FARC collapsed in 2002 the stage was set for an intensification of the conflict, and in 2002 Alvaro Uribe Velez was elected on a mandate for a hard line military solution to the conflict. Despite increased military operations, one of the central arguments of the Uribe administration has been that since coming to power he has managed to reduce the number of human rights violations against trade unionists. If we look at figure 2 below, which compares both overall assassination of trade unionists (red) and educators (blue) we can indeed see a decline in both categories since 2003, which represents a positive development.

Figure 2
However, for many interviewees the decrease in murders of trade unionists can be attributed to a shift in the nature of the Colombian conflict since President Uribe came to power, rather than its resolution. For many in the trade union movement Uribe’s election is interpreted as the coming to power of the paramilitary project in Colombia. Since then Uribe has negotiated a peace deal with the AUC (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia), the biggest paramilitary grouping, which has led to a process of demobilization under a ‘Justice and Peace Law’.

For the trade union movement this does not represent a ‘peace process’ because they believe that the paramilitaries were never at war with the state – but with the guerillas. Instead they see it as a means to reintegrate – and to an extent ‘rein-in’- the paramilitaries back into the state. Regardless of the rights and wrongs of the demobilization process it does appear to have changed the dynamics of the conflict. Commentators have suggested that there is less need for direct paramilitary violence now as they have effectively taken political control of many parts of the country (Romero, 2007).

This assertion is backed up by an ongoing political scandal in Colombia known as the ‘parapolitica’ which has shown the links between politicians elected in 2001 and paramilitary organizations. The politicians are alleged to have signed ‘el pacto de Rialto’ (the pact of Rialto) a letter committing themselves to the paramilitary project. Since then 14 members of the Colombian Congress, the Chief of the Secret Police, two Departmental Governors, six Mayors and 15 further politicians have all been arrested accused of working with the paramilitaries. Furthermore, there has been a full

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9. The law provides for reduced sentences for paramilitary human rights violations in return for sworn confessions.
parliamentary debate on the alleged links of the current Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Velez to book drug traffickers and paramilitary organizations. As a recent book on the subject has shown (Romero, 2007) the position that that Colombian state was an ‘innocent’ actor caught between two warring factions (paramilitaries and guerillas) is no longer tenable:

The ‘parapolitica’ has demonstrated that the state was not a victim. It appears that an important section of national and regional elites with a decisive presence in the state – as high government functionaries or as members placed there by popular vote – have aligned themselves with paramilitaries and drug traffickers to consolidate their dominance in and outside the state and alter the political contest. In this business, in a very short time, they produced numbers of deaths and disappeared similar or superior to that of the Southern Cone in the 1970s and 1980s and unleashed a tide of displacement of the civilian population much bigger and more painful than any of those governments. (Romero, 2007:10)

Furthermore, while the paramilitaries have consolidated political power, a new paramilitary force ‘Las Aquilas Negras’ (The Black Eagles) has emerged with very similar practices to the previous AUC, which threatens a new upsurge of political violence against trade union and social movements in Colombia.

Having laid out a brief history of recent political violence in Colombia, with a special emphasis on paramilitary violence against trade unionism, I now want to the relationship between education and conflict.

**Education and Conflict in Colombia**

The education system in Colombia has been effected in a range of direct and indirect ways by the ongoing armed conflict. Firstly, as a significant portion of
state spending education budgets have come under pressure from the government’s needs to cut costs to fund the armed conflict. Between 1991-2002 Colombian government military spending more than doubled (from 1.7% of GDP to 3.6%) (SIPRI, 2007). Meanwhile spending on education has been far more erratic, reflecting skewed and changing priorities. Between 1994 and 1996 spending increased from 3.09% of GDP to 5.03%. By 1999 this had dropped to 2.74% in response to fiscal austerity measures (CCJ, 2004). Between 2000 and 2004 this increased from 3.6% to 5.1% (Corpoeducacion, 2006). However, spending on education as a percentage of total government spending decreased from 16.9% to 11.7% between 1999 and 2004 (UNESCO, 2006:316).

Secondly, while progress has been made towards Education For All targets (UNESCO statistics suggest that 87% of both boys and girls are in primary school), of those 13% of out of school children, many are children displaced by the armed conflict. Furthermore, as Tomasevski (2006:201) notes “The scope of exclusion from education is not known because guesstimates of the size, structure and distribution of the population are based on the 1993 census”. According to CODHES (2006), of the estimated 3’832.527 people who have been displaced due to the conflict in Colombia, over half are of school attending age. Thirdly, particularly in rural areas many schools become directly embroiled in the conflict. The Colombian Commission of Jurists (2004:68) note that between 1996 and 2003, 71 schools suffered attacks by guerillas (57%), paramilitaries (15%) and state agents (14%), often during combat between the different groups. In interviews several teachers mentioned how, particularly in rural areas, the

\[\text{net primary enrolment increased from 69% in 1991 to 83% in 2004}\]
military and police would often set up camp close to schools, in clear violation of International Humanitarian Law. Similarly, schools have often been used by the different armed groups as both a place to sleep and also to hold meetings in rural areas for the purpose of political propaganda. Fourthly, students have been forcibly recruited from schools by both guerilla and paramilitary groups. Human Rights Watch (2003) estimate that there are more than 11,000 child soldiers in Colombia. The Colombian military have also used schools as potential terrains for recruiting soldiers and informants. In Arauca, a recent campaign entitled ‘Soldier for a Day’ took children to military barracks where they could dress up in camouflage, learn about helicopters and armed cars (CCJ, 2004:64). Fifthly the CCJ (ibid: 60) estimate that between 1996 and 2003, 186 students were murdered for socio-political reasons. Sixthly, in some areas teaching staff have come under pressure from local paramilitary organizations concerning the content of their classes. In one case documented in a UNICEF sponsored book (Cameron, 2001) a child witness notes:

Not long afterwards my teacher was killed. Some men wearing masks came into the classroom and shot him, right in the middle of our lessons. They didn't give him a chance to say anything. One of the masked men lifted our teacher’s dead body by the back of his shirt and spoke to us. "This man had to die because he was teaching you bad ideas. We can kill all of you as well so don't get any bad ideas if you want to stay alive."

Seventhly, events like the above have a strong psychological effect on both children and teachers experiencing such events and the CCJ (2004) estimates that since 1991 over 1,000 teachers have permanently left their jobs through fear of violence. Finally, and I think particularly important for this study is the relationship between conflict, education and neoliberal restructuring. While neoliberal restructuring within the education sector has
taken place across the World, when it takes place in a zone of conflict it can have particular ramifications, as is the case in Colombia. When teachers and students challenge or resist measures of decentralization, fiscal austerity, privatisation in Colombia – as others have done elsewhere – there is a tendency for the protest to be come highly polarised and for leader and activists to be targeted both by state and paramilitary forces as ‘subversives’. In this sense, the major teachers unions become, during periods of neoliberal restructuring, easy targets of attack and liable to suffer human rights violations.

**Background to Teachers Unions in Colombia**

If state and para-state violence seeks to silence all opposition, and trade unionists are seen as a key concern, then a logical target would be the teaching profession. Due to repression, and the massive growth in the informal sector, trade union representation is very low in Colombia with only 5% of the workforce unionised, largely in the state sector. The majority of state employees are unionised – around 800,000 - and the biggest trade union in the country is FECODE, the national teachers’ federation, with over 250,000 members (the private sector in education is almost completely non-unionised and represents over 50% of secondary school students and around 70% of university students). FECODE also has a strong presence and influence in the CUT (the major national Colombian labour Federation) with many ex-members occupying leadership roles.

FECODE is also a highly disciplined and well-organised trade union with members in every city in Colombia and the capacity to mobilise nationally like no other union in the country. Throughout the 1990’s to date it has
mobilised to oppose educational reforms linked to neoliberal austerity measures, decentralisation and privatisation. Its effectiveness to block decentralisation reforms in the early 1990’s was noted by a World Bank report in 1995:

FECODE is a powerful Union; it is well-financed and its leaders enjoy stability and maintain nationwide control over their organization. They are in constant communication with the Minister and the Vice Minister of Education, and direct contact with national and regional politicians, frequently expressing their views before Congressional committees. (Montenegro, 1995:24)

Since then FECODE has mobilised on several major occasions, particularly in 2001 against changes in educational funding mechanisms (Law 2001), which led to a six week strike, and recently in 2007 over the Colombian Governments national budget plan. In both cases, while not successful in completely blocking the plans they did negotiate significant changes.

In 2004 they also mobilised nationally and in a highly public manner for a ‘No Vote’ in a referendum brought about by the Colombian President to change the Constitution to allow for his re-election. The referendum was won by the opposition, with FECODE credited with a key role in the victory.

FECODE has also pledged open and public support for the new political opposition party formed in 2001, the Polo Democratico Alternativo, which is a fierce critic of the current administration and to the current ‘peace process’ with the paramilitaries, which it sees as giving immunity to persons involved in crimes against humanity. Two ex-Presidents of the FECODE are now members of the Colombian Congress for the PDA. All of these issues may lead teachers unions, and particularly FECODE to be targeted by political violence.
Having laid out a broad panorama on the Colombian conflict, its relationship to education, and the role of teachers unions therein, I now want to turn to the possible explanations as to why teachers are targeted and the move on to review the data on political violence against teachers in Colombia.

**Why are teachers targeted?**

The first and most simple explanation is that educational institutions and the educational community in Colombia become targets of violence merely because they are located in a conflict-ridden society. That schools are destroyed, or teachers killed is an unintentional by-product of the conflict. The second possibility is that educational institutions and particular educational communities may be perceived to be controlled/infiltrated by either state/anti-state organisations and therefore are presented by these forces as being legitimate military targets in an ongoing war. While illegal under International Humanitarian Law these attacks are often justified discursively, by the perpetrators and their supporters, with reference to the need to defend national sovereignty against illegal armed groups and to preserve order or vice-versa to challenge state dominance. Thirdly, the educational community could be targeted not because of alleged direct links to the insurgency, but because teachers represent in most low-income countries normally the biggest sector of the national trade union movement, which often represents one of the strongest oppositional movements to national governments. Therefore, the organised education community– as members of the national trade union movement – are targeted as part of a broader state and para-state offensive against the national trade union movement, not because they
are members of a particular ‘education’ trade union. This might be as part of a general attack on the trade union movement, or occur in particular moments when the national trade union movement is mobilised to resist particular labour reforms, broader political or economic reforms or national bargaining over annual public sector pay claims and conditions, state sector pension reforms etc. Fourthly, the organised educational community might be targeted by state and para-state organisations because of the particular role that they play within local, regional and national educational trade union movements. They might be targeted because they are resisting a particular educational reform, or mobilising the teaching profession over specific alternative educational proposals, or involved in pay and conditions mobilisations and campaigns over the education sector. Fifthly, individuals within the educational community might be targeted because they are involved in legitimate oppositional political movements, as part of their own political activity, and perhaps also linked to their particular education or national trade union movements affiliation to these organisations. Sixthly, members of the educational community might be targeted because of the role that they play within the local community and within local social movements and organisations. This might extend to individuals being targeted because of particular local issues/behaviour deemed to be an obstacle to powerful state and para-state interests or local insurgent forces. This could extend to a range of possible activities: critical teaching activities, local issues etc. What this variety of hypotheses points to is the multiple identities and activities of members of the education community: as individuals, workers, political activists, trade unionists, local leaders, persons of status in the community
which reflect the complexity of the research questions and the difficulty of finding adequate answers to these questions in a field so cloaked in danger, fear, impunity and darkness.

**How are Teachers’ Human Rights Violated?**

As we can see from the graph between 1991 and 2006, 808 educators were assassinated, 2015 received death threats, 21 were tortured, 59 were ‘disappeared’, 1008 were forced to leave their homes and jobs for fear of violence, and 161 were arbitrarily detained\(^\text{12}\). In this section I want to bring these rather abstract statistics to life through exploring the nature, rationales and effects of these human rights violations.

**Table 1.**

Human Rights Violations (selected types) against educators (1991-2006)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Murder</th>
<th>Death Threat</th>
<th>Arbitrary Detention</th>
<th>Disappearance</th>
<th>Forced Displacement</th>
<th>Torture</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>135</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>808</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>1008</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Assassinations**

\(^{12}\) The statistics cover members and advisers of FECODE, SINTRAUNICOL, ASPU, SENA and several smaller education related unions. However, the vast majority of unionised education workers, and victims of human rights violations, are members of FECODE; hence in this chapter my focus is on them.
This type of human rights abuse which violates ‘the right to life’ remains an all too common form of political violence in Colombia more generally, and increasingly teachers represent within the trade union movement a high proportion of its victims (Figure 2). Precisely because of the clandestine nature of counterinsurgency strategy which both the paramilitaries and the Colombian military are implicated in, it is often difficult to know who carried out the murder and why. In Colombia it is estimated the 96% of murders are never solved and remain in impunity (CCJ, 2006). For this reason one can often only speculate on the likely authors (both actual and intellectual) and the motives. For some cases the murder occurs after a series of death threats and thus can be linked to particular organisations. However, in many cases there is no clear evidence. In interviews it was clear that it was the paramilitaries that were seen as the main actor and that while there were a significant number of cases of guerilla movements assassinating educators (particularly the FARC) it appeared less systematic and widespread. The rationale for this type of assassination can span from the need to eliminate particular teachers leaders and/or spread fear to deter others to engage in trade union or social activity. Particularly in rural areas, where the status of the teacher is seen to be higher this may also serve as a general warning to the population.

Death Threats

One of the most common methods of political violence used against

Colombian educators is the death threat. This can take a variety of forms

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13 Counter-insurgency training manuals suggested that extra-judicial assassinations and forced disappearances be carried out discretely to allow for ‘plausible denial’ by the state and military forces. This provided the rationale for the creation of paramilitary organisations and death squads with shadowy links to the state (see McLinlock, 1985; Stoljes, 2004)
ranging from an anonymous telephone call notifying the person that they are on a ‘military’ list, a flyer sent to the trade union headquarters or the school with a list of names of targeted people accompanied by the logo of the particular paramilitary organisation, a tip-off from an anonymous caller warning the person that they are on a list, or a card known in Colombia as a ‘sofragio’ which would normally be sent to people as a form of commiseration after the death of a relative but in this case is sent to the victim pre-announcing their (or sometimes their children or family members) future death.

The type of forms of death threats gathered during the research period include:

- ‘Sofragio’ cards announcing the death of the recipient
- Graffiti with death threats in school buildings and teachers’ residences.
- Ultimatums for teachers to leave their jobs by a defined time
- Direct harassment of teachers in their homes
- Death threats – both by letter and by telephone
- Public announcements/posters declaring teachers as military targets
- Threats from armed groups for teachers not to participate in any trade union activities and to leave their trade union or face the consequences (Cesar, Cauca, Antioquia, Narino among others).

In line with the earlier definition that political violence is ‘purposeful’ I want to suggest that the death threat fulfils a range of specific and general purposes that depend on the particular context of the case. In the most
general sense death threats serve as a warning to both the victim and others surrounding them (family and fellow trade unionists) that trade union activity is a dangerous activity and likely to result in a violent outcome. It also serves to destabilise more generally the trade union organisation, increasing levels of suspicion and fear among members and decreasing the likelihood of more people getting involved in union activities. In specific cases it is likely to be aimed at preventing certain activities by the victim (they might be a witness in a court case, have documentation on corruption, have been witness to a particular activity, or carrying out an activity that the organisation or individual sending the death threat seeks to stop).

Regardless of the specifics of the particular case, once a direct death threat has been received that person’s life is often irreversibly changed in a range of ways: suddenly personal and family security become of paramount concern and all public movement becomes filled with fear and anxiety. This fear of attack begins to effect the victims life forcing them to rethink their activities and responsibilities, often coming under pressure from family to stop their trade union activities. Depending on the perceived severity of the threat the person may choose to leave their city and move either internally or where possible emigrate, with all the consequences that entails. Ultimately, the worst outcome is that the death threat is carried out, but its function is much more than the pre-announcement of imminent death. As we can see from the broader statistics it is the ‘death threat’ that has been a pervasive feature of political violence against educators throughout the period under study and remains today at very high levels.

Forced Displacement
While forced displacement often emerges as a result of the receipt of a direct death threat that is by no means the only cause. The extent of forced displacement in Colombia is so great that often whole communities are forced to flee their homes. In this case teachers as members of rural communities are victim to the same type of human rights violations as others. The phenomenon of mass forced displacement can be attributed to a range of causal factors and is overwhelmingly a rural phenomenon. In the case of the black communities in the Valle de Cauca region it appears to have often resulted from a massacre, the vast majority carried out by right wing paramilitaries (often with Colombian military complicity) which then leads the rest of the village to flee in fear (Interview with Naka Mandinga, 2007). However, the FARC have also been responsible for massacres, particularly in recent years.

Another major cause has been armed confrontation between the Colombian military and the guerrilla, or between the guerrilla and paramilitaries – or both, with similar consequences. In 2003, in the Department of Bolivar an estimated 12,000 children were unable to enter school because 125 schools had been closed due to teachers fleeing the fighting between armed groups (IPS, 2003). Accusations of collaboration with one side or the other, appear to have also led to mass displacements. Teachers have been caught up in all of these types of displacement. In several interviews it was noted that teachers in rural areas become particularly prone to displacement through accusation of collaborating with one armed actor or another. In many rural areas schools are often the only possible public meeting place, and thus if an armed group enters the area the
school is often used as a meeting place to spread their particular political propaganda. Later, educators become accused of collaborating with that particular force when a different armed group enters the village.

There are a number of explanations for forced displacement. Those incidents of mass forced displacement, particularly linked to massacres, have been overwhelmingly caused by right-wing paramilitaries and appear to be linked to interests relating to land control and ownership, drug routes, and natural resource control (Romero, 2007). Much of the forced displacement has occurred in areas of rich natural resources, and often where the most vulnerable and poor communities lived (indigenous community, black communities). In these processes displacement is the intentional outcome of the terror tactics and seeks to secure land rights. In cases where there is armed confrontation between the different factions then the displacement often appears as an unintended outcome of that conflict.

*Arbitrary Detention*

Since the election of Alvaro Uribe Velez, and the expansion of military operations, there has been an increase in the militarization of certain areas of the country and a linked increase in mass arrests and arbitrary detention. Teachers have not been immune to this process. In the region of Arauca many teachers have been arbitrarily detained and accused of ‘rebellion’, which carries a potential life sentence. Often cases are dropped for lack of evidence, but by then teachers have been stigmatised as members of the insurgency, often lost their jobs and sometimes their homes and family. One well-publicised case was that of Samuel Morales and Raquel Castro who on the 4th August 2004 were witnesses to the murder of three trade unionists by
the Colombian military. After initially claiming that the murdered trade unionists were guerrillas and were killed in a shoot-out, the army was eventually forced to admit that it was responsible for the unprovoked murder of all three. Samuel and Raquel were both active teachers and trade unionists and were later charged with rebellion. Their case was taken up by Amnesty International as prisoners of conscience. Samuel was eventually released on the 28th of April 2007, and Raquel Castro on August 2nd, 2007, having both served nearly three years in prison. Neither can return to their jobs, both have been displaced from their hometowns, and continue to live in fear of further ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ persecution.

While there may well be some trade union and social leaders that are members of the armed guerilla groups this does not appear to be the case for the vast majority of teachers arbitrarily detained. So what then is the rationale for this type of violation? Samuel Morales, on the day after his release speculated on this from his new home in Bogotá. He noted that the arbitrary detention displaced the activist from their roots, often cost them their job, on occasions their family, and therefore for the state served as an effective mechanisms to neutralize social and trade union activists, without incurring the wrath of the international community produced by assassination, disappearances and torture (interview with Samuel Morales, April, 2007).

*Forced Disappearances*

‘Disappearances’ became synonymous with the dark years of the military dictatorships in the Southern Cone (Chile, Argentina, Paraguay) and form part of the core techniques of counterinsurgency policy (McClintock, 1985). In Colombia ASFAADES (the national committee for the families of the
disappeared) estimates that over 7000 people were disappeared between 1982 and 2004 (ASFADDES, 2005\textsuperscript{14}), the majority of whom were active in trade unions, student organisations and social movements. They also attribute the majority of disappearances to paramilitary organisations and/or state functionaries.

According to ENS, between 1991 and 2006, 59 educators were disappeared, never to be seen again. One of the most high profile disappearances in the education sector was that of Gilberto Agudelo Martínez, the President of SINTRAUNCOL (Colombian University Workers Union). He was disappeared on the 6\textsuperscript{th} April, 2000 with paramilitaries later claiming responsibility (Amnesty International, 2001). Five years later, on October 13\textsuperscript{th}, 2005, after information was given by an AUC (major paramilitary organisation) informant, his mutilated body was exhumed. The rationale for disappearances encompasses many of those explained earlier but has an extra impact in the fear and distress that it can cause family members not knowing where their loved one’s are, or what has happened to them.

**Patterns of Violence against Educators**

While political violence against teachers in Colombia is both widespread and has a long history it is not evenly distributed either temporally or geographically. If we explore the figures on political assassination what we can see in figure 3 is a remarkable concentration in Antioquia, where 247 assassinations against educators took place (31% of total). Following on from that there are four further departments with significant numbers of

\textsuperscript{14} Available at http://www.asfjasdes.org.co/ftdocumentacion.htm.
assassination victims: Cordoba (6%), Arauca (4%), Norte de Santander (4%), Valle (4%) and Narino (4%). Central to an explanation of these patterns is to understand the spread and trajectory of Paramilitarism in the 1990s (Duncan, 2007, Romero, 2007). For some interviewees Antioquia during the 1990s was seen as the laboratory for the paramilitary experiment which then spread outwards to other departments (O’Loingsigh, 2004; 2007).

**Figure 3**

**Distribution of Homicides Against Colombian Education Trade Unionists 1991-2006**

In Antioquia the ‘convivir’ law of 1994 was enthusiastically supported by the then Governor of Antioquia, Alvaro Uribe Velez. During this period Paramilitarism moved from regional private armies for landed elites concerned with guerrilla attacks to a national structure with close ties to the military. If we look at the statistics on human rights violations against educators from 1994 onwards in Antioquia we can clearly see the sharp rise in assassinations, forced displacement and death threats until 1996.

**Figure 4**
More generally, in Figure 4 we can see two sharp rises in the number of assassinations carried out against education sector trade unionists. The first coincides with the period of the CONVIVIR – 1994-7, and the second from 1999-2003 onwards. The second period coincides with the implementation of Plan Colombia, the multi-billion dollar, largely military aid package provided by the US government to fight the war on drugs, the failed ‘peace process’ with the FARC, a series of privatisation processes of state-owned enterprises and the expansion of the geographical reach of paramilitarism in the country.

One further point is necessary on the downward trend in the assassination of educators since 2001, presented in Figure 5. This period is important because it coincides with the election of Alvaro Uribe Velez as President of Colombia. If we look at the levels of assassinations of educators they do appear to have dropped from a peak in 2002 of 94 steadily downwards to 35 in 2006. While 49, 46, 44 and 35 as yearly numbers of assassinated educators is still
shockingly high it does represent an impressive reduction, and the question of why is important to this research. However, we need to treat these declines with caution as is highlighted by Figure 6 which takes a sample of the most common human rights violations since 2001. This demonstrates that in both the category of death threats and arbitrary detention the downward trend appears to be far less certain with death threats peaking in 2004 and then descending steadily and arbitrary detention steadily rising between 2001-2005 before descending in 2006.

**Figure 5**

![1991-2006 Murder of Educators Affiliated to Trade Unions in Colombia](chart)

**Figure 6**

![Chart](chart)
Having laid out a broad panorama of the nature and different types of human rights violations that education sector trade unionists are subjected to I now want to explore what strategies have been developed over the years to address/mitigate or manage the situation.

**What strategies have been developed to mitigate and manage the violence?**

In response to the violence a series of initiatives have developed to address teacher insecurity ranging from human rights training to the provision of special protection measures for threatened teachers and in this section I will provide an outline some of these major initiatives.

Due to sustained pressure from FECODE on the government to address the plight of threatened and displaced teachers there have been a series of legal provisions regulating the situation. Decree 1707 of 1989, Decree 1645 of 1992, and Decree 3222 of 2003 allow threatened teachers to be relocated to different parts of the
administrative department or if necessary to another department, without loss of earnings. Through these legal procedures Special Committees were set up in each Department to deal with situations of death threats and displacement of teachers. The special committees are made of representatives from the Ministry of Education, the Departmental Educational Authority, FECODE and the Regional Public Prosecutor or representative thereof. The committee is tasked with evaluating the level of risk of each individual case and providing temporary and permanent solutions to the situation, in accordance – as much as possible - with the wishes of the threatened teacher.

Measures include funds to cover the cost of moving both family and belongings to the new location and special protection measures. They also involve the provision for inter-Departmental agreements to allow teachers to move to a different Colombian Department if necessary.

In 2003 this was further developed with the creation of the Working Group on the Human Rights of Teachers that includes FECODE, UNHRC and various Colombian state authorities that assess the risk of individual teachers, and provides administrative and financial support. To date over 300 teachers have been beneficiaries of ‘special protection measures’ that range from mobile phones to armed bodyguards and bulletproof vehicles. Table 2 highlights the type of measures provided.

Table 2: Protection Measures provided by Committee for the Evaluation of Risks for Trade Unionist

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Description</th>
<th>Count</th>
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<td>No of beneficiaries</td>
<td>302</td>
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<tr>
<td>No of departments covered</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td>No of trade unions attended</td>
<td>33</td>
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### Means of Protection

<table>
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<th>Means of Protection</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>Radio Phones</td>
<td>33</td>
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<td>Mobile Phones</td>
<td>53</td>
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<tr>
<td>Protection Schemes</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>National Travel Tickets</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Travel Tickets</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporary Relocation Support</td>
<td>363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for moving</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other humanitarian assistance</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulletproofing of union headquarters</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullet-proof jackets</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Ministry of Interior & Justice (2007)

There are however a range of ongoing disputes over the efficacy of these measures to protect teachers and a great lack of trust between education trade unions and Colombian authorities (interview with FECODE leader, 2007). It was emphasized by many of the informants that neither the Decrees to facilitate teacher mobility, nor the special protection measures were sufficient to fully protect threatened teachers, nor did they address the underlying roots of the violence directed at teachers. Furthermore, in many areas the committees were not functioning. However, of those interviewed, it was felt that these mechanisms were worthwhile but needed to be strengthened, and that the balance of decision making power needed to shift in favour of the victims of these violations, and their representatives.

**Setting up of human rights departments in each affiliate**

During the 1990s, in response to the widespread human rights violations against teachers, FECODE began the process of setting up Human Rights Commissions in each of its affiliates in order to create a National Human
Rights Network. The job of the human rights commission is to represent teachers in the Special Committee for threatened and displaced teachers; coordinate work with other NGO and human rights organisations at the local, departmental, national and international level; raise awareness of human rights violations against teachers, train representatives in the different areas of the department; maintain and manage a database of human rights statistics for their union, and raise awareness amongst teachers of human rights issues and mechanisms for their protection (Interview with Amanda Rincon, April, 2007).

This process was consolidated in 2004 through a Human Rights Training Programme\textsuperscript{15} jointly supported by Education International, the US based National Education Association and FECODE. 3 Training manuals on Human Rights, International Humanitarian Law, and Conflict Resolution were produced and tailored towards the needs of Human Rights activists within FECODE, and carried out across the country\textsuperscript{16}. The courses provided participants with a comprehensive understanding of the roots of the Colombian conflict, the history of human rights and International Humanitarian law and the skills and strategies to defend human rights locally, regionally, nationally and internationally through the Colombian Courts, and via mechanisms such as the Organisation of American States Inter-American Human Rights Court. Despite these advances, it was widely recognised that coordination and organisation within and between the different commissions

\textsuperscript{15} The full title of the project was “Prevencion de la violacion de derechos humanos en Colombia: hacia una red nacional e internacional por la prevencion, proteccion y defensa de los derechos humanos de las educadoras y educadores.”
needed to be strengthened and that there was a lack of systematic work being carried out both regionally and nationally. Furthermore, that the quality of the work being carried out by the different Human Rights Commissions of affiliate organizations was highly uneven, due both to lack of resources and experience, but also to the lack of priority given to human rights work by some affiliates.

**International Involvement with the Human Rights Movement**

At the international level the human rights department of FECODE has facilitated the involvement of major human rights organisations in the trade union’s situation, and representatives of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have intervened several times. These organisations engage in lobbying, the production and distribution of ‘urgent actions’, the compilation of reports on the human rights situation in the region and high level visits to representatives of the armed forces, the government and supranational organisations such as the United Nations Commission for Human Rights (UNCHR). The involvement of Amnesty and Human Rights Watch is understood discursively by the union’s leaders as providing a cordon of protection within which they carry out their activities. These organisations have particular skills and abilities to influence governments by applying selective pressure and lobbying.

Closely related to this network is the role of the supranational labour and human rights bodies, such as the Inter-American Human Rights Court, that have the ability to sanction national governments for the failure to enforce and protect human rights. These organisations, the supranational equivalent of state labour
and justice departments, have the power to sanction states rather than individuals.

In the particular case of FECODE, the union with the assistance of national human rights organisations has taken several cases to the Inter-American human rights court. One landmark case was that of the teacher and trade union leader Isidro Caballero who on the 7th of February 1989 along with a friend Carmen Santos were disappeared and subsequently murdered by members of the Colombian military in the Department of Santander. After an extensive investigation the Inter-American human rights courts on 21 December 1992 found the Colombian government responsible for their murders and order to pay compensation to the families of the victims (Commision Andina de Juristas, Seccional Colombiana, 2004). This case is seen as an important milestone in the history of the Colombian human rights movement, as it highlighted not only the military’s role in the killings, but also the attempts of a broad range of state functionaries and departments to cover up the case (ibid).

Two important events have occurred over recent years which signify that the situation of widespread human rights violations in Colombia is becoming more ‘visible’. The first has been the setting up in 1996 of a United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia whose mandate is to monitor the human rights situation. The Second is the creation of a Special ILO mission in to Colombia which began in June 2007, and represents both a sanction, and international recognition of the seriousness of the situation in Colombia. Both of these are seen as political sanctions by the International Community for the failure of the Colombian government to provide human rights protection to its citizens.
Despite several positive advances over recent years, both representatives of FECODE and several human rights leaders emphasized the need to improve the coordination with international organizations and the need to develop new contacts and links in a range of countries. Several interviewees also felt that the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia was not pressuring the Colombian government strongly enough.

**Understanding the Strategies and Opportunities for Change: Initial Conclusions**

Having laid out some of the strategies and developments over recent years I now want to conclude by exploring the rationale behind Fecode’s strategies and offering some policy recommendations. Firstly, what appears clear from the evidence is that teacher trade unionists have been targeted by all the armed actors in the Colombian conflict, but particularly the right wing paramilitaries and the Colombian state. The relationship between these two forces while complex cannot be considered as non-existent, as there is just too much evidence suggesting collusion than is possible to ignore. Secondly, if this is indeed the case then it is the behaviour of the state and its paramilitary allies that needs to be changed. That is not to say that the Colombian guerrilla have not committed infractions of International Humanitarian Law against teachers, but that it appears far less widespread and systematic in its nature. Thirdly, the question that then arises is how can state and para-state repression be influenced. In his path-breaking work Sluka (2000) argues that there are two major theories of why states resort to mass political violence. The first is a ‘structural-functional’ explanation that argues
that the state is essentially too weak to gain control and legitimacy and therefore it uses violence as a functional necessity in order to maintain order and stability. The second is a ‘power-conflict’ theory which argues that states use violence because they are unafraid of the consequences, because of their strength and unchecked power, not “because the state is weak, but rather because they are strong and can get away with it” (Sluka, 2000:30).

The major international donors, and particularly the United States appear to have taken the first approach and seek to strengthen the ‘weak’ Colombian state through assistance packages such as Plan Colombia. However, if the second analysis is correct, then the strategy to challenge political violence would be to increase the cost of carrying out mass political violence for the Colombian state. It is through this prism that we can understand the strategies and tactics of FECODE and the broader Colombian trade union and human rights movement, and this operates on a range of geographical scales.

In assessing the efficacy of FECODE’s human rights strategies it is necessary to understand the importance of ‘visibility’ and ‘invisibility’ in the domain of human rights advocacy. Many of the worst human rights violations in Colombia take place away from the eyes of the cameras, in rural areas where ‘events’ can be ‘managed’. Letters of protest and ‘urgent actions’ sent to International Organisations, solidarity networks and Colombian embassies raise the international profile of violations, making them become visible, and increasing the opportunity costs of political violence.

More generally the effectiveness of human rights work relies on the sensitivity of the Colombian government and its need to maintain international
respectability. How this functions has not been fully theorised but is intimately related to the need of nation states to be legitimated both ‘domestically’ and ‘internationally’. This need to be seen as an accepted member of the International Community reflects itself in the massive increase in state signatories to human rights agreements over the last 4 decades. This appears important for the state not just on the international stage, but also for national public consumption. Finnemore & Sikkink (1998: 652) note that:

International legitimation is important insofar as it reacts back on a government’s domestic basis of legitimation and consent and thus ultimately on its ability to stay in power. This dynamic was part of the explanation for regime transitions in South Africa, Latin America, and Southern Europe.

In research on transnational advocacy movements Keck & Sikkink (1998) talk about the ‘boomerang effect’ whereby channels for change are blocked at the national level and processes of transnational advocacy assists in mobilising external actors to pressure the state and therefore change its behaviour. This appears to be the rationale behind the international strategy of FECODE and other trade union and human rights organisations in Colombia. This transnational civil society pressure appears to be an important variable in encouraging human rights compliance.

In a persuasive article Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui (2005) argue that there is no direct correlation between a country signing of particular human rights treaties and conventions and their respect and enforcement. They even suggest that on occasions signing a particular treaty may even lead to increased human rights violations as the international credibility emanating from the signing provides cover and legitimacy for the state to increase repression. However, despite this what they argue is that the variable factor in reducing the prevalence of human rights violations is the activity of civil society groups, both locally,
nationally and internationally to pressure the state to fulfil their human rights obligations.

What appears clear from the international community side is that the major international donors have been very slow to criticize the Colombian government for its appalling human rights record, and reluctant to exert their influence to modify its behaviour. Returning to Tomasevski’s report on the right to education in Colombia, she notes the:

The failure of what we call ‘the international community’ to react when a government violates some human rights obligations easily becomes perceived as a licence to violate them all, as the case of Colombia illustrates clearly and painfully. (Tomasevski, 2006:201)

This chapter has highlighted the devastating effect that this has had on teachers unions in Colombia and the broader impacts of the conflict on the education system. It has also highlighted the tensions within the education system and the different interest groups. Teachers unions’ in Colombia as representatives of teachers and as key institutions of civil society come into conflict with other interest groups. This is the same in all countries, however, in Colombia it takes on an incredibly violent form. The task therefore of change is not to remove the conflict, but to ensure that conflict is addressed through non-violent channels. In this there is a need to pressure all armed actors – state and non-state, to do this. It is also imperative for those groups attempting to promote change through peaceful means to be allowed to do so.

While as is clear from this chapter FECODE is a vociferous participant in both the governance of the education system in Colombia and an active participant in the oppositional political scene – it is a non-armed actor. If the international community remains silent on the ongoing political violence against
these types of civil society organizations then the voices advocating armed opposition are more likely to find fertile ground for new recruits. Opportunities for change do indeed exist in this situation but this requires concerted efforts from all stakeholders: trade union, Colombian government, and International Community (state and civil society) to ensure that inevitable processes of societal conflict are managed through dialogue and negotiation, and that teachers and students can teach and learn together without the threat of violence pervading every aspect of their lives.

**Some Initial Recommendations**

Based on these initial findings several recommendations appear useful:

1. There is a strong need for increased vigilance on the part of the international community towards ongoing human rights violations in Colombia and the responsibility therein of the Colombian government. Their appears to be a disjuncture between ratification and implementation of human rights practices and mechanisms need to be developed to ensure that the Colombian government abides by its International Commitments. In this the International donor community and international civil society have an important role to play.

2. The current campaign by FECODE to make schools ‘a neutral territory in the armed conflict’ is an initiative that should be supported by all actors – armed and unarmed, locally and internationally. This goes beyond the issue of political violence against teachers and is necessary to protect all members of the education community (teachers, parents, workers and children).

3. There remains serious weakness in local, national and international coordination over issues of human rights violations against the education community in Colombia. Effective mechanisms need to be developed to respond to threats and violence.
4. The statistics on human rights violations against educators remains uneven and incomplete. More systematic mechanisms need to be developed by FECODE and its education affiliates to both encourage victims of human rights violations to come forward and document their case, and to maintain and update the databases.

5. There is a need for increased research on political violence against teachers and more generally on issues of human rights violations within the education sector in conflict and postconflict countries to assist in the development of improved national and international policy responses, particularly for Education International.
References


