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## OPINION



# Unions As Safe In Colombia As In D.C.

By [DANIEL GRISWOLD](#)

Posted 06/09/2009 05:58 PM ET

As President Obama seeks to boost the U.S. economy and build stronger ties with our friends abroad, he could advance both goals at once by urging Congress to pass the pending trade agreement with our South American neighbor Colombia.

The U.S. and Colombia signed the free-trade agreement in November 2006, and every month that it languishes in Congress is another month of lost opportunities to export more U.S. goods and build ties to a key Latin American ally.

Upon enactment, the agreement would immediately eliminate duties on more than 80% of U.S. exports of consumer and industrial products to Colombia, and remaining tariffs would be phased out over the next 10 years.

The U.S. International Trade Commission estimates the FTA would boost U.S. exports, of manufactured and farm goods, by \$1 billion a year.

Most of Colombia's exports to the U.S. already enter duty-free because of the Andean Trade Preferences Act. The FTA would make Colombia's access to the U.S. market permanent, boosting investment and growth in that country.

And by reducing and eliminating Colombia's tariffs, the agreement would deliver the "level playing field" that critics of trade are always demanding.

More importantly, the agreement would strengthen U.S. relations with the Colombian government, which under President Alvaro Uribe has been a bulwark in the region against terrorism and the authoritarian socialism of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez. Rejecting the agreement would send a signal to the region that the U.S. does not stand by its friends.

The main domestic opposition to the agreement in the United States is organized labor. Reflexively opposed to almost all trade liberalizing agreements, the AFL-CIO complains that Colombia is unworthy of the agreement because of continuing violence there against union members.

Labor complaints ignore the dramatic progress that has been made under Uribe against violence of all kinds. Since he took office in 2002, the government has disarmed 30,000 paramilitary fighters and largely defeated the left-wing guerrilla movement known as FARC.

As a result, the murder rate in Colombia has been cut by 40%, and murders of union members by 80%. One study showed that union members in Colombia are actually at less risk of murder than nonunion members.

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## Investing Tip

Never stop learning. Experienced investors regularly go back and revisit the basics.



In a recent visit to EAFIT University in Medellin, Colombia, in February, I was struck by what a normal city it has become. A decade ago, it was the epicenter of drug cartel and FARC violence. Today it is a bustling commercial, cultural and tourist center.

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