

# Canada complicit in Colombian labour troubles



Joshua Berson photo

*Members of the Colombian army on the march, intimidating citizens in a small community that is standing firm in the face of corporate interests.*

Tradetalk reporter David Hogben carries his labour perspective to Colombia and even Tradetalk magazine plays a small part in his story of throwing himself into harm's way while investigating Canada's role in Colombia's suppression of trade unions, agricultural workers, and the indigenous people. Here's part of his report.

## By David Hogben

**So there I was**, recording video of the highly militarized Colombian-Venezuelan border, hoping to catch the Canadian-built armoured personnel carriers on patrol, when I learned that writing for a labour magazine like Tradetalk can sometimes come in handy, especially if detained by Venezuelan immigration.

The 32-armoured personnel carriers manufactured by General Dynamics Land Systems in London, Ontario, were stationed nearby, at Battalion Rondón in Colombia. The highly weaponized vehicles which, according to the military website, protect pipelines, natural resources, and counter "criminal threats." The smuggling of cheap Venezuelan gasoline across the border fuels a wide-open, mob-dominated economy.

A firm hand gripped my shoulder from behind and an authoritative voice instructed me: "Señor, accompany us to immigration."

Next thing I knew, I was in an otherwise empty desert outbuilding with two uniformed Venezuelan immigration

officers who advised me that taking photos and video of the border without authorization was illegal. They said I had also wandered across the border.

The first officer wanted to know what I was doing and why I was taking video of the border. The other watched sternly for any discomfort on my part.

**Canada surprised a lot of people** when it declared Colombia a "preferred destination" for small-arms exports—including armoured personnel carriers which look a lot like tanks—in December 2012. Canadian arms export policies prohibit selling arms to countries where they will likely be used against their own populations.

The Canadian government defended the sale saying the weapons were only being sold to state security forces: the military and the national police. But in Colombia, two of the greatest abusers of human rights, are the military and the police!

So, the search for these Canadian arms led to Puerto Rubiales, where labour leaders are threatened with jail and death for organizing oil workers, to Cauca where native groups are occupying traditional territories, and Guajira where police officers are assassinated and police stations and customs offices are burned to the ground if the authorities interfere with the contraband-fuelled economy.

There was plenty of evidence.

Colombian security forces, especially the feared anti-riot squad known as

*David Hogben, shortly after his encounter with teargas and his rescue by Indigenous Nasa people.*



ESMAD, have used armoured personnel carriers in brutal attacks against blockades by native Colombians.

In one attack, near the Pacific coast, children were tossed to their deaths in the river. A national strike by agricultural workers was also brutally suppressed with the use of armoured vehicles.

And hundreds of soldiers, like some at Battalion Rondón, have been implicated in the deaths of thousands more innocent civilians assassinated by military and police in the "false positives" scandal. Unemployed Colombians were promised jobs, murdered, then dressed up in guerrilla uniforms to make it look as if they had been killed in combat.

At least two Canadian companies have made significant exports to the Colombia military.

In addition to the \$85-million sale of 32 General Dynamics Land Systems in January 2013, Toronto-based INKAS Armored Vehicle Manufacturing announced a sale for an unspecified

The Canadian-made INKAS armoured vehicle sold to Colombia's national police at a roadblock on the Panamerican Highway near Mondomo, Cauca, the scene of many confrontations between Nasa Indians and the national police and army.



David Hogben photo

amount for 4 of its newly developed Huron armoured vehicles in June 2014 to the Colombian national police, of which ESMAD is a part.

I found one of the INKAS vehicles near Mondomo, where the Cauca Valley rises up to meet the Andes Mountains. It blockaded the front of the fortified Mondomo police station. Young natives, members of the Nasa people, jeered at police from the other side of the street. The next day, the vehicle was stationed about 12 kilometres down the Panamerican Highway, near the scene of frequent confrontations with native Colombians.

*Tradetalk* credentials did not impress army or military at the scene. The national police and military forbid photos of armoured personnel carriers, so images had to be recorded from a great distance or while repeatedly pass-

ing the scene in buses.

Security forces repeatedly fired tear gas and "non-lethal" weapons against the indigenous people in the four days I spent in the disputed territories.

I also found myself in the middle of an attack and was completely blinded and nearly suffocated from tear gas. But two Nasa each grabbed a shoulder and guided me from the conflict zone. Sugar cane liquor calmed my throat and water eased my burning eyes.

Dozens of natives were injured and one killed as police tried to remove people from their lands.

**So, there I was,** trying to explain to the Venezuelans why they shouldn't be too suspicious of a foreign reporter filming their border, when finally things took a turn for the better.

Who did I work for, they asked?

I told them I was a writer for a labour magazine (*Tradetalk*), a magazine which tells workers' stories, I answered. Everything changed.

They wanted to hear how Canadian workers fight back when the government attacks their political rights, how they struggle to obtain better working conditions, and how they build massive projects: dams, bridges, and industrial plants.

The Venezuelans did not smash or confiscate my camera, as many Colombians warned me they would if they apprehended me near the border.

So, I was free to return to Colombia, to continue collecting evidence of how Canadian military exports are being used in land disputes with native peoples, and potentially against trade unions and protests by agricultural workers.



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