

# End of Bush could mean relief for Columbians

By Nicole C. Lee

Special to Sentinel-Voice

While Washington is buzzing in preparation for the inauguration of Barack Obama, President Bush is finishing up his final acts of a memorable presidency.

Besides the many pardons that will be granted, Bush will also be presenting the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian honor in the U.S. to three foreign leaders. One is Alvaro Uribe, the current president of Colombia. The White House Press Secretary Dana Perino said that Uribe would be receiving the honor for "improving the lives of [his] citizens and for... efforts to promote democracy, human rights and peace." Consistent until the end, President Bush is sending a slap in the face to human rights advocates and people of good will everywhere.

For the past few years, I have talked a lot about Colombia. A war is waging, but not the war mainstream media likes to talk about.

It is a war against the dreams and aspirations of Black Colombians and Uribe is waging it. While Bush calls Uribe America's closest friend, Uribe has enacted policies that resulted in a humanitarian and human rights

disaster.

Uribe inherited a war between government forces and left-wing guerrillas, such as the FARC. In an attempt to get an upper-hand in the war against the guerrillas, the government funded paramilitary forces. The paramilitaries and the military were responsible for unspeakable atrocities against civilians. Illicit coca cultivation on all sides has made an insane situation crazier.

Caught literally in the middle is the Black population of Colombia. Twenty-six percent of Colombians are Black; they make up the third largest population of Afro-descendants in the Western Hemisphere after Brazil and the U.S. To put it another way, there are more Black people in Colombia than Haiti. Despite the large numbers, and a vibrant civil rights movement, "Afro-Colombians" continue to be the target of human rights abuses. Many of these abuses are tied to government practices and rampant impunity.

In 1990, Afro-Colombians won a great victory in Law 70. This law basically pro-



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vided the "40 acres and a mule" to Afro-Colombians in that it recognized their rights to the land traditionally populated by Afro-Colombians. Yet, since the law was enacted, the Colombian government has systematically undermined the letter and intent of the law.

For example, both the drug war and the continued fight-

ing between armed groups have caused massive internal displacement in Colombia. At the end of last year, Colombia's internally displaced population (IDP) exceeded the displaced population in Darfur, evidence of a grave, yet overlooked humanitarian disaster.

While the U.S. provides some aid to assist the IDPs, the Colombian government has enacted laws allowing them to sell Afro-Colombian land while the owners are displaced. This has provided a perverse incentive to some to foment conflict in Afro-Colombian areas.

Also, effecting the population is the murder of trade unionists in Colombia. According to the AFL-CIO, nearly 500 trade union-

ists have been murdered since Uribe took office in 2002. More union members are killed in Colombia than any other country and virtually by all other countries combined.

Many Afro-Colombian leaders are union members. Teachers have been murdered in front of their students; mothers and fathers in front of their children. This has sent a chilling effect throughout the country and serves as a warning to those fighting for worker rights that they can be targeted and killed without consequence.

None of these facts are new to President Bush. Human rights organizations across the globe have repeated these facts to the Bush administration time and time again. Their response has been to embrace Mr. Uribe even firmer, ignoring the grim realities that face the innocent of Colombia.

To give Uribe an award is a slap in the face to democratic principles and common decency. So goodbye, President Bush. Can we help you pack your bags? Please be sure to take your friends with you. As far as I am concerned, change can't get here soon enough.

Nicole C. Lee is the executive director of TransAfrica Forum.

## Labor to Obama: We'll support you, you support us

By Bill Fletcher Jr.

Special to Sentinel-Voice

The president of the Maryland and DC AFL-CIO, Fred Mason, had an idea. Following the electoral victory of Barack Obama he found himself perplexed by the enthusiastic, yet very unfocused, response of organized labor as to what should happen next. While there was optimism in the air, what was missing was real content. But what was especially missing was any sort of public display of both support AND concern by U.S. workers for an incoming administration at a point of significant economic and political crisis.

The traditional labor union response to incoming administrations, particularly those viewed as favorable by and toward unions and workers, has tended to be side-bar meetings where an agenda is discussed.

These behind-the-scenes gatherings might have worked when unions were in a stronger position, but the diminishing power of workers and unions has resulted in such meetings having limited impact.

Mason, a long-time progressive, African-American union activist and leader, started suggesting a different course of action. Why not have unions hold or sponsor celebratory

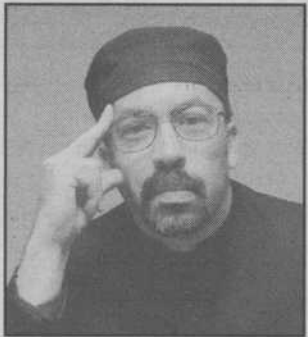
parades around the USA to make plain both their support for President-elect Obama, but also the important issues that the incoming administration must address that have a direct impact on working people?

Mason received two responses to his suggestion, which is what makes this commentary a "good news/bad news" piece. On the one hand, there were few takers on the idea of nationwide rallies. True to form, there were no explicit objections raised to the suggestion; instead, silence.

The failure to respond is illustrative of the crisis facing organized labor and the challenge to overcome it. A movement that has over-relied on lobbying and small meetings has strayed light years from the notion that a movement is disruptive and challenging.

A social justice movement cannot always play by the rules, but has to call upon its members and supporters to make their voices heard — publicly and defiantly. In fact, mobilizing our base(s) is often the only weapon that we have in order to win in the court of public opinion.

The silence that Mason encountered represented something far more dangerous than what at first glance could appear to be timidity. Rather, the silence was the result of years of defeat that have been rationalized away. The decline of the union movement, largely the result of mega-economic factors (for example, globalization) combined with vicious political assaults (such as the mass firings of the air traffic controllers in 1981 by then-President Ronald Reagan), is as well the result of internal problems that inhibit many leaders and members from understanding the global economic and political battlefield on which we operate. Thus, when Mason sug-



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gested a nationwide mobilization, the leaders' collective silence in effect said the following:

"If we can even mobilize our members—which many of us think that we cannot—we run the risk of antagonizing political and business leaders. If we antagonize them, we will not be invited into meetings and we will be condemned to the wilderness."

What Mason recognizes, along with some other key union leaders and activists, is that the union movement was condemned to the wilderness a very long time ago by political and business leaders in the USA. The problem that the union movement confronts is how to change the terms of the discussion and ensure that the voices of the voiceless are heard on a national stage and can actually shift reality.

Though Mason was unsuccessful with his first proposal — and here comes the good news — he won support for 'Plan B': a union contingent in the 56th Presidential Inaugural Parade on January 20th under the banner "America's Workers United for Change." What makes this contingent of more than 250 workers of particular interest in addition to its historical significance is that it brings together union leaders and activists from the AFL-CIO unions, Change to Win, the National Education Association, and constituency groups affiliated with the AFL-CIO.

In other words, despite a painful split that the union movement suffered in 2005, Mason was able to bridge the divide and help representatives from both sides, plus the independent NEA, join together to convey critical messages to a nationwide audience.

— Workers, through their unions welcome the election of President Obama.

— Workers, through their unions, are demanding immediate action by the incoming administration to support an economy that works for all; equitable economic development through the creation of GOOD JOBS — GREEN JOBS; and creating GREAT PUBLIC SCHOOLS as a critical to enhancing the participation of American workers in the global economy.

— Workers, through their unions, will support the administration in taking on the task of reforming our healthcare system to provide healthcare for all.

— Workers, through their unions and community allies must demonstrate that they will prepare to support the administration in meeting the great challenges ahead, but that they are unwilling to retreat in the face of the onslaught of employer attacks being felt, be they the auto loan issue—which is a de facto attack on auto workers—or the threats in state governments across the country to layoff workers and cut back on public services.

— In this sense, this contingent is not the equivalent of a float in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. While union members can look at this contingent with pride and see themselves after years of being treated as both disposable and invisible, this contingent is not mainly about making people feel good. This contingent, more than anything else, is a public statement.

— Just as the workers at Chicago's Republic Windows made a statement in their takeover of the plant when Bank of America initially cancelled loans and denied the workers the compensation they were due, this labor contingent is putting the incoming administration on notice: workers in the USA have had enough and are not prepared to fall any deeper into despair; further retreat is simply not an option.

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## Walters

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voted for him to become a support base and a safe harbor as he faces the task of turning the historical corner to achieve a more enlightened America.

So, permit me to say, as someone who has given much of his life work to making the election of a Black man President of the United States possible, I join you in wishing Brother Barack Obama God's speed.

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