

9 March 2010

Rt Hon David Miliband MP
Secretary of State
FCO
King Charles Street
LONDON
SW1A 2AH

Dear David

Dr Miguel Angel Beltran Villegas

Last year I went on a delegation of trade unionists and Labour MPs to Colombia. Like all those who had made the trip before me, it made a profound impression. I met dozens of people living in constant fear, fear for themselves and worse, for their families. I was told of a country where there is no respect for the right to life, which was 'in a transition to a tyranny' and at the same time undergoing the 'silent violence' of extreme poverty.

Our delegation met with many different groups which included a meeting with university campus unions and the student union. Like trade unionists, it became clear that students and their teachers were under threat – when I went in April last year, already five students had been killed. Numerous academics and teaching staff have also lost their lives as a result of teaching or research that the Colombian regime sees as 'subversive'.

For this reason my union has taken the decision to invite leading Colombian academic Dr Miguel Angel Beltran to Manchester this year to address delegates at our annual Congress on the situation facing those working in Colombia's universities; their fight for basic human rights as well as the more familiar struggles for better conditions and an end to privatisation in the sector.

Since May 2009 Dr Beltran has been a prisoner of the Colombian regime, held in appalling conditions in a high security jail. He has not been put on trial, no evidence against him has been provided, nor has he been convicted of any crime. Dr Beltran is simply in jail accused by the regime of the Orwellian-like crime of 'rebellion'.

His true 'crime' was to have taught classes, published articles and conducted research on the conflict in Colombia which, according to government claims, shows he is an 'ideologue', a 'guerrilla' and a recruiter for 'terrorists'. Dr Beltran's former students and colleagues, as well as the UCU's sister union in Colombia, the Colombian Association of University Professors (ASPU), are clear that he has been targeted for his political opinions and say his imprisonment is just one more example of the Colombian regime attempting to silence those who disagree with them.

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Not only is this instance of imprisonment without, seemingly, any due process it is an increasingly worrying development in the ability of academics in Colombia to research, teach and publish without fear of retribution from the state. We would not allow such intolerance or constraints here and I do not believe we should be supporting any regime that does.

I am inviting Dr Beltran to speak at UCU Congress at the end of May. If he is not able to attend, that sad occasion will mark a year of his imprisonment without trial.

On behalf of UCU and our membership, I ask you to contact the Colombian government to ask for the release of Dr Beltran and to enshrine within their system academic freedom that covers all those who teach and research, regardless of the subject matter.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sally Hunt', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Sally Hunt
General Secretary