

14 May 2021

**RE: Severe human rights violations in context of protests in Colombia**

Dear Minister,

We are appalled at the extreme levels of state violence currently taking place in Colombia since the latest round of National Strike protests began on 28 April.

These mobilisations reflect widespread public opposition to the government's planned tax reforms, as well as support for human rights and the peace process. Rather than engage democratically with these legitimate concerns, President Iván Duque's government responded with horrific force: according to the National Ombudsman, at least 24 people have been killed during the protests, 11 at the hands of police – human rights organisations have documented 40 protesters killed by police. Hundreds of people have been injured, including several cases of likely permanent eye injuries caused by police firing projectiles at citizens' faces. There are also multiple reports of sexual violence committed against detainees and attacks on human rights defenders and journalists. There have been arbitrary arrests and a concerning number of people reported missing.

The highly volatile situation has been exacerbated by the reprehensible actions of politicians in President Duque's political party, the Democratic Centre. The former president Álvaro Uribe, was forced to remove a tweet after he offered his support for police using their firearms during the protests, while the defence minister has issued statements stigmatising protesters by accusing the protests to be backed by illegal armed groups. On 10 May, the Vice President sent a tweet with dangerous insinuations against indigenous organisations supporting the protests questioning without any evidence "who is financing them?". On 9 May, after people dressed in civilian clothing were filmed shooting at indigenous protesters alongside police, the President issued a statement calling on the indigenous organisation CRIC to "return to their *resguardos*" to "avoid unnecessary confrontations". It is extremely concerning that instead of condemning the very clear evidence of abuses, these statements can be seen to legitimise violence against people engaging in their core democratic right to peaceful protest and freedom of assembly.

It is imperative that the instability in Colombia does not divert attention or resources from the country's peace process, which continues to face many difficulties, including question marks around the Duque government's commitment to its implementation and the human rights crisis that has claimed the lives of hundreds of social activists and former guerrilla combatants.

The United Nations and the European Union, as well as governments of many countries have spoken out against the police violence. Given Ireland's close relationship with Colombia, every effort must be made to ensure protection for human rights and an end to the bloodshed. We urge you to publicly denounce the violence and call for those responsible to be held to account. We welcome the initiations of dialogue between the National Strike Committee and the Colombian President and we ask that representations are made to ensure these negotiations are meaningful and engage with all

sectors involved in recent protests. We also call for diplomatic efforts to encourage urgent police reform, specifically for the police force to be moved from the Ministry of Defence to become a civilian force suitable for a context of the ongoing peace process.

We welcome the recent meeting of 15 April 2021 with your department and look forward to further correspondence with you on the points raised herein.

Yours sincerely,



Kevin Callinan, Vice President, ICTU & General Secretary, FORSA



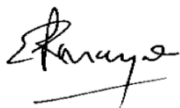
Senator Paul Gavan



Patricia McKeown, ICTU Executive & Regional Secretary, UNISON Northern Ireland



Gerry Murphy, President, ICTU & Northern Secretary, INTO



Eoin Ronayne, Deputy General Secretary, FORSA



Anne Speed, Head of Bargaining and Representation at UNISON Northern Ireland