

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Colombia Workers Risk Lives for Better Future

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Francisco Maltés, President, Unitary Workers Center (CUT)

Francisco Maltés ([00:01](#)):

For the first time in the history of social struggles in Colombia, the National Strike Committee has been able to define an agenda and form a part of a public conversation.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([00:17](#)):

Hello, sisters and brothers, and welcome to the Solidarity Center Podcast, an interview show that highlights and celebrates the individuals working for labor rights, the freedom to form unions, and democracy across the globe. I'm your host, Shawna Bader-Blau. I'm also the executive director of the Solidarity Center in Washington, D.C.. We're the largest U.S.-based, international worker rights organization. We empower workers to raise their voice for dignity on the job, for justice in their communities, for greater equality in the global economy, and for one just future.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([00:57](#)):

We're so glad you can join us for this special episode. We'll be launching season two of The Solidarity Center Podcast in coming weeks, so stay tuned. You'll hear from worker advocates who are standing with fast food workers in Thailand, farm workers in Jordan, street vendors in Nigeria and more, who are all working to gain basic rights on the job and to build a better future for all.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([01:24](#)):

When the Colombian government moved to give wealthy corporations and rich individuals huge tax breaks, while raising taxes on working people this year, workers and their unions led hundreds of thousands of people in a national strike that surged across more than 600 cities. People protested for months, in the face of incredible state violence that was often directed against workers, women, and Black and Indigenous communities. But the tax increase was just the spark. Inequality was increasing even before the pandemic. Many marginalized communities often have no electricity, water, or other basic infrastructure.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([02:09](#)):

My guest today is someone who has spent his life on the front lines with workers, fighting for good jobs and a society that treats everyone with fairness. Francisco Maltés is president of the CUT, the Unitary Workers Center, the largest trade union confederation in Colombia. He was elected CUT president in February 2021, a year into the pandemic and just weeks before the protest started. The CUT has played a key role in the protests, as part of the National Strike Committee, a coalition of major unions, students, and groups representing marginalized people across the country.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([02:46](#)):

As Francisco will tell us, through both its diversity and its unity, the committee won key victories and is set to achieve major economic and social gains for all those who have been left behind.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([03:02](#)):

In our conversation today, we go a little heavy on the acronyms. So here are the main ones involved on rights issues in Colombia. ICHR is the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights. CSA is the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas, part of the global body of unions around the world.

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Shawna Bader-Blau ([03:25](#)):

Francisco Maltés, president of CUT Colombia, welcome to the podcast.

Francisco Maltés ([03:34](#)):

[Spanish 03:34].

Shawna Bader-Blau ([03:34](#)):

It's so wonderful to talk with you today. Congratulations on your recent election to president of CUT, the largest union federation in Colombia. Can you start by telling us a little bit about your history in the labor movement?

Francisco Maltés ([03:53](#)):

Thank you, again. I am actually a public employee. I work in the district tax office in Bogota, which is the capital of Colombia. I've been working as a public employee for a long time, and I've been working even longer in the fight for unions and in the political sphere, over 40 years. I was president of my member union and then was a part of the sub-directorate for CUT in both Bogota and the district of Cundinamarca for two terms. This is my third and final term on CUT's executive committee

Shawna Bader-Blau ([04:35](#)):

Brother Francisco, can you tell us a little bit, briefly, about the CUT in Colombia? What are the goals of your labor federation?

Francisco Maltés ([04:48](#)):

CUT is the largest among union organizations. We have over 800,000 affiliates among different branches of the economy, including the public sector and transport and the agricultural-industrial sector. And our goal is to defend the interests of both workers and all Colombians, and as such, we have taken a leading role in the current social movements in Colombia.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([05:20](#)):

And I want to get into that. I've wanted to start, though, with a recognition that Colombia has gone through a very devastating COVID crisis. Workers have been affected deeply. For a period of time, Colombia has had skyrocketing cases. And I just wonder if you can tell us just a little bit about how are you doing? How are workers doing in Colombia? Is it getting any better? Have you gotten government assistance to workers during this horrible pandemic?

Francisco Maltés ([05:57](#)):

We started to see a decline in social indicators in 2019, so before the pandemic. Unemployment reached double digits, informal work increased, and there were 1.3 million new people in poverty, which was 10 percent of the population. In 2020, 3.5 million new poor were added to the statistics, leaving 42 percent of Colombians in poverty. Dropout rates in school increased, and almost 9 million people had stopped eating a third meal every day. And as far as work, there are 4 million people unemployed, which is 20 percent of the population. 52 percent of the population works informally, leading to systematic violations by both the government and the private sector of workers rights to negotiation. And so the ILO has included Colombia among the worst violators of labor rights in the world.

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Shawna Bader-Blau ([07:07](#)):

And I know the International Trade Union Confederation has regularly highlighted Colombia as a country with a great labor movement, fighting hard to defend workers in the face of a lot of repression. You've just been talking, additionally, about unemployment, poverty, and hunger in Colombia. I've read that Colombia's one of the economies that is the most unequal in all of the Americas, and I wonder if you could tell us about the social movement led by workers and activists that has been on the streets for months, protesting for better conditions? Can you tell us a little bit about the role of the CUT in the National Strike Committee and the movement on the ground in Colombia for justice?

Francisco Maltés ([08:04](#)):

The social unrest is said to have begun on April 28, but really, it continued because it truly began on November 21, 2019. Because of the deep inequality in income distribution that is found in Colombia, Colombia is ranked as the fourth most unequal country in the world, and the pandemic and lockdown only serve to deepen this dynamic.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([08:33](#)):

Can you tell me about this bill that the government is presenting that's going to raise taxes on basic goods and consumption and services, even pensions, and that it's not going to benefit average Colombians who are living in high rates of poverty and unemployment? Can you tell me about that moment when the CUT determined and knew that it needed to lead this movement on the street to fight that tax reform?

Francisco Maltés ([09:04](#)):

The straw that broke the camel's back was a proposed tax reform that sought to tax wages, pensions, utilities, computers, internet—and 90 percent of the revenue from these proposed tax changes would have come from wages, pensions, and consumption, where the mega-rich would only have contributed 10 percent of the revenue. And the union movement and CUT have had an important role to play in this.

Francisco Maltés ([09:36](#)):

In November of 2019, when there was social unrest, that was a strike that was initiated by CUT with the collaboration of CTC and CGT, who represent retired workers, and the National Strike Committee. And so the same dynamic came into play this year. CUT took action because of the government's stance of refusing to negotiate, refusing to offer solutions, and offering instead repression. And so the idea came about to have a strike in April, specifically in April, because that was when tax reform was going to be being debated, and also because this would be a time that an opportunity existed to discuss salaries for public employees.

Francisco Maltés ([10:26](#)):

There are 1.3 million public employees, who make up between 10 to 12 percent of the workforce in Colombia. And so CUT thought to have a strike at the end of April and discuss this with other organizations, who agreed, and it was then proposed to the National Strike Committee, who set the specific date. CUT understands how to read the moment, historically speaking, to be able to propose these social mobilizations, and we're currently promoting both peaceful strikes and protests for the rest of the year, several days a month, for the remainder of the year.

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Shawna Bader-Blau ([11:11](#)):

The CUT and workers are, of course, the backbone of these strikes and of this movement, but I understand also that this movement has expanded. We see students, Indigenous people, Black communities, LGBTQ communities, community activists in general, from across Colombia taking part in the social movement, in the movement on the streets. Can you tell us about the coalition that has come out to join you in protest?

Francisco Maltés ([11:40](#)):

Colombia has formed a National Strike Committee that has a presence in all of Colombia's departments and many of its municipalities, so it truly is a national organization. It's present in every department and in 900 out of 1,400 municipalities. It includes 59 social organizations and is made up of workers, retired workers, all Indigenous groups that are present in Colombia, rural workers, farm workers, the LGBT community, environmentalists, women's committees.

Francisco Maltés ([12:22](#)):

What I wanted to underline has been the participation of young people, who have been able to join the National Strike Committee, both students who have yet to go to the university and college students. These young people have six seats set aside among 60 on the committee.

Francisco Maltés ([12:42](#)):

And another effort has been outreach to young people who are neither in school nor working because of failures of the government. We've tried to incorporate them into our movement so that they can be organized and fight more effectively. And so we would like to work with them towards addressing all of our social struggles, for as long as the Duque government remains in power.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([13:20](#)):

Part of why we wanted to talk to you, in this moment, is because the world has seen quite a lot of repression in Colombia. We've seen protestors shot at, young people in the street, and the bravery of the labor movement and this coalition, to keep fighting for what you know to be right. I know the Peace Accords, in November of 2016, were supposed to really guarantee Colombians have the right to protest and the right to speak out. Can you talk about the government response to this movement?

Francisco Maltés ([14:01](#)):

The government's policy has been to carry out repression. The Peace Accords that will have been signed five years ago this November, between the government and the FARC, did achieve a reduction of the stigma that social activists faced, but several problems have come about. Instead of making good on the Peace Accords, the approach has been repression, not negotiation, not dialogue, and that repression has been carried out through the national police who are heavily militarized.

Francisco Maltés ([14:45](#)):

The police should be civil or should operate within a civilian mindset and not a military paradigm. The ICHR's position and ours is that, in social mobilizations, the first tool you use should be dialogue, persuasion. The government's position has been the opposite, where they first resort to repression, and

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then there is no dialogue or negotiation after that. Our position is that the national police should have civilian control and that it should be converted from a military body to a civil body.

Francisco Maltés ([15:28](#)):

And so the military police have shot at peaceful protestors and, likewise, protected civilians who have shot at people in peaceful mobilizations. The national prosecutor's office doesn't have any investigations currently ongoing as to civilians or police who have shot at people who are protesting peacefully. We've asked the government to speak out against these actions or to publicly condemn violence against protestors, and they unfortunately haven't done it.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([16:07](#)):

I know this new repression comes after decades of particularly harsh treatment of labor leaders in Colombia.

Francisco Maltés ([16:18](#)):

We consider that not fulfilling the Peace Accord is a part of the government's DNA. 2,500 union leaders have been killed since CUT was created, and the vast majority of those crimes have not been punished.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([16:39](#)):

What has been gained, brother Francisco, in the movement so far? What happened to that tax reform bill?

Francisco Maltés ([16:49](#)):

There have been both tangible and intangible achievements. What's been tangible is that we were able to do away with the worst tax reform proposal that had ever been seen in Colombia. We were able to get rid of a tax minister who was arrogant and linked to corruption. We were able to stop congressional bill number 10, which would have essentially done away with public health in Colombia. And we were able to get rid of the foreign secretary who went all over the world, denying what was happening in Colombia. The strike also was able to get rid of the police chief in El Valle, who was among the police leaders who was responsible for the most violent repression.

Francisco Maltés ([17:52](#)):

So those are important achievements that are among the most tangible. Now, intangible achievements, for the first time in the history of social struggles in Colombia, the National Strike Committee has been able to define an agenda and form a part of a public conversation. We are now able to talk about basic income, free tuition, wage subsidies for small and medium businesses, issues that matter to workers and the average people in Colombia. We've made people understand that taxes are an important issue for both their personal lives and the life of the nation.

Francisco Maltés ([18:44](#)):

Another intangible achievement has been solidifying the notion that social movements have, as their goal, acting peacefully and that our goals are achieved through unity and through peaceful mobilization. And so those are some of the tangible and intangible of achievements that have made it so that the social movement in Colombia can be neatly divided now into two different eras.

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Shawna Bader-Blau ([19:16](#)):

I mean, those are outstanding, impressive, powerful achievements in the face of this repression, getting rid of a corrupt minister, seeing the end of employment for a brutal police chief, eliminating this tax bill that would have been so destructive and increased inequality in the country, and opening space for the dialogue of the most basic, fundamental improvements in wages and working conditions that a labor movement can ever demand, subsidies for people, basic income. It's really, truly remarkable, in the face of the repression, what this movement has been able to achieve.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([20:00](#)):

The Colombian union movement won big victories by reaching out to a diverse coalition of young people, retired workers, indigenous groups, the LGBTQ community, environmentalists, and rural workers to join the National Strike Committee and defeat harmful tax laws. After the break, Francisco will tell us how they are building on their successes.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([20:25](#)):

Hi, there. It's Shawna again. I just wanted to take a minute to invite you to check out Radio Labour, the international labor movement's radio service. Radio Labour produces daily newscasts about union events and issues, and it also produces special programs to support labor campaigns around the world. Check out Radio Labour at radiolabour.net and find out more about worker rights struggles around the world and how the movement is supporting their efforts for decent wages, fair treatment, and strong communities. Follow and subscribe at radiolabour.net.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([21:20](#)):

If I could ask you, what's next? What are the outstanding demands? What are the next demands of the movement? You talked about the impunity of the police for their crimes against civilians. You talked about the need, positively, for a basic income and wage support. Can you tell us a little bit more about what are the next demands of the CUT and the social movement?

Francisco Maltés ([21:47](#)):

There were 10 points in our initial list of demands that President Duque refused to negotiate on, but those 10 points have been converted into bills. And that's a new phenomenon that is unprecedented among social movements, for a social movement to be able to then propose 10 legislative bills. It was attempted by CUT in November of 1992, but this is the first time that it is being done to this degree. In 1992, there were labor laws proposed that had over a million signatures in support of them, and so we are now trying to get Congress to begin debate about our 10 bills that we have proposed.

Francisco Maltés ([22:35](#)):

A second point is that we are continuing to fight now against a new tax reform that's been proposed by President Duque. This has several points that are harmful. It would propose to have large and small and medium businesses taxed at the same rate on their income, which we feel would lead to the collapse of many small and medium businesses that make up 80 percent of formal employment in Colombia. The bill also proposes to freeze public employee salaries for 10 years and shrink the state, which would mean fewer government jobs. They would give the president power to eliminate or merge government agencies and also empower the president to develop processes for privatization. This is why we are against this new proposed law. The third point is that we want to launch an international campaign.

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Shawna Bader-Blau ([23:40](#)):

You started to talk about international solidarity. I wanted to ask you, as you move your strategy from a protest strategy to a political struggle, working with allies that you may have in the Parliament, as you move to this new phase, what is the role of international solidarity in supporting your movement? You talked about the ICHR, which is the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, and its findings. You mentioned the CSA, which we also know as TUCA or the ITUC, the International Trade Union Confederation, as an ally, the AFL-CIO and the Solidarity Center and the American labor movement. How can global unions and human rights groups and others help Colombia and stand with your movement?

Francisco Maltés ([24:27](#)):

The labor movement internationally can talk to their governments, in their particular countries, so that those governments can put pressure on the Colombian government to fulfill the recommendations put out by the CIDH. In October, we're going to launch a tour throughout Europe, speaking to European governments and labor movements there. We're hoping that the United Nations will weigh in on the ICHR's 41-point recommendation, and we will continue to have mobilizations for the remainder of this year.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([25:09](#)):

As you mobilize this social movement for justice, you can totally count on all of us in the international labor movement to stand side-by-side and hand-in-hand with you in your fight, which is a fight we share with you. I've been thinking, brother Francisco, as I've been listening to you, of your four decades of dedication to building a progressive social change in the labor movement and in Colombia for a better future. And as I think about your history and your work, I want to know, what keeps you going? What motivates you? You have a polarized society, a right-wing, anti-democratic government. What motivates you to continue this fight in the labor movement and for social justice?

Francisco Maltés ([26:03](#)):

I would like to, once again, thank the Solidarity Center for all of the help that is provided to labor and social movements in Colombia. And as far as my motivation, what drives me, it is my social conscience and the idea that a more just society, a different country that is more equal, that has greater social justice is possible.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([26:34](#)):

Brother Francisco Maltés, president of the CUT of Colombia, thank you so much for joining us today, for those inspiring words. A better future, less inequality, social justice for the people of Colombia and all people, everywhere, we stand with you in this call and in this demand. Thank you for sharing your story.

Francisco Maltés ([26:58](#)):

It is very nice of you to have me, and I want to give thanks to the entire technical team.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([27:07](#)):

Our conversation with Francisco Maltés today is a powerful reminder of what can happen when people come together to demand their rights to just and fair treatment. A diverse coalition of workers, students, women, and communities that have been historically discriminated against stood up to a

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government that was serving the wealthy at the expense of everyone else and said, "No more." By doing so, they pushed back the harshest tax law ever proposed against those who could least afford to pay it. They preserved public health care. They got rid of corrupt ministers and those responsible for repression and violence, and together, they are moving forward a host of measures in the Colombian Congress to provide decent income, job creation, access to higher education, and much more, a vision of a better future that benefits everyone.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([28:08](#)):

My deepest appreciation to my brother, Francisco Maltés, for his leadership and commitment to achieving social justice in such a difficult environment, often in the face of violent repression. Thank you, Francisco, for sharing such a compelling example of what workers and their unions can achieve, when they expand their movement, making it more inclusive and so much more powerful.

Shawna Bader-Blau ([28:36](#)):

You can follow and subscribe to The Solidarity Center Podcast on Apple Podcast, Spotify, or wherever you find your shows. Learn more about the Solidarity Center at solidaritycenter.org and follow our social media on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The Solidarity Center Podcast is a member of the Labor Radio Podcast Network, and our show is produced and engineered by Adam Yoffe. A special thanks to the staff of the Solidarity Center, who assisted with this podcast. In more than 60 countries around the world, we work to ensure a righteous future for workers, dignity, freedom, equality, and justice. For The Solidarity Center Podcast, I'm Shawna Bader-Blau. Thanks for listening.