

Why Does the IUF Attack SINALTRAINAL?

On July 15, 2003, the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers Associations (IUF), a worldwide labor federation headquartered in Switzerland, issued a statement publicly opposing the call for a worldwide boycott of Coca-Cola products by SINALTRAINAL, the Colombian union that represents Coca-Cola workers. At the same time, the IUF charges SINALTRAINAL — and, by implication, all of its supporters — with circulating “unsubstantiated allegations and empty political slogans” about human rights violations in Colombia that Coke has tolerated and encouraged.

The “allegations” against Coke and two of its bottlers can be found in the lawsuits filed by the International Labor Rights Fund and the United Steelworkers of America. The lawsuits include a chilling description of the assassination of SINALTRAINAL negotiator Isidro Segundo Gil, based on eyewitness accounts. They name a former plant manager who prepared resignation forms that SINALTRAINAL members were compelled to sign after Gil’s murder. They cite payments to paramilitaries, whom the U.S. State Department labels “terrorists,” by a sales supervisor and a second official of Coke’s “anchor bottler” in Latin America. They assert that Colombian troops allied with the paramilitaries trained at the U.S. Army’s School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Ga., where students were encouraged to torture and murder those who do “union organizing and recruiting,” pass out “propaganda in favor of workers,” or “sympathize with demonstrators or strikes.” (This was made public when the Pentagon was forced to reveal the contents of training manuals used at the school.)

The lawsuits are based on months of research and interviews with union members and leaders who personally observed the pattern of collaboration between Coca-Cola plant managers and the paramilitaries. These “allegations” have also been substantiated by many independent journalists and investigators for respected human rights organizations.

In 1998, a delegation of Canadian church and trade union representatives, coordinated by the Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America, traveled to Colombia. Although their report was written six years ago, it clearly stated that representatives of the Colombian IUF affiliate, SINTRAINAGRO, “expressed little concern” about abuses committed by military and paramilitary forces, and “disturbingly” chose to ignore the “conditions of exploitation” that affect its own members. The information that prompted the IUF to attack SINALTRAINAL’s call for a worldwide boycott originated with an organization that, as you will see, has never paid much attention to the conditions to which multinational corporations like Coke and other exploitative employers subject Colombian workers.

Because of their relevance to the current situation, we reprint below excerpts from the 1998 report as well as a letter dated April 5, 2004 from a former Colombian trade unionist living in exile in England.

“Colombia and the TUC, Monday 5th April 2004

“As a former trade unionist in Colombia, now living in exile, perhaps I can shed some light on the TUC’s [Trade Union Congress in England] silence about the Colombian workers of SINALTRAINAL, which Mark Thomas (29 March) criticizes. The International union of Food Workers (IUF), which the TUC has to follow in this type of situation, strongly criticized the call

to boycott Coca-Cola. The Colombian delegate to the IUF is president of a union called SICO. He was expelled by his previous union, representing brewery workers, for espousing extreme right-wing views. The new union was set up in Carepa, Antioquia, at the local Coca-Cola bottling plant, after five SINATRAINAL members had been murdered, many more forcibly displaced and the union offices burned down by paramilitaries. Ever since, SICO has coexisted peacefully with the paramilitary forces that control this part of Colombia.”

Manuel Perez
London SW9

“The SICO Local Section in Carepa-Urabá began its organising work in 1999 and was established in January 2000. In its process of contacting and organising the Coca-Cola workers, SICO relied on the extensive support of the National Union of Workers in the Agrarian Industry (SINTRAINAGRO) and the IUF Latin America Education Project. The first collective agreement was signed in Carepa on 15 February 2000.”

From the IUF website.

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February 1998

REPORT OF THE CANADIAN TRADE UNION DELEGATION TO COLOMBIA

Background to Tour:

In response to an escalation of attacks directed against Colombian trade unionists, the mission was conceived and coordinated by the **Inter-Church Committee on Human Rights in Latin America (ICCHRLA)**, a church-based organization which has established extensive working relationships of solidarity with church, human rights and popular organizations in Colombia since 1989.

The purpose of the trip was to investigate abuses of human rights directed primarily against the organized labour movement of Colombia, but also other institutions of civil society, namely human rights, church, women's and peasant organizations.

Each participating Canadian organization was responsible for selecting and covering the costs of its delegate(s), while ICCHRLA covered additional logistical expenses and organized the many details of the tour, including developing an agenda, internal travel and translation.

The delegation was in Colombia from October 1-11, 1997 and consisted of the following eight (8) persons:

John Bird, journalist, United Church Observer; **Bill Fairbairn**, South America Program Coordinator, ICCHRLA; **Carl Hetu**, Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace (CCODP) and member of the CSN (Quebec); **Rick Kitchen**, Canadian Auto Workers

Local 127 (Chatham, Ontario); **Ken Luckhardt**, Staff Representative, CAW Social Justice Fund; **David Onyalo**, Staff, Canadian Labour Congress Human Rights Department; **Don Schmidt**, Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA); **Paul Smith**, Ontario English Catholic Teachers Association (OECTA)

Colombian Trade Unionism: A Final Overview

Throughout our meetings with Colombian trade unionists in all regions visited, we witnessed an incredible determination to carry forward the struggle against virtually impossible odds. While eleven days certainly limited our ability to meet with unionists from all sectors and regions of the country, the testimonies provided our delegation with an overview that allows us to come back to Canada and make very strong recommendations for increased trade union solidarity between Canadian and Colombian workers.

In only one instance were we troubled by anyone involved in the labour movement and that instance deserves mention.

While visiting the northern region of Uraba, members of our delegation met with the leadership of the National Agricultural Union, SINTRAINAGRO. The union was formed in 1988 after the government revoked the legal status of two unions: SINTAGRO and SINTRABANANO. The new union, SINTRAINAGRO, represented a fusion of the two...

During our interview with the SINTRAINAGRO leadership, our delegation was deeply disturbed both by the tone and content of the discussion. We were struck by the fact that the briefing provided by the union leaders represented an interpretation, which was diametrically opposed to that provided to us by all the other NGOs with whom we met in the region. Specifically, the leaders expressed little concern over the incursion of paramilitary groups into the region (which has resulted in countless massacres and tens of thousands of refugees). Furthermore, they never acknowledged the abuses committed by the military in the region nor the links between the military and paramilitary forces, which has been well documented by Colombian and international human rights organizations. The SINTRAINAGRO leaders whom we met also launched a vociferous and slanderous personal attack against the courageous mayor of Apartado, Gloria Cuartas, a woman who is well known as a strong advocate for peace and a defender of the rights of the civilian population. Disturbingly, the leaders did not make a single reference to the conditions of exploitation their membership experience at the hands of the local banana growers.

Before we left the meeting, we were essentially warned that we would not be wise to travel in the region (under the auspices of church-based human rights organizations) without the prior approval and direction of the SINTRAINAGRO leadership.

Our concerns regarding the SINTRAINAGRO leadership were only heightened the following day when we met with the army commander of Uraba, General Rito Alejo de Rio. Here, we were struck by the fact that General de Rio's briefing of the situation in Uraba coincided exactly with that provided by SINTRAINAGRO leaders. Moreover, in referring to that union under its present leadership, General de Rio had only words of praise, describing the union as "the model of models."

Our reason for raising this in this report is not just for information purposes. Rather, the SINTRAINAGRO leadership told us that it had recently been accepted as an affiliate of the IUF

and that this affiliation would allow it to give the international labour movement the real story of what is happening in Colombia.

In any event, we are concerned that a union described by an army general, well known for his support of paramilitary death squads in the area, as a "model of models" will perhaps begin to play a role in the international labour movement circles that will further confuse and disinform the rest of the world about Colombian workers' struggles.

While it is certainly not our role to pass judgment on the international affiliation of Colombian trade unions, we strongly believe that this situation should be monitored very closely. There are hundreds of former members of this union who are now displaced in other regions of the country who would undoubtedly have a very different story to tell regarding the particular leadership that currently heads SINTRAINAGRO. In our view, their testimonies should form part of the final assessment of the role this union is now playing in the Uraba region.

[This concludes the excerpts from the Canadian delegation's report.]

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IUF's Oswald: Allegiance to Whom?

It is fair to ask why Ron Oswald, the IUF's general secretary, is so vociferously opposed to the efforts of students and workers who have rallied around SINALTRAINAL and the Campaign to Stop Killer Coke. Mr. Oswald's inclination to support "cooperative discussions" with companies that commit human rights and labor rights abuses, rather than confronting them with demands that they change their behavior, is nothing new.

For example, Mr. Oswald sharply criticized the International Labor Rights Fund's lawsuit against the U.S. Customs Service for breaking American trade laws by allowing the importation of African cocoa picked by child slaves. Mr. Oswald's position is that the ILRF — and more importantly, the child slaves it is fighting for — should have waited for the IUF and other parties to negotiate a deal with the cocoa companies before taking any affirmative steps to protect the children. While the IUF gets bogged down in protracted discussions with the companies, these children continue to suffer the most extreme forms of exploitation.

Similarly, Mr. Oswald is actually scheduled to be a witness for Fresh Del Monte Produce in the ILRF's lawsuit against that company, which in 1998 not only fired 900 workers in Guatemalan banana plantations, but organized 200 heavily-armed men to assault them. Mr. Oswald has agreed to testify that he signed an agreement with the company (albeit without the workers' consent) which waived the workers' right to bring this lawsuit. What makes this situation even more incredible is that the banana workers are represented by a union affiliated with Ron Oswald's own IUF.

Unlike Ron Oswald, who seems to believe that multinational corporations will stop participating in human rights and labor abuses if only they are approached in the proper spirit of moral uplift, we believe that workers, students and other people of goodwill have to challenge these companies. It is this difference in beliefs and approaches that puts us at odds with Ron Oswald.

If we want The Coca-Cola Co. to take its responsibilities as a corporate citizen seriously and to protect the safety and rights of workers in Colombia, we must raise the stakes for Coca-Cola

in ways that will make its top policymakers realize that they have a lot more to lose than to gain if they ignore us. We strongly support initiatives to cut out important Coke markets. We do not believe that high schools, colleges, universities, government facilities, unions and other institutions should lend their names and prestige nor serve as a marketplace to a company which has shown such anti-social, immoral and criminal conduct. Since Coke is so massively involved in lawbreaking and human rights violations in Colombia and elsewhere, it follows that conscientious consumers will find Coke products “unthinkable” and “undrinkable.”

In any struggle between workers and an employer, both sides as well as “innocent bystanders” may be harmed. When transportation workers, autoworkers, steelworkers or government workers strike, there are always adverse impacts on other workers and large segments of the public. There’s no escaping the fact that union solidarity may require sacrifice.

SINALTRAINAL is a courageous, independent union that will not be intimidated, even by the most dominant brand in history. It has staked its future on the solidarity of its brothers and sisters around the world. Unfortunately, the IUF chooses to align itself with the position of SINTRAINAGRO, a “company union” with a pro-management bias if ever there was one. With a clear understanding of the IUF’s regrettable and mistaken stand, SINALTRAINAL and the Campaign to Stop Killer Coke ask you: Which side are you on?

Campaign to Stop Killer Coke
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