

## Confronting power with power: the Campaign to Stop Killer Coke

by Caitlyn Vernon

*This article summarizes the October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2004 presentation at York University by the Campaign to Stop Killer Coke.*

As part of the Canadian Campaign to Stop Killer Coke Week of Action, Campaign Director Ray Rogers spoke at York University on October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2004. The Canadian speaking tour was organized and facilitated by Larry Wells of the Oakville and District Labour Council. A video began the presentation by illustrating the desperate situation for union activists in Colombia, Larry Wells spoke about Canadian support and involvement in the Campaign, and Ray Rogers passionately argued the case against Coca-Cola.

Fighting for their unions, their jobs, and their lives, Coke workers in Colombia have filed a lawsuit against The Coca-Cola Company and Colombian bottlers. The lawsuit charges that Coca-Cola's bottlers in Colombia "contracted with or otherwise directed paramilitary security forces that utilized extreme violence and murdered, tortured, unlawfully detained or otherwise silenced trade union leaders." The lawsuit was filed in 2001 by the International Labour Rights Fund and the United Steelworkers of America on behalf of SINALTRAINAL (the union representing Coke workers in Colombia), several of its members, and the estate of Isidro Gil (who was murdered by paramilitaries while working at a Coke bottling plant.)

The Campaign is challenging the image that Coke has spent billions of dollars over decades to create. Its actions

contrast its advertised image; in Colombia the company is involved in threatening and murdering trade union leaders, in India and Mexico it is stealing water and turning farmlands into wastelands, and here in Canada it is aggressively marketing a product to children that is helping to fuel the obesity and diabetes epidemics. This is a company that last year gave its 6 top executives \$8.4 million in bonuses, while laying off 3700 employees.

In 1996 at a Coca-Cola bottling plant in Colombia, paramilitaries shot Isidro Gil. The plant is controlled by Coca-Cola and bottles and distributes only Coke. That night the union office was set on fire and the next day the paramilitaries marched into the plant and gathered the workers together. The workers were told they had three choices: leave Colombia, quit the union, or be shot. Their deadline was 4pm that same afternoon. The Coca-Cola management happened to have union resignation forms ready, and all members of the union quit that day. The wages at the plant then dropped from \$380 to \$130/month.

Ray Rogers related how he attempted to speak up about these issues at a recent annual meeting of the Coca-Cola Co. He had his microphone turned off, was physically assaulted by hotel security guards, and then arrested by local municipal police and forced to leave the meeting. As it turns out, these uniformed police officers were in fact working for the hotel security in the pay of Coca-Cola. This raises a serious issue of local police presumably

representing the public while actually being paid to represent the interests of a private company.

The Campaign to Stop Killer Coke has been raising these issues on college and university campuses. As a result students on 5 campuses in the USA and 3 in Ireland have terminated or chosen to not renew their contracts with Coca-Cola, and have removed all Coca-Cola products and Coke machines from campus. While Coke refuses to publicly debate Ray Rogers, the company finds other means for distributing its side of the story. When the Campaign spoke in Toronto high schools, Coca-Cola contacted the Toronto School Board, upset over Ray's presence, and sent each school Coca-Cola propaganda for distribution.

Ray also emphasized the connections between The Coca-Cola Co., the Royal Bank of Canada and Dow Chemical. J. Pedro Reinhard, a top policy maker on the Boards of Directors of all three companies, has been called a corporate criminal for his involvement with these companies that refuse to accept responsibility for their human rights and environmental abuses. The Campaign has organized a letter campaign (see website below), encouraging the Royal Bank of Canada to make Reinhard accountable for his support of the companies' actions by removing him from its Board of Directors.

Larry Wells spoke about Canadian support and involvement in the Campaign. Currently he is seeking the support of labour councils and

encouraging national unions to become involved. He insisted that these are the kinds of issues where solidarity and support from the labour movement are paramount. Larry also noted that the Canadian government, through the Canada Pension Plan, has investments in The Coca-Cola Company.

Audience members participated in a discussion of paramilitarization in the Colombian context. The money that is sent to Colombia to supposedly fight the drug trade goes to the military, and it is difficult to distinguish between the military and the paramilitary. Coca-Cola is complicit in the actions of the paramilitaries: there is evidence of Coca-Cola managers paying paramilitaries, and the paramilitaries have easy access to the bottling plants to intimidate workers.

SINALTRAINAL Vice-President Juan Carlos Galvis has summed up the situation in Colombia by stating, "If we lose the fight against Coca-Cola, we will first lose our union, next our jobs and then our lives."

For more information, to join the campaign, or to give a donation, visit [www.killercoke.org](http://www.killercoke.org).

To send your comments or support, if you would like to subscribe to their electronic newsletter, or if you would like copies of the flyers and information sheets to distribute, contact:

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*This event was co-sponsored by the Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean (CERLAC) and the Centre for Research on Work and Society (CRWS). It was the second of a CERLAC series of three events on Colombia. For information on the Fall 2004 Series on Colombia, see <http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/EVENTS.html#Colombia>.*

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