

Update from an April 2003 interview with Edgar Paez, President of Barrancabermeja section of Sinaltrainal

The U.S. court of Florida said we can continue our investigation but only against Panamco Beverages, Bebidas y Alimentos of Uraba and Richard Kirby, owner of a bottling company.

Unfortunately Coca Cola International and Coca Cola Colombia were put outside the investigation. We are persevering in the U.S. and putting before the court the documents and the evidence to continue the investigation against Coca Cola. The court considered continuing the investigation based on the symbiotic relationship between the paramilitaries and the Colombian state. The transnational could have avoided the crimes that were committed by issuing a public statement against the paramilitaries.

I conclude by informing you that despite all this and given Colombian justice's failure to act, we have sued Coca-Cola in the United States District Court in the Southern District of Florida for murder, for kidnapping, for torture or incarceration, and for death threats against workers.

However, Coca-Cola deems our resort to the courts a crime. And thus we are being sued for having sued Coca-Cola. So now it is a crime to seek justice. This is astonishing.

THIS IS THE STATE OF AFFAIRS FOR THE COLOMBIAN TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

To a greater or lesser extent, many workers face these same conditions. It is the river of blood, it is the price that we have to pay for fighting against these monsters that want to get rich at the expense of the suffering, the blood, and the riches of the Colombian people. For this simple reason, we request here in this forum that Coca-Cola be declared responsible for all these crimes. We ask the audience to extend solidarity, not only to Sinaltrainal but to all the workers and the entire trade union movement in Colombia.

We ask for justice. We ask for truth. And we ask for reparations. Because we hurt for the deaths of our sisters and brothers, we hurt for the suffering of our children, our families. Coca-Cola has caused a lot of damage through these crimes-as well as through all its looting of the riches that it has taken from Colombia throughout for over 100 years. It has contributed to the impoverishment of the communities. It has contributed to the attack against the rights and the sovereignty of the Colombian people.

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the authority to whom we denounced several of the cases of the company's murder, persecution and abuse. Now, in a claim that Coca-Cola brought against us, he is the transnational corporation's legal representative. Thus those who represent the state at a later time represent the companies.

All these cases have come to the knowledge of justice system. It has not investigated, punished or stopped the abuses; nor has it redressed the damages caused. The processes are delayed, the cases end up in archives-and we, the victims, end up the subject of a lawsuit.

Even when judges have found Coca-Cola's officials guilty of violating the workers' right to organize and meet, those same officials continue committing the same offenses at Coca-Cola's bottling plants. Officials who commit abuses and are caught are simply transferred to other bottling plants. Thus they maintain impunity. There is no punishment-not even when there is clear, solid proof.

As result of the policy of impunity, the union organization at the Coca-Cola Corp. is at the brink of disappearing. The terror campaign is very serious. The fear felt by the workers inside the plants is tremendously high. The blackmail we suffer every day is immense.

In due course, we have also given account of all this to the United States government. But it has not taken any action about it either.



Eyewitness Report from Javier Correa, President of Sinaltrainal, in a December 2002 speech

I want to start my presentation by stating that this forum was held on Dec. 5 in remembrance of our brother, Isidro Segundo Gil. As this national assembly takes place, our brother and all those workers we cannot forget would be asking: What would Coca-Cola do to us in this forum? Because whether in forums or collective bargaining, Coca-Cola's answer has always come in the form of a murder or an act of aggression.

Allow me to read a message from the family of Isidro Segundo Gil:

Dec. 5, 2002: The sixth anniversary of the death of Isidro Segundo Gil Gil. Communication to the national and international public:

We are the relatives of Isidro Segundo Gil, victims of the repression by the transnational Coca-Cola Corp. carried out through the company Bebidas y Alimentos de Urabá, SA. The manager at that time, Dec. 5, 1996, was Ariosto Milán Mosquera in Carepa, Antioquia. We condemn Coca-Cola for the events of that date that took the life of our son, brother, husband, father, and companion, Isidro Segundo Gil. We also condemn the state of Colombia for its inefficiency, negligence and failure to investigate his and other deaths, and also for the incineration of Sinaltrainal's local headquarters in Carepa, Antioquia. On the incident's sixth anniversary, there are those who have not yet condemned the culprits but on the contrary, reward them-as in the case of Coca-Cola's manager Milán Mosquera, who, having yet to face justice, can be found managing the hospital in his hometown. Meanwhile, former workers of Bebidas y Alimentos de Urabá, Coca-Cola, still suffer from forced displacement, persecution and instability both at home and at work.

We send our voice of protest to the international community so that justice can be achieved. Because right now in Colombia the law is applied only against the poor; it facilitates the enrichment, the savage capitalism, of foreign transnational corporation and thus impoverishes the Colombian people.

We demand that the culprits be brought to justice.
--the Family of Isidro Segundo Gil Gil

The truth, brothers and sisters, is that it is very difficult to summarize the significance of Coca-Cola's policy, its attacks on workers and their communities, in Colombia and worldwide.

COCA COLA: TERROR AS A WORLDWIDE POLICY

We are distressed at the conditions of our sisters and brothers around the world. I want you to know that, just as we denounce the transnational Coca-Cola Corp. for murders, abuses and injuries against the workers here in Colombia, we equally denounce it for crimes committed in Guatemala in the early 1980s. There, several workers were killed. Our sisters and brothers were taken from the bottling plants by the police. And then their bodies were found without ears, without noses, without fingers but with notes in their shirt pockets, written by their murderers.



Coca-Cola has also attacked Black people in the United States. This was made evident in a lawsuit for racial discrimination that Coca-Cola lost in U.S. courts.

At a hearing in Brussels, Coca Cola's crimes in a town in India were denounced. In that town the transnational corporation took control of a river. Coca-Cola stole the community's water and made it inaccessible. It took the water, which belongs to the people of the area, forcing them to buy it back from Coca-Cola. So now the community has decided to expel the corporation.

The same thing has occurred in the sister republic of Venezuela. Our sisters and brothers there, through the Laureano Bendía Committee, have launched a campaign against the corporations that are financing the disinformation campaign aimed at overthrowing the democratic, popular government of Hugo Chávez. Coca-Cola is amongst these companies. The sisters and brothers from the Committee of Displaced Workers of Venezuela also speak of the company's abuses in Venezuela.

COCA COLA IN COLOMBIA

It is a little-known but outrageous example of Coca-Cola's policies that while the poorest people in Colombia struggle to acquire that precious liquid, water, the Colombian government favors Coca-Cola with prices for water that are below those paid by these poorest people. Bear in mind that water makes up 80 percent of Coca Cola's intake products. This type of aggression against the population is unacceptable.



Coca-Cola has 18 plants in Colombia under the name Panamco Colombia. Three different plants, one in Florencia, one in Leticia, and one in Urabá, are the property of a U.S. citizen named Richard Kirby. In these plants Coca-Cola has 10,587 workers. Eighty percent of them are subcontracted. These workers are practically working for free. Their conventional rights are stolen. They have none of the benefits of the nominal labor laws. And they are not even allowed to unionize.

At the same time, Coca-Cola has laid off over 5,000 workers in Colombia.

Coca-Cola has used the device of accusing the workers of being guerrillas, to charge us with being terrorists. It has charged that we meet together to plan crimes. It has sued us criminally, bringing insult and calumny against us. But with no evidence, the courts decreed our innocence and the processes were concluded in our favor. Yet Coca-Cola has said openly that it uses this strategy so that the paramilitary groups will act against Sinaltrainal and our sisters and brothers.

According to a published article, in 1998 Coca-Cola officials met with paramilitary leader Carlos Castaño in Córdoba. They also made contact in Montería on Aug. 15, 1998.

And as if that is not enough, there is an October 2002 testimony stating that the paramilitary groups continue to enter Barrancabermeja's bottling plant to meet with company officials. When Coca-Cola is asked to give a sensible explanation for this state of affairs, it goes to the paramilitaries and tells them we are making public accusations against them. And it sues us for making public its relationship with the paramilitary groups.

Eight Coca-Cola workers have been assassinated-four of them within the context of collective bargaining. The clearest message was the murder of Isidro Segundo.

We presented the labor contract proposal on Nov. 18. On Dec. 5, the day prescribed by law for the negotiation, they murdered Isidro inside the bottling plant. And seconds before Rigoberto Marín, one of the production managers, talked with the paramilitaries that murdered Isidro. He was detained but without a logical explanation, he was let free.

There are 38 displaced sisters and brothers, 67 sisters and brothers under death threat. Because the workers' beligerency has not yielded, the workers continue to resist and expose the atrocities, Coca-Cola has now resorted to attacking our families. They have attempted to kidnap our little daughters. They have searched the union headquarters, the workers' cooperatives. They have burned down one of the union headquarters and tried to obliterate all the evidence so we would be unable to either bring charges or expose the crime.

We have sisters and brothers who have had to go into exile. We have workers who have been forced to denounce the labor union because Coca-Cola brought paramilitary groups into the bottling plants. We have had union protests and demonstrations attacked by the police in military fashion, based on the company's allegations that there are insurgents and terrorists among us.

The situation has reached such extremes that when workers join the union, unbearable pressure is applied against them and their families. Coca-Cola managers and officers visit their homes. They chase down our sisters and brothers to deliver notices of discharge from their work contracts. They have even gone to jails to deliver lay-off notices to many of our sisters and brothers.

They murdered our brother Adolfo Múnera on Aug. 31 after one of Coca-Cola's officials accused him of rebellion. After accusing him, they searched his home and obtained a warrant for his arrest. Coca-Cola then fired him.

However, the investigation ended in his favor. Coca-Cola was ordered to accept this decree of his innocence. Coca-Cola refused, filing a motion to set aside the finding. The company motion was denied, and on Aug. 22 the brother was notified of the right to be reinstated to his job. On Aug. 31 he was murdered.

Thus, there is not even the right to fight in court for our jobs.

The paramilitary groups have posted death threats against us at most of the bottling plants. These warnings have given the labor union a deadline of six months to abandon the cities and the bottling plants. Somehow Coca-Cola, with all its security systems, never finds the paramilitaries responsible for posting these notices inside the plants. Nor has it exposed them to the authorities for their punishment. That is because all the company's security is for hunting the workers. The Coca-Cola bottling plants look like jails. They look like concentration camps. Even when the sisters and brothers have to relieve themselves as required by physiology, they are followed by armed personnel. The situation in the plants is full of pressure and anguish.

Also inside the bottling plants they have produced another type of deaths. In 1998 they closed off the bottling plant franchise at Pasto. For two years a brother endured the situation. But watching his children go hungry, he made the decision to swallow poison. He left a note holding Coca-Cola responsible. To this date the company has not provided a survivor's pension to that brother's widow. That is Coca-Cola: It does not even care about the suffering of the families.

To hide its culpability for this state of affairs, the company operates its bottling plants worldwide as franchises, or individual bottling contracts. Yet we say that Coca-Cola is responsible-because we have made it aware of all these acts of aggression and it has done nothing.

We point to attorney Jaime Dejar Cuello to demonstrate the ties between the state and the company. He was formerly



ISIDRO SEGUNDO GIL

