

## International boycott

## Coca-Cola destroying life and liberty

by Linda Nagel

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Across Canadian TV screens romp healthy, smiling young people as the song plays on, "Coke adds life." Yet in other countries, the tune is different as consumers and trade unionists join together to boycott the international soft drink. In Sweden, workers halted Coke production for three days; consumers stopped buying it for four; in Australia, Coca-Cola workers held protest meetings during working hours; Mexican workers stopped bottling it for a week, Finnish workers for three days; and Spanish hotel, restaurant and food workers' unions called for a 15-day sales and consumer boycott earlier this year, according to the News Bulletin of the International Union of Food and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF).

Why so much ill will towards a product universally promoted as part of the good life? The answer lies in Guatemala, a tiny Central American country where being a worker in the recently unionized Coca-Cola bottling plant means, quite literally, putting one's life on the line. Coca-Cola has done little to stop the persecutions.

According to the May, 1980 Latin American and Caribbean Labour Report, workers at the Coke plant, Embotelladora, Guatemalteca, S.A., fought a hard and bloody battle to certify their union and force management to negotiate with them. The union, formed in 1975, was legally incorporated in 1976. That year 152 workers at the Coca-Cola plant were fired, but reinstated through the pressure of combined unions.

On February 2, 1978 the union forced the company to sign its first collective agreement. At this point, the Labour Report said, management attempted to sabotage the union by firings, bribes, intimidation and the setting up of pro-management associations. In December the union's secretary-general was killed while on his delivery route. Five months later his replacement was beaten to death with iron bars and his throat was cut, said a Globe and Mail report June 13, 1980. In March 1979, the union published a statement charging plant owner John Trotter and his friends with responsibility for the repression.

The first collective agreement expired February 2, 1980. On April 14 the union took management to court for refusing to negotiate. That same day the company fired 31 unionized workers and the plant was attacked by machine guns and tear gas, said the Labour Report.

Following these and other incidents, the eight-man police unit already in the plant was replaced by a 16-man specialized military unit. On May 1, four Coca-Cola workers were abducted from their homes.



Two were later found tortured and dead. To date six Coca-Cola workers (including three Secretary-Generals of the union) have been killed. On May 16, the leader of the 'pro-management' association was assassinated after he told the rest of the association he had had enough, said the July IUF News Bulletin.

Coca-Cola International has quietly stood by, refusing for a long time to break with the American licence holder of the Guatemalan franchise, John Trotter, whom the IUF has called a "right-wing Texas businessman." Until May 1980, Coca-Cola claimed it was not responsible for the labour relations practices of its licence holders.

According to the IUF, Coca-Cola generally seeks to maintain good relations with trade unions in its own plants. But it refuses to change its "hands off" policy towards licence holders. This was confirmed in a recent letter to various church groups holding Coca-Cola shares, who wanted this year's stockholders meeting to instruct the company to include a clause on basic human rights in its licence agreements. Such a clause, top management argued, "would constitute an improper and unnecessary intrusion into the business affairs of the independent bottlers."

In response to these events, the IUF called for an international tourist boycott of Guatemala, for, unfortunately Coca-Cola workers are not the only ones victimized in this virtual military state.

To date, 27 unions on all continents have joined the campaign (Canada has been one of the last to respond) to take direct action on Coca-Cola production and consumption where possible.

Guatemala has a 25-year history of murder, torture and political and class opposition. According to a July 12, 1980 Le Monde article, estimates of the number of assassinations since 1953 range from 30,000 to 60,000 and Guatemala has "the dubious honour of being the country with the greatest amount of political violence in Latin America." The U.S. Embassy says Guatemala has the largest and best equipped military force in Central America.

Prior to the election of the current president, General Romero Lucas Garcia, in February 1978, the physical persecutions, kidnappings and

killings which systematically eliminated government opponents were commonly thought to be the work of armed right-wing paramilitary groups.

But the latest attack, the June 21 abduction of the 25-30 trade unionists from the headquarters of the National Labour Central (CNT) almost certainly had government involvement. This is supported by the fact that the CNT is located in the extremely congested downtown area of Guatemala City. The streets in the area were cordoned off just before the raid, making it apparent that government military/police were behind the well organized, large scale attack.

A report by the Latin American Working Group (LAWG) of Toronto said that the kidnapped trade unionists had been holding an emergency meeting at the CNT to discuss the recent deaths of two trade union leaders. On June 20, the secretary of the Organizing Committee of the Coca-Cola plant workers was shot to death as he left work. On June 17, the badly tortured body of a worker at the plant in which Coca-Cola holds a majority interest was found.

This recent attack is the most overt to date against the organized trade union movement in Guatemala. "The military regime of Lucas Garcia is bent upon eradicating the entire leadership of the trade unions," said Toronto's LAWG.

In May 1980, Coca-Cola appeared to finally bow to mounting international action and the indignation of trade unions and politicians, and pressured its Guatemalan franchise holder into selling the controversial enterprise. Trotter resigned in May but the terror continues at the

plant.

The latest IUF News Bulletin reported the impending sale of the plant had fallen through. Because of the continued tension, Coca-Cola is having difficulty finding other buyers.

On June 23, the IUF general secretary, Dan Gallin, cabled Coca-Cola asking it to buy the plant directly.

"The present indecisiveness and delays by the Coca-Cola company are costing more lives and could be construed as deliberate stalling," the cable stated. If a satisfactory reply is not received shortly, the IUF intends to resume its call for world-wide action from other unions.

In early July, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) headed by Dennis McDermott called for a boycott of Coca-Cola products until Coca-Cola withdrew its bottling franchise from the present owner. The 2.3 million member congress has also protested to the president of Guatemala and called for an investigation by the human rights committee of the Organization of American States.

It will also ask for a halt to foreign aid by the Canadian government.

More than ever, Guatemalan workers require international support from trade unionists, human rights organizations and individuals.

Letters of protest can be written to Coca-Cola, President Garcia and Minister of External Affairs Mark MacGuigan.

Coca-Cola, which has the power to influence the Guatemalan government, must be made to take a firm stand concerning not only trade union rights, but basic human rights. These include the right of workers to live.

## Royal Bank jilted

WINNIPEG (CUP)—Over \$50 thousand has been withdrawn from the Royal Bank of Canada by the University of Winnipeg Students' Association (UWSA) to protest that bank's lending practices to politically controversial regimes.

The move came in response to information supplied by the world council of churches and amnesty international. They indicate the bank has made loans to repressive governments and companies operating in those countries.

"It's the principle of the matter," said Brian Pannell, President of the UWSA. "How could we, in all conscience, support a bank that has such disregard for the welfare of people in countries like South Africa and Chile."

A letter to this effect was sent to the Royal Bank when the student council money was transferred to a credit union.

The bank said they had not made a direct loan to the

South African Government in the last four years.

The UWSA did not believe this because the bank did not release any evidence supporting the claim. The bank believes its financial transactions to be fully confidential.

Pannell also said that even if the Bank's claim of no direct governmental loans was true the bank was still lending money to corporations operating in those countries. According to the world council of churches, corporate investment has increased recently.

In a letter to the UWSA the Royal Bank explained they have been good corporate



citizens and should be trusted to make investments and loans which are not detrimental to a

country's population.

The UWSA is doubtful.

"We don't trust the social conscience of a profit motivated corporation," Pannell said.

Council expects to save about a thousand dollars over the next year because of the higher interest rates and lower service charges offered at the credit union.

The motion to withdraw the money from the bank received almost unanimous support of council, Pannell said. However, some members felt it was not Council's place to act on issues outside the education realm.

Pannell believes this attitude to be narrow-minded.

"For too long student councils have had the tendency to stay out of non-education issues," Pannell said. "The thing we now have to realize is that we don't operate in a vacuum in society and that these issues are as important as traditional student issues."