



EXCLUSIVE REPORTS

Students call for Coke boycott

Jim Lovel, Staff writer, *Atlanta Business Chronicle*
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The Coca-Cola Co. is trying to stop a boycott of its products that has been spreading across Ireland for the past month and becoming more visible on college campuses in the United States.

Students at University College Dublin, the largest campus in Ireland, and students on more than a dozen U.S. college campuses are protesting alleged human rights violations by the company in Colombia. Several labor unions in the United States and Ireland also have expressed concern over the way union members are being treated in Coca-Cola bottling plants in Colombia.

On Nov. 18, students at the University of California Berkeley held a vigil to protest Coke's alleged human rights abuses and ask the university's administration to revoke its contract with Coke that allows the company exclusive marketing rights on the campus.

At least two colleges in the nation already have decided to remove Coke products. Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., won't renew its contract with Coke when the contract expires next year. Lake Forest College near Chicago switched to PepsiCo products earlier this year.

A group of protesters plans to deliver several thousand petitions to Coke's headquarters in Atlanta Nov. 25 asking the company to do something to stop the violence against Colombian union workers. Ray Rogers, director of Corporate Campaign Inc. and a top organizer of the boycott against Coke, said he expects protesters to picket outside the company's headquarters.

Sonya H. Soutus, Coke's assistant vice president and director of media relations, said Colombia is an issue for the company that is being created by "secondary organizations."

"Colombia is an issue because there are a lot of problems in the country, and it's very easy to kind of hook your star to Coca-Cola and get a lot of publicity around that," she said.

SunTrust may be next

Rogers said he plans to expand the campaign against Coke to include SunTrust Banks Inc. (NYSE: STI) of Atlanta next year because of the bank's close ties to Coke.

At the end of 2002, SunTrust owned 130 million shares of Coca-Cola, according to Coke's most recent proxy statement, which was filed March 5 with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

SunTrust is one of the largest lenders to Coke, and the two companies have key executives on each other's boards of directors, Rogers said.

“They are so intimately linked, it’s hard to tell them apart,” Rogers said. “The campaign against SunTrust will be as focused and intense as it is against Coke.”

Jana Silverman, a graduate student at Columbia University, said she is organizing protests on Dec. 5, a “day of action” for protests against Coke called by SINALTRAINAL, Colombia’s food and beverage workers union. The date was chosen because it is the anniversary of the 1996 slaying of Isidro Gil, a leader of the union who was killed by paramilitary groups at a Coke bottling plant in Carepa, Colombia, Silverman said.

Silverman said she plans to coordinate the distribution of leaflets and signing of petitions at college campuses throughout New York City. She also plans to organize a demonstration in front of Coke’s offices at 711 Fifth Ave. in Manhattan.

“Our ultimate goal is to stop the labor rights violations in Colombia,” she said.

Meetings in Ireland

Students at University College Dublin voted Oct. 14 to remove Coke products from the student union and student union stores on the campus in support of a boycott advocated by SINALTRAINAL, the national food and beverage union in Colombia that represents workers in Coke’s Colombian bottling plants.

The union accuses The Coca-Cola Co. (NYSE: KO) and its bottlers in Colombia of using paramilitary groups to break the union by assassinating union leaders. Nine SINALTRAINAL union leaders have been killed since 1990. A federal lawsuit filed in Miami two years ago related to the allegations is pending against two of the Colombian bottlers.

Coca-Cola sent Rafael Fernandez Quiros, its director of communications for Latin America, to Ireland to meet with members of the university’s students’ union in November and ask them to reconsider their decision. The students were scheduled to take a second vote Nov. 19, but results were not available by press time.

Coke officials declined to discuss the details or results of the meeting beyond a prepared statement.

“They were productive meetings held with interested parties to present the proper facts and address any concerns about the allegations,” Lori Billingsley, issues director for Coke, said in the statement.

However, Aidan Regan, deputy president of the 21,000-member students’ union who attended the meeting, described it as “an arrogance” that insulted the students.

“It was more propaganda,” Regan said. “He made a speech and basically ran out the back door without answering questions.”

Some of the franchises on the campus, which operate independently of the students’ union, continue to sell Coke products, but the students’ union is considering revoking their licenses to operate on the campus, Regan said.

The boycott has found other support in Ireland. John Hewitt Bar and Restaurant, one of the most popular pubs in Belfast, removed all Coke products Oct. 11. The largest Irish language cultural and tourist center in Belfast and the Belfast Unemployed Resource Centre also have removed Coke products.

Other restaurants and bars near University College Dublin are removing Coke products, Regan said, and at least four other colleges in Ireland are considering joining the boycott.

A Northern Ireland branch of UNISON, the largest trade union in Britain with almost 1.3 million members, announced Nov. 12 that it supported an international boycott of Coke. Patricia McKeown, a union spokesperson, said the union would urge its members to stop buying Coke products and ask them to lobby their employers to remove Coke's vending machines and products from their workplaces.

"It's moving forward," Regan said. "These boycotts do work."

However, members of the Dublin Drinks, Tobacco and Warehouse Distribution branch of the SIPTU union, the largest trade union in Ireland, are opposed to the boycott. The union argues that the boycott could endanger the jobs of more than 1,000 workers in Ireland who are involved in the manufacture and distribution of Coke products.

"We respect the interest shown by students in human rights and injustice around the world," the union said in an Oct. 15 statement. "Trade union and human rights in Colombia have to be strengthened and protected. We know that over 4,000 trade unionists have been assassinated there in the past decade and that Colombia has the worst human rights record in the world. Our union, SIPTU, has consistently supported solidarity actions with workers in Colombia and will continue to do so. However, we do not believe a boycott of Coca-Cola products is the most effective way of expressing this concern at the present time. We would urge all other student union bodies and organisations which are approached to consider this issue to first acquaint themselves with the views of the workers employed in the bottling companies as to the likely consequences of their actions for the livelihoods of Irish workers."

The boycott efforts in the United States are being encouraged by Luis Adolfo Cardona, a former Coke worker in Colombia who has been in the United States for the past 19 months under a protection plan sponsored by the AFL-CIO. Cardona has been speaking at college campuses nationwide asking them to support the boycott.

Cardona said he has advocated the boycott on "many, many" campuses around the nation. He is asking the universities to revoke their exclusive marketing contracts with Coke. He said that about 20 universities have student groups that are "working against Coca-Cola" and five of the universities have vowed to support the boycott.

"Above all, we are working with students," he said through an interpreter. "Students have a lot of power in this country."

John Faucher, an analyst with J.P. Morgan Chase & Co. who follows Coke, said he wasn't aware of the boycotts, but didn't think they would make much difference to the company.

"I find it hard to believe this could turn into anything that would have a significant impact on the company," he said. "I don't see it as a major issue."

Cardona currently lives in Chicago with his family and has been granted political asylum to remain in the United States. He had been in hiding in Colombia for six years after an attempt on his life in 1996 by paramilitary groups before coming to the United States on April 27, 2002. He worked for the United Steelworkers of America union under an internship program until the end of October 2003.

‘Discredited allegations’

Bard College won't renew its contract with Coke when it expires next year as a protest against the treatment of the company's union workers in Colombia, according to Mark Primoff, a spokesman for the school.

Coca-Cola's Billingsley said administrators at Bard College made their decision from "discredited allegations."

"The Coca-Cola Co. regrets that Bard College has decided not to serve our beverages on campus beyond this academic year," she said. "Unfortunately, Bard College officials appear to be relying on discredited allegations that have been reviewed and repeatedly rejected by courts and independent investigations in the United States and Canada.

"We believe an objective review of the facts will assure Bard College that there is no factual or legal basis that our company and its bottling partners were responsible for wrongful conduct in Colombia."

A spokesperson for Lake Forest College, Irene Ratliff, said that a "handful" of students expressed concern about the situation in Colombia to school administrators, and the director of the school cafeteria decided to ask students about their preference of products. The students chose Pepsi, Ratliff said.

Billingsley didn't respond to the Lake Forest College decision.

The issue is being debated at other colleges, including Columbia University, Hofstra University, New York University, the State University of New York at Stony Brook, Fordham University, the University of Illinois, the University of Vermont, Oregon State University, the University of California at Berkeley and Loyola University Chicago.

Student opposition

UC Berkeley is in the second year of a 10-year contract that gives Coke exclusive rights to sell its products on the campus. Coke pays the university about \$1 million annually for the contract.

Students at the university have been campaigning against Coke for the past year, according to Jeremy Blasi, a labor researcher at the university. The student governments that represent undergraduate and graduate students both passed resolutions last November opposing the university's contract with Coke.

"Students for the past year have been trying to get the university to reconsider the contract," Blasi said. "The students feel the company has been secretive and hasn't taken the necessary steps to correct this problem."

Coke sent a representative to the campus in May to meet with students and the university's Store Operations Board, which signed the contract with the company. The Nov. 18 vigil was an attempt to "debunk the claims the Coke official made when he came to the university," Blasi said.

Blasi said he expects the university's administration to make a decision about the contract within a month.

Students at Loyola University met with administration officials Nov. 11 to ask them to reconsider the university's 10-year contract with Coke, according to Audrey Avila, a student activist who helped arrange the meeting.

The student movement at Loyola started last year after Cardona visited the university and discussed the slaying of union workers in Colombia, Avila said. This year, students have been sponsoring events to support the Colombian union members.

"We want to make sure that the companies we contract with adhere to our principles," she said.

Cardona said he has met opposition on some campuses from students who can't accept the concept that Coke would support violence against workers.

"At the universities, there are children of businessmen or those on the right who are not in agreement," he said. "They say that this cannot be."

The United Steelworkers of America union and the International Labor Rights Fund filed a federal lawsuit in Miami on July 20, 2001, against Coke and two of its bottlers in Colombia on behalf of SINALTRAINAL. The lawsuit accuses Coke and its bottlers of allowing paramilitary groups to enter the bottling plants knowing they would threaten and harm union members.

A federal judge dismissed The Coca-Cola Co. as a defendant in March, but allowed the lawsuit to continue against the bottlers.

Coke released a statement denying any involvement with the slayings in Colombia.

"Colombian labor union SINALTRAINAL's oft-repeated allegations against The Coca-Cola Company and its Colombian bottling partners are completely false," the company said. "They are nothing more than a shameless effort to generate publicity using the name of our company, its trademark and brands."

Another SINALTRAINAL member and former Coke employee in Colombia, Luis Eduardo Garcia, currently is making a speaking tour in England and Ireland in an effort to build more support for the boycott. Garcia was imprisoned for six months in Colombia after managers at the Coke bottling plant in Bucaramanga, Colombia, accused him of planting a bomb in the plant. He was released without charges.

Garcia began the tour Oct. 27 and is scheduled to end it Dec. 6. He is meeting with student groups, churches, trade unions and activists.

Dan Kovalik, assistant general counsel for the United Steelworkers of America, who is representing the union in the lawsuit, calls Coke's denial "ridiculous."

"We aren't saying that [Coca-Cola CEO] Douglas Daft in Atlanta, Georgia, is ordering hits on workers," Kovalik said. "But it is their problem and they have to clean it up."

Tatiana Prophet contributed to this report.

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