

# UCATS REAFFIRMS COKE BAN— NYU LIFTS IT

■ Rob Lesko, 29 Washington Square West

In February, the NYU University Senate repealed a three-year old ban on the sale of Coca-Cola products on campus. The ban was the result of a 2003-2005 campaign conducted by student activists, which began after Luis Adolfo Cardona, a former union activist at a Coke bottling plant in Colombia, visited NYU to speak of a string of murders of union leaders at such plants, committed with the apparent collusion of plant managers and paramilitary death squads. Over the course of two years, NYU students participated in an international effort to boycott Coke from college campuses. By tabling with petitions, hosting debates, holding candle-light vigils, and presenting resolutions to student councils of the University government, the activists convinced the Senate to ban the sale of Coke products on the NYU campus until the Coca-Cola Corporation agreed to an independent investigation of violence against bottling plant workers in Colombia.

## The case for Coke

Last fall, students began a campaign to rescind that ban. Prompted by NYU's announcement of an investigation of conditions in Coke's Colombian plants conducted by the International Labor Organization, an agency of the United Nations, students ran a campus petition drive urging a re-opening of the debate on the ban.

Hampton Williams, a Steinhardt junior, spoke to *Momentum* on his motivations for working to overturn the ban. "The 2005 resolution called for an independent investigation of the charges against Coke," Mr. Williams said. "An investigation was conducted by the U.N. What body has more authority to address issues of human rights? One result of the ban was Coca-Cola suspending endorsement and scholarship aid to NYU. That has led to a drop in the quality of student life at NYU, most notably for student athletes. Nearly all current students were not here when the ban was imposed, and many are not even aware of it. I felt it was fair and appropriate to bring the full issue to their attention, especially in a time of declining revenues for NYU."

Derick Schaudies, a law student, also spoke to *Momentum*. "These were serious accusations made



against Coke. The investigation found no evidence for them. As long as bans such as this continue, Coke workers in this country suffer from decreased demand for their products. Also, I believe that consumer boycotts are best left to individuals rather than organizations such as NYU."

## The case for the ban

As the debate returned to the campus, other students argued for maintaining the ban.

Erin Keskeny, a 2007 CAS graduate and participant in the 2003-2005 campaign, herself returned to the campus, as a concerned alumna, and spoke to *Momentum*. "NYU selected the ILO to investigate them. The resulting investigation looked at current working conditions at the plant, and avoided looking at the charges that led to the ban. Edward Potter, Coca-Cola's Director of Global Labor Relation, is a chief spokesperson for the ILO. We can understand Coke's touting the



Above: UCATS members joined student supporters of Coke ban outside University Senate meeting on February 5.



Left: Luis Adolfo Cardona (r) was the keynote speaker at the "Dying for a Coke" event organized by NYU students and alum on February 4. Cardona witnessed the assassination of his union president at a Coke bottling plant in Columbia.

Cover: (l to r) Jeff Olshansky, law student Coke Ban organizer, Luis Adolfo Cardona, *Dying for a Coke* Keynote Speaker, and UCATS VP Rob Lesko.

results of the ILO report, but we do not consider that report to be an independent investigation of the murders for which we seek justice."

On February 3, Luis Adolfo Cardona returned to NYU. At a forum held by supporters of the Coke ban, he re-told his account of witnessing the death of the president of his union, who was shot to death on-the-job by a masked gunman. He also spoke in harrowing detail of his seizure by paramilitaries, and his escape from their custody and from Colombia. He reported that death threats continue against unionists at Coke bottling plants and that lifting the NYU ban could embolden death squads to carry out those threats.

The following afternoon, the University Senate lifted the ban.

Student supporters of the ban were disappointed by the Senate's reversal, but found consolation in the closeness of the vote (28-22). Also, they view the recent declarations by two student councils and seven student organizations at NYU to maintain the ban as indicative of substantial student support for their position. In a statement released on March 4th, ban supporters wrote "Students are now planning next steps to get back the

ban on Coca-Cola products until the company agrees to true accountability for its practices."

As clerical and technical workers are not represented on the NYU University Senate, we are not part of their decision-making process. Through UCATS, though, we can advocate for our rights in the workplace, and for those of other workers on-campus and abroad. After reviewing the ILO report, the UCATS executive council has come to the same conclusion as the advocates of the Coke ban—it does not address the murders of union activists at Coke's bottling plants in Colombia. On March 11th, the UCATS Executive Council voted to re-affirm our 2005 resolution to boycott Coca-Cola products for our member events and we call upon our members to avoiding purchasing Coke products until further notice. UCATS was privileged to support the 2003-2005 student campaign. We look forward to the opportunity of providing further support to those NYU students who, in the spirit of mutual aid and solidarity, continue to advocate for the rights of our fellow trade unionists in Coca-Cola plants in Colombia. (For a list of Coca-Cola products, or to view the relevant resolutions and ILO report, contact Rob Lesko at [ucats@erols.com](mailto:ucats@erols.com).)