

NEW YORK PRESS



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Colombia's Other Deadly Coke

Ray Rogers sharpens his blades.

When Ray Rogers says the Coca-Cola Company has a big problem on its hands, he's talking about himself.

It's a statement that would seem to warrant, at best, a dismissive snicker. An amiable middle-aged guy in a green t-shirt and sweatpants shorts, Rogers doesn't come off as someone with allies in high places and the nation's biggest activist database at his fingertips. His folksy manner is at odds with his reputation as both a top theorist and decorated Green Beret in class warfare. As usual, surface is deception.

From modest offices near Union Square, Ray Rogers directs Corporate Campaign, Inc., the progressive strategic consulting firm he founded in 1981. Since then, the organization has revolutionized the way labor, environmental and human rights groups fight corporations and the government. Its motto: "Tools to Confront Power with Power."

In an era noted for the decline of organized labor, Rogers has repeatedly demonstrated power on its behalf. He and his colleagues have executed dozens of successful campaigns at the local and international level, against opponents including New York state governors and city mayors, the asbestos industry, J.P. Stevens, Brooklyn Union Gas, Con Edison and General Electric. They have won union contracts worth hundreds of millions of dollars and have forced the resignations of Fortune 500 board members and executives. In 2001, his firm led the campaign to beat back a conservative putsch at Pacifica Radio. For all of this, Rogers' firm has been described as a left-wing A-Team.

His innovations have led some of his enemies to view Corporate Campaign, Inc. as a sort of terrorist cell. In 1995, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce called his firm "a serious threat to American business" during a stillborn drive to outlaw Rogers' strategies. Their legislative attack against Corporate Campaign Inc. was unsuccessful, and today Rogers continues his work, which *Time* magazine described as bringing "some of the most powerful corporations to their knees."

So it's no joke when Ray Rogers says Coca-Cola has a big problem on its hands.

Nobody hired him for this latest project. The newly launched "Killer Coke" campaign is his own initiative, launched in solidarity with a legal suit filed by labor groups and funded by donations and his firm's own resources. At issue is ongoing trade union-related violence at several Coca-Cola bottling plants in Colombia, where since 1989 eight officials from the local union (and at least one family member) have been killed by paramilitary death squads. A 2001 brief submitted by the Colombian beverage workers union SINALTRAINAL—filed together with the International Labor Rights Fund and the United Steelworkers of America—claims that Coca-Cola bottlers "contracted with or otherwise directed

paramilitary security forces that utilized extreme violence and murdered, tortured, unlawfully detained or otherwise silenced trade union leaders."

"Coca-Cola has done nothing about the situation," says Rogers. "The union is under attack and people are dead. We're going to get progressive groups and the house of labor working together on this one. If I could put 30 full-time people in the field and print millions of pieces of literature, I could bring down Coca-Cola in a short time."

With limited resources, Rogers admits that the campaign could take two to three years, but is confident it will succeed. His strategy for tackling the soda giant is minted from the template of his classic m.o.: a bombardment on multiple fronts, combining dogged legal action with direct protest and a fiery media and public relations campaign. The public energy generated by what Rogers calls "high-impact literature" will be transformed into intense pressure trained on influential individuals linked to the company, such as the board of directors, major shareholders and creditors.

"A corporation is nothing more than a coalition of individual and institutional economic and political interests," Rogers says, carefully and precisely. "Some more vital and vulnerable than others, that can be challenged, attacked, divided and conquered." It is a definition chiseled over a long career getting to know his opponents at close range.

In the case of Coca-Cola, the campaign will focus on the 14 company board members, five of whom—including entertainment mogul Barry Diller—are based in New York, which Rogers says is a "key geographical region" in the effort. Protests will be organized in front of relevant Manhattan office buildings, as well as those in Atlanta, the home base of Coca-Cola and its CEO Douglas Daft. Rogers says the protests will help make these figures "battering rams" for the issue.

Key to the success of the campaign will be the amount of financial pressure brought to bear on Coca-Cola's main creditor, SunTrust Bank. Altogether, Coca-Cola and SunTrust have five present or former CEOs of Coke and SunTrust serving on each other's boards of directors.

"In my 30 years of studying corporate structures," says Rogers, "never have I seen such an incestuous relationship."

Rogers will try to convince large unions to withdraw their funds from SunTrust, and discourage others from doing future business with the bank. "We're going to embroil SunTrust bank in this," he says.

One thing noticeably absent from the campaign is a boycott. Rogers gives two reasons for this. The first is that Coca-Cola puts out too many products to keep track of—more than 300 in total. The second involves the need to get and keep large unions like the Teamsters on board. "Union leaders feel a large boycott might jeopardize jobs [associated with delivery] so it's a political consideration."

Instead of going directly after sales, the "Killer Coke" campaign will attack the brand itself. Along with direct pressure on individuals who set Coca-Cola policy, Rogers will employ culture-jamming methods to subvert the soda's carefully crafted commercial face. With stickers, posters, media appearances and direct mailings, the "Killer Coke" campaign is intended to sully the company's public image so expensively maintained by Madison Avenue.

"They can spin what they want," says Rogers, "but for their Colombian workers the reality is murder and intimidation."

Fundraising for the campaign is in its earliest stages, and the website is still being tweaked, but Rogers says he can already feel momentum building. By allying labor with peace groups focused on Colombia, he is sure he can force one of the world's biggest companies to protect the lives and rights of its workers.

"Coca-Cola should be very concerned about this," he says. "It isn't going to go away."