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# NEW YORK PRESS



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## Should the bottling giant be held accountable for paramilitary assassinations in Colombia?

News of the Assassins.

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**They're armed and dangerous** with pamphlets and flyers touting anti-military slogans. "Let's close down the School of the Assassins," barks one supporter as he hands out a flyer, which resembles the cover a Gabriel Garcia Marquez novel.

The headline reads: "Colombian Coke Float" and shows three Colombian union workers floating in a giant, old-fashioned Coke glass. In bold letters: "Unthinkable! Undrinkable!"

It's 7 o'clock in the evening at St. Mary's Church on W. 125th St.—the place looks like a quiet military bunker. This old cathedral houses a handful of members from the School of the Americas Watch (SOA Watch), a Latin American solidarity group fighting for the rights of indigenous people in their native countries. Critics of the School of the Americas have dubbed it the "School of the Assassins."

Juan Carlos Galvis walks to the podium slowly and deliberately. He carries the weight of the world on his shoulders, because he knows he could've been a "Coke-Float" casualty. Today, he's vice-president of Sinaltrainal, the union at the Coca-Cola plant in Colombia—and one of the lucky survivors of an assassination attempt. He still wears a frightened death mask—a peculiar vacancy that comes from staring down the barrel of a gun. He always wears a bulletproof vest and travels in an armored-car with bulletproof windows.

Galvis vividly recalls being driven to his house by his bodyguards, when two *sicaros*—assassins—approached his car on motorcycles, 50 meters away from the corner of Street 47 and Avenue 19, in front of Colegio Santo Tomas outside the town of Barrancabermeja.

"They cocked their guns in my direction," he recounts, looking down at the mahogany pews filled with people. "That day, my bodyguards saved my life, because they pulled out their guns and

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fired upon them, and the assassins drove off on their motorcycles."

This news forum is sponsored by students, peace activists and members of the clergy, as well as leftist proletarians, including Father Roy Bourgeois, the founder of SOA Watch.

The Colombian unionist holds the small crowd in awe with the story of his Aug. 22 assassination attempt, carried out, he says, by the paramilitary.

"I fear for my life today." His voice cracks. "In Colombia this is business as usual. So far, the paramilitary army has assassinated nine Coca-Cola employees over the past twelve years. Forty people have been displaced, six workers have been kidnapped and over 65 workers have received death threats."

On Sept. 9, the official national day of Human Rights in Colombia, the Coca-Cola Company closed 10 of its factories. "And because the workers didn't voluntarily leave," he says, "they were fired."

The figures are staggering: Four hundred workers have been terminated, according to Galvis. "I believe they are doing this so they can make more profits," he adds. "So it's clear they want to shut down the union."

New employees at minimum wage—\$130 a month—replaced the experienced workers who left the plant. They had been earning between \$380 and \$400 a month.

"[W]e are asking people around the world to divest their interests from [Coca-Cola]," he says in a somber tone. "We must stop the violence. So far, the countries that have endorsed the 'Unthinkable, Undrinkable' campaign against Coca-Cola include the UK, U.S., Germany, Italy and Australia."

**Human rights watch** groups can back up Galvis' story. Eric Olson, the director of the Americas at Amnesty International in Washington, DC, states that over 180 trade unionists were killed last year in Colombia. A number of those attacks were carried out by the paramilitary.

"They do the dirty work for the Colombian Army," he argues. "And the government, a lot of times, has accused these unionists of supporting the guerrillas. That's why they're going after them. They think these unionists are connected to terrorist organizations."

That's part of the reason why trade union leaders, including the

Colombian union Sinaltrainal, simultaneously with the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF) and United Steelworkers of America in the United States, filed suit against Coca-Cola, Panamco (the biggest soft-drink bottler in Latin America) and Bebidas y Alimentos. The lawsuit states that the Coca-Cola bottlers contracted the paramilitary security forces to use extreme violence to murder, torture, unlawfully detain or silence trade union leaders.

The lawsuit also claims that Colombian paramilitary troops were trained at the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) in Fort Benning, GA, which until three years ago was known as the U.S. Army's School of the Americas (SOA), and that trainees were encouraged to torture and murder those who do "union organizing and recruiting."

Galvis is clear about the connection between the violence and the School of the Americas: "It's a fact of life that behind each act of violence there's a graduate of [SOA]." He sighs, runs his hands through his hair.

"[T]here are many known civil rights violations, but it's the paramilitary who are currently responsible for this dirty war in Colombia."

In March, Galvis says, a Florida district court judge removed Coca-Cola from the suit, but the process against the bottlers, Panamco and Bebidas y Alimentos, continues. The unions have appealed the court's decision.

Coca-Cola officials disagree with the union leaders' claims.

"Obviously, Colombia is a dangerous place because of the civil war down there," says Lori Billingsley, a Coca-Cola spokesperson based in Atlanta. "One of the allegations is that Coca-Cola is involved in union busting—and that's not true. And we certainly don't support the paramilitary."

SOA Watch activists are rallying around the Colombian union leaders. Patrick Stanley, a Fordham University undergraduate who just served six months in prison, remembers being handcuffed and arrested by police. He was recently released as a SOA Watch prisoner of conscience. At the forum at St. Mary's, Stanley speaks out about Colombia's violence.

"I have talked to people who had relatives who had been killed and disappeared," he says, referring to the paramilitary's methods, "and in our country we must continue to lobby against this School of Assassins. We must close down this school. And when we close down this school, we need to close down similar schools like the SOA, because who knows how many schools like this exist out there."

Ten minutes later, one of the gray-hairs in the movement takes the stage. Bill McNulty is a tall, lanky Long Island peace activist and U.S. veteran.

"It's very disappointing when you encounter some people that you are trying to impress. And you say, you know the School of the Americas, and they [reply], 'Oh, that's the school out in Riverhead, isn't it?'"

The School of the Americas was actually launched as a U.S. Army training facility in 1946 in Panama, ostensibly to increase political stability in Central and South American countries. The facility, which moved to Fort Benning in 1984, has trained thousands of Latin American soldiers and officers. Critics claim that it's one of the most powerful international organizations. Past students include former Panamanian president Manuel Noriega and El Salvador's infamous death squad chief Roberto D'Aubuisson. U.S. Special Forces have also trained military personnel from such countries as Venezuela, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Argentina, Mexico, Panama, Bolivia, Peru—and even Iraq.

**The last speaker** at the podium is a Maryknoll priest—and one of the most feared men in military circles. He commands applause at the podium. Father Bourgeois, the head of the SOA Watch, appears tired from making the protest rounds. Since 1990, the SOA Watch has coordinated annual protests outside the WHINSEC facility.

"Many of our young people are going up in Iraq. And we began to ask basic questions like, what are we doing there? The Coca-Cola plant, the IMF, the World Bank, are going into those countries to enrich themselves off the cheap labor and exploit the resources there."

He pauses, glances over at Juan Carlos Galvis.

"[B]ecause Coca-Cola simply can not make a profit without those soldiers there. We must shut them down."

Every November, Bourgeois protests the 1989 massacre in El Salvador of six Jesuit priests, their housemaid and her daughter. Of the 26 people indicted for the murders, 19 had trained at the School of the Americas. Organizers claim that more than 10,000 people attended last year's protests, with half of them risking arrest for trespass.

"This year's turn-out will be even larger," he adds.

Bourgeois himself served over four years in federal prison for

trespassing. He and three others snuck onto the base "dressed in high-ranking officers uniforms," carrying a boom box playing the last sermon of Archbishop Oscar Romero, the Salvadoran Archbishop assassinated in 1980. He describes his arrest as "a sacred moment" because "those soldiers [were] hearing the voice of Romero once again."

Kenneth LaPlante is the Pentagon spokesperson for WHINSEC. He offered his views on the Coca-Cola debacle.

"The conglomerates are trying to get the most profit," he says, and explains that the economic situation in Colombia is complex. "The unions just want fair wages for their workers," but "it's more pronounced because Colombia has a smaller middle class than the U.S., so things get really tough."

With the introduction of cocaine into the economy over the last 50 years, "things have gotten really bad."

He summarizes: "Cocaine was introduced, and now you have heavy narco-trafficking in that country. You have the [guerrilla groups] ELN and FARC kidnapping wealthy people and holding them for ransom. You have indigenous groups, and then there are the paramilitary forces in Colombia trying to get both of them."

What of the paramilitary forces?

"The paramilitary army is a group of thugs. They're not a governmental organization. They went out and committed murder in that Coca-Cola bottling plant. It's a hard situation, because the poor indigenous people get caught in the middle. But I don't believe that Coca-Cola supports that violence."

Has he heard of the attempted assassination of Juan Carlos Galvis?

"I only know what I read in the newspapers. If you give me any names of the perpetrators, I could look into the matter."

Has WHINSEC ever trained any military units in Colombia?

"We provided training to the Colombian military personnel—law enforcement and the Colombian National Police. It was professional leadership classes. It was part of the military education program under U.S. Foreign Policy.

"That's all—not the paramilitary army."

**According to Juan Carlos Galvis**, no member of the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation can claim ignorance of the dark side of the organization. In the past two

decades, newspapers, investigators, congressional leaders and even members of the Pentagon have spoken out against the school.

"Some of the people who attended the [School of the Americas] were not people you would want to put on your Christmas list," explains Gina DiNicolo, a Virginia-based public affairs specialist for the U.S. Army. "But the new school teaches strong human rights principles; it is not just a shoot-em-up military school straight out of the movies. WHINSEC is a much broader school still run by the Army that focuses on Democratic sustainment as well as human rights instruction."

After the attacks on the World Trade Center, WHINSEC took on a greater role in combatting world terrorism.

"September 11 underscored the importance of maintaining good relationships around the world, and that's why we included an Anti-Terrorism Course," DiNicolo explains. "Because getting to know your neighbors in the international community is just good foreign policy."

DiNicolo notes that many at WHINSEC are learning how to protect their borders. "If you don't have a stabilized government," she argues, "you will be more susceptible to coups because your borders will be unprotected."

To hear DiNicolo tell it, the school teaches human rights courses that require soldiers to learn the miniscule details of setting up governmental infrastructures.

"Many of the graduates will become leaders in their countries. Some of these people will become major players in their countries many years down the road."

Father Roy Bourgeois would agree. He toured Iraq last December, and understands that one "cannot control the resources without the firepower—without those men with the guns. [WHINSEC has] trained over 60,000 graduates from Latin America who have provided the muscle for U.S. foreign policy. They even had a torture manual that they used in their training.

"That really got them in big trouble with the Pentagon."

**The night at St. Mary's** wraps up around 10 o'clock, and a crowd huddles around Juan Carlos Galvis. Lurking in the back of his mind, always, is the terror that he could be shot in the back at anytime.

"They threatened my wife over the telephone," he tells the small group of supporters. "They told her 'I know where your children go

to school.'"

His voice cracks again. "I am scared. I fear for my family. But I can't give up this fight. We must continue on. I know we can win."

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