

Coca-Cola spends hundreds of millions of dollars annually to promote “The Real Thing”. **Ray Rogers**, director of the Campaign to Stop Killer Coke/Corporate Campaign Inc. explains why the campaign is recruiting labour, student, peace and human rights activists worldwide to force “The Real Thing” to do the right thing

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Union leader Isidro Gil, an employee at the Carepa Coca-Cola bottling plant in Colombia, was killed at his workplace by paramilitary thugs on December 5, 1996.

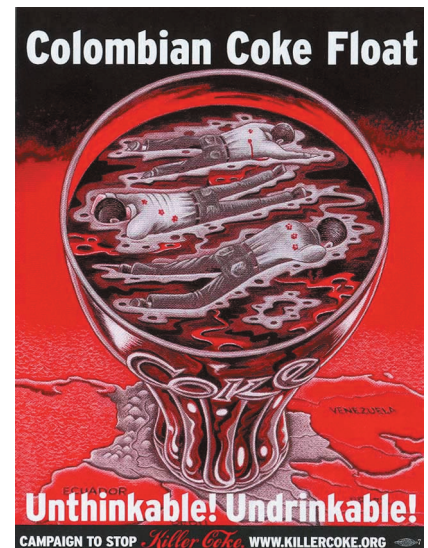
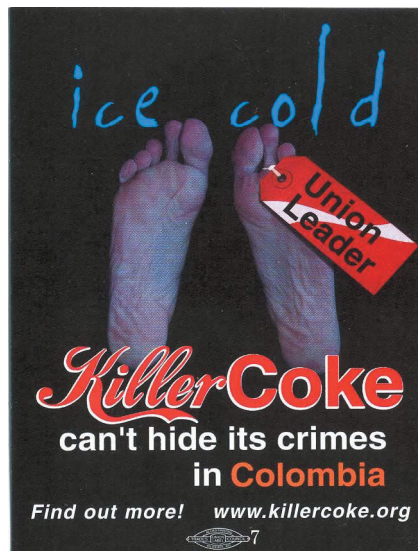
That evening, a building that housed the union’s offices, equipment and records was set ablaze.

The next day, heavily armed paramilitaries returned to the plant and told the workers that if they didn’t quit the union by 4 pm, they too, would be killed. Coke’s plant manager prepared resignation forms in advance and union members at Carepa resigned *en masse*. Since 1989, eight Coke workers (seven union leaders and a friendly plant manager) have been murdered.

In 2001, the International Labor Rights Fund (ILRF) and the United Steelworkers of America, initiated a lawsuit on behalf of Sinaltrainal, the Colombian union representing Coke workers, several of its members and the estate of Isidro Gil. The lawsuit charges that Coca-Cola bottlers: “Contracted with or otherwise directed paramilitary security forces that utilize extreme violence and murdered, tortured, unlawfully detained or otherwise silenced trade union leaders.”

That same year, Coca-Cola made \$4 billion in profits and paid its chief executive, Douglas Daft, \$105 million. Coca-Cola continues to rake in billions each year, yet the conditions at the Coke plants remain unchanged. Actions against union leaders and threats against family members have recently escalated as Sinaltrainal protests the illegal closures of production lines.

Labour unions, students, peace and human rights organisations have been promoting the Killer Coke “Unthinkable! Undrinkable!” campaign that threatens the public image that Coca-Cola has spent decades and billions of dollars to create. Coke has been banned by student referendum from student-run facilities at the University College Dublin, Ireland’s largest university and the movement is spreading to other campuses in Ireland. The proprietors of one of Belfast’s best-known pubs, the



John Hewitt Bar and Restaurant, removed all Coca-Cola products from its premises.


In the US, student groups on dozens of campuses are working to rescind, not renew or not consider contracts between their universities and Coke. Labour unions have removed Coke machines from their union halls and workplaces. Peace and human rights activists have recently made the campaign a prominent part of their demonstrations against the FTAA agreement and the School of the Americas, the military school that trains Colombian troops connected to the paramilitaries.

The campaign will soon be promoting protests against Coke’s financial support network. This will include activities in the US directed at public pension funds and SunTrust Banks; SunTrust shares numerous board members with Coke and its largest Colombian bottler. The bank also owns 5% of Coke’s stock and is a principal lender and underwriter for hundreds of millions of dollars to Coke.

The campaign is also targeting Barclays, which is a major shareholder in both Coke and SunTrust Banks. Barclays holds billions of dollars of stock in Coca-Cola, hundreds of millions of dollars more in other Coke operations and is the third

largest institutional shareholder in SunTrust Banks.

In addition to the violence against workers in Colombia, the Stop Killer Coke’s website, www.killercoke.org, highlights allegations of other abuses of Coca-Cola throughout the world: a history of racially discriminatory practices; aggressive marketing to children of nutritionally worthless and damaging products; cheating workers out of pay and bad pension policies; marketing fraud; safety and health problems; overexploitation and pollution of water sources in India; repressive anti-worker policies in many countries; inaction and neglect on health issues in Africa, and anti-competitive practices around the world.

The importance of winning this campaign and holding Coke accountable for what has happened in its bottling plants in Colombia is best summed up by Sinaltrainal Vice President Juan Carlos Galvis, who said: “If we lose the fight against Coca-Cola, we will first lose our union, next our jobs and then our lives.” 

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