

Colombia's new labor minister vows national drive for 'great projects'

by Valerie Rush

Colombia's new labor minister, veteran trade union leader Jorge Carrillo Rojas, took his oath of office Sept. 2 with the presidential palace surrounded by thousands of jubilant workers. The outpouring of enthusiasm for Carrillo's appointment occurred not only because he is the first labor leader to occupy that cabinet post, but also because Carrillo is known as a man who believes that "thinking big" is the only way to run a country. He is known as an advocate of great development projects like the construction of an Atlantic-to-Pacific sea-level canal, a multi-billion-dollar project which would allow a vast expansion of world trade.

In his swearing-in address, the new minister declared: "The nation's sovereignty must be supported by great infrastructure projects—such as railroads, highways, ports, hydroelectric plants, and the Atrato-Truandó interoceanic canal—works which we Colombians will have to build. . . .

"The effectiveness of such methods in achieving development, in increasing the power of labor, has already been conclusively proven by other nations. . . . To go ahead with implementation of these great projects will guarantee fulfillment of Article 17 of our Constitution: 'Work is a social obligation, and shall enjoy the State's special protection.'"

Carrillo pledged, "The ministry of labor will give special attention to learning and training programs. We must prepare ourselves for great projects."

Carrillo's appointment to the cabinet of President Belisario Betancur in this, the President's last year in office, was well considered. Betancur entered the presidency in 1982 with great plans for bringing his country out of Third World backwardness and into the 21st century. And yet, under the combined blackmail of the international banks and the drug mafia, he has been forced to retreat from these projects and accept instead a murderous austerity program dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Now faced with the possibility of having to hand his country back in 1986 to the entrenched oligarchy which seeks, along with the IMF, to convert Colombia into a semi-feudal drug plantation that would guarantee debt repayment, Betancur has apparently determined to make his stand. His speech at Carrillo's swearing-in ceremony (see *Documentation*), in which he dubs the labor leader his "agent of social justice" in "a sea of urgent necessities," suggests that his last year in office may be one of confrontation with the IMF and its domestic agents.

Labor Minister Carrillo, one of Colombia's fiercest op-

ponents of the International Monetary Fund program that has ravaged workers' living standards, triggered outraged demands for his resignation even before his swearing-in, because of his "untimely" attacks on the IMF at precisely the moment that Finance Minister Roberto Junguito is conducting negotiations with the Fund and the international creditor banks for several billion dollars in new loans.

In fact, destabilizing rumors that Junguito had resigned his post in protest against Carrillo's anti-IMF stance spread throughout the nation's press on the eve of Carrillo's taking office, in the apparent hope that Betancur would sacrifice Carrillo in exchange for the confidence of Colombia's creditors. Betancur, however, appears to have called his enemies' bluff, for Junguito was highly visible at Carrillo's swearing-in, and attended a mass offered in Carrillo's honor by the UTC labor federation.

While Junguito has not resigned—yet—it is nonetheless expected that clashes between the two ministers, representing diametrically opposed viewpoints, are inevitable. And, as numerous commentaries on Carrillo have accurately noted, President Betancur is well aware of that fact.

"It appears that the presidential announcement that it is time to loosen up the [IMF] adjustment policy noted by Carrillo corresponds to a concerted strategy," wrote Senator William Jaramillo Gómez in the Sept. 1 issue of *El Espectador*. "The undisguised concord between the President of the republic and the minister-worker must appear to the minister of finance as an abrupt alteration of his plan of economic stabilization and, to all intents and purposes, the demotion of his ministry."

Declared the irate head of the Latin American Banking Federation (Felaban), Fernando Londoño Hoyos, in the newspaper *La República* of Sept. 3, "It is unimaginable that citizen Carrillo Rojas has said all this [against the IMF—ed.] without an audience with and the previous agreement of the President of the Republic, because otherwise the crowded swearing-in ceremony today would never have occurred."

Columnist Fernando Cepeda Ulloa commented in his weekly newspaper column of Sept. 5, "Carrillo arrives at the labor ministry for what he has said and done . . . [which] goes against the adjustment scheme of the administration he has just entered. . . . Jorge Carrillo is not, then, just another minister, one more on the list. For various reasons, this is the hour of social works. The president has already announced it. Carrillo was the man called for this mission."

Inaugural speech by Jorge Carrillo Rojas

At his swearing-in ceremony on Sept. 2, Colombia's new labor minister, Jorge Carrillo Rojas, addressed nearly 1,000 guests and supporters, including Colombian President Belisario Betancur, while 5,000 trade unionists, representing nearly every labor federation in the country, gathered in solidarity outside the presidential palace where the ceremony took place.

Before his nomination, Carrillo was vice-president of the Colombian Workers Union (UTC) and president of the Workers Union of Bogota and Cundinamarca, UTRABOC.

We reprint the full text of Carrillo's speech.

Mr. President:

For the first time in the history of our country, a worker is charged with the Ministry of Labor and Social Security, by the will of a great man such as yourself, Mr. President.

Your special affection for the people has moved you to give me this opportunity to serve my nation from a position of great responsibility. Since you have constantly proven that what is usually considered impossible, can indeed be done, no one should be surprised that you, Mr. President, vindicate Colombian labor and workers by including me in the list of your collaborators.

As labor minister, I represent all those who wish to work; all those who want to build the nation—that is, all Colombians of good will: those who have some decent occupation, as well as the underemployed and the unemployed.

There are those who say we cannot accomplish great things because ours is a poor country and we live in an equally poor neighborhood. Others ask themselves, what can the labor ministry do, with its limited resources? I grant that we do have many deficiencies, in fact, at the present moment. However, all we need for our development can be built, if we but utilize the potential for wealth which our unemployed represent.

This ministry will definitely give priority to fostering the creation of productive jobs. All Colombians have the right to a decent job. None of our countrymen needs suffer the penalty of having to sell foreign cigarettes on Seventh Avenue in order to survive.

The nation's sovereignty must be supported by great infrastructure projects—such as railroads, highways, ports,

hydroelectric plants, and the Atrato-Truandó interoceanic canal—works which we Colombians will have to build.

The efficiency of these methods to achieve development, to increase the power of labor, has already been conclusively proven by other nations. In the midst of the worst economic depression that ever afflicted the world, in the 1930s, the United States forged its present industrial base, through the construction of great projects.

To go ahead with the implementation of these great projects will guarantee fulfillment of Article 17 of our Constitution: "Work is a social obligation, and shall enjoy the State's special protection."

The Ministry of Labor will give special attention to learning and training programs. We must prepare ourselves for great projects.

Only in the minds of a very few can a deadly confrontation between capital and labor be conceived. Neither the workers nor this ministry see an enemy in capital invested to create jobs in our country. The only enemy of labor is speculation, which destroys labor while it makes productive capital investment impossible.

There are those who say we cannot accomplish great things because ours is a poor country. . . . However, all we need for our development can be built, if we but utilize the potential for wealth which our unemployed represent.

According to Article 30 of the National Constitution, under which "property is a social function that implies obligations," I urge the business community to present concrete proposals for the creation of new jobs. The country is eager to hear of these initiatives.

I shall be inflexible in the application of laws which protect workers and their union organizations; likewise, I shall continue the policy of morally upgrading the labor ministry.

As Pope John Paul II wisely expresses it in his encyclical on human labor: "Work is a good for man, is a good for humanity, because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he realizes himself as a man; what's more, in a certain sense he becomes more of a man."

Because of this, our debt is with the workers, with the unemployed, with all generations of Colombians; not just the present, but also the preceding ones and those to come.

This debt, I promise, we shall honor."

President Betancur swears in Carrillo

At the inauguration of new Labor Minister Jorge Carrillo Rojas, Colombian President Belisario Betancur addressed his new collaborator and the hundreds of guests and supporters gathered to witness the ceremony, on the significance of his choice of a trade unionist for the ministerial post.

Excerpts of President Betancur's speech follow:

1) The common good

This government sets a precedent and moves ahead on its democratic course, as we name Jorge Carrillo labor minister, in recognition of his long and embattled crusade in the service of workers, of his professional responsibility, of his good sense, of his realism, and above all of his idea of how to democratically, positively, harmonize the supreme interest of the country with the various strata which give life and progress to that country.

The ministerial cabinet is a forum in which experts on the country's problems, with different backgrounds and different viewpoints, place themselves above legitimate but limited interests in the face of national necessities, in order to find formulas for governing which, if not always perfect, at least respect the idea of the public good that must reign in a democratic state.

2) Popular emphasis

This is so because the government is not the hunting preserve of anyone in particular . . . since we are delegates representing one hundred percent of our compatriots and not a greater or lesser percentage of them, and because everyone has equal access to their leaders under the constitution. . . .

3) Affection of the people

. . . A contemporary U.S. politician, asked about his passion for the support of the political machines versus those who seek more direct contact with the people, responded rather derisively: "The politician who has the people with him, has nothing." And his career appears to have proven him right. At the end of his life, and having already been President, he was dealt the hard blow of having to give up his reelection bid, because the people informed him that they no longer wanted him as their representative. He then found out

that he who lacks the affection and respect of his people, truly has nothing. . . .

5) A sea of necessity

In this period of our history, the President of Colombia proceeds with the awareness that what most abounds amongst us are our wants, in the midst of a sea of urgent necessities.

And he remains an optimist, in spite of bad international situations, since he knows that such situations are not only felt by himself, but by the entire nation; when the President feels the sting of necessity, he cannot indulge in paralyzing self-pity. No, the President must continue thinking about solutions and not about lamentations.

That is what we continue to do, with greater enthusiasm every day that goes by. And that is one of the purposes of this ceremony. . . .

8) A beautiful challenge

Labor Minister Mr. Jorge Carrillo:

Accustomed as you are by occupation to making decisions in which the moment cannot be separated from history, you bring with you your valuable experience, as you become an agent of social justice in the management of worker-employer relations and the general well-being of the community. I have seen you fight to defend the workers: not just their wages and services, but their productivity, fostering the conviction that to receive more you must create more; you must improve qualifications, reduce expenses, and maintain competitive conditions in the face of the coldness and rigidity of international trade.

For many years I've been acquainted with your labor crusade; I know of your clean, transparent militancy in behalf of labor; I've been very close to your activism. Furthermore, together with you and other labor leaders, I have executed tasks aimed at asserting the rights of workers, and I know of the responsibility of many of these leaders—a responsibility and enlightenment which many Colombians don't understand so fully, perhaps, as to understand the seriousness of their actions and the plain, unencumbered rigor of their decisions. And understand that the coarse trade-unionism of years past is but a memory of the labor struggle, expressed today by leaders with a profound view of the national interest, who know the economy, and study and guide it, digest and analyze it.

What a difficult and beautiful challenge before you! Surrounded by the affection and respect of your comrades—emulators, even—likewise surrounded by the expectant admiration of businessmen, I know that as your term comes to an end, this affection and respect shall be even greater, because you shall have won them by your intelligence, your patriotism, your wisdom, your love of justice, and the conviction that no problem is unsolvable; that there is no confrontation which cannot be settled when we know how to read the compass of the supreme interests of People and Country.