

Colombian labor movement battles AIFLD and the dope mafia

by Valerie Rush

Mafia-linked bosses with a decades-long stranglehold on Colombia's trade unions are reeling after a head-on clash with union leaders determined to cleanse the labor movement of corruption. At the center of the battle are drugs and the State Department-financed American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), whose policy of selective funding and grooming of corrupt individuals and trade union institutions has turned large portions of the Ibero-American labor movement into a haven for the mob.

The scandal broke on July 25 in the city of Cali, where the 32nd national plenum of the Union of Colombian Workers (UTC), Colombia's largest trade union confederation, was being held. UTC president Victor Acosta, an AIFLD favorite notorious for his mafia sympathies, was faced with the prospect that the respected and popular Labor Minister Jorge Carrillo Rojas—formerly the vice-president of the UTC—would be returning to trade unionism Aug. 7, the day a new President takes office in Colombia. An ongoing investigation by Carrillo's labor ministry of UTC finances threatened to expose Acosta and, more importantly, to dump a scandal in the lap of AIFLD itself.

Desperate to preempt Carrillo, Acosta moved to expel Utraboc, the Bogota-based regional affiliate of UTC which was Carrillo's stronghold, from the national trade-union confederation. Acosta was challenged by UTC comptroller Orlando Obregón, who read a 26-page document to the assembly which leveled accusations of theft, abuse of funds, links to the drug mafia, and other charges against Acosta and his coterie on the UTC executive board. In particular, the document asked UTC secretary-general Alfonso Vargas, an Acosta intimate, to explain his 1984 trip to Madrid to testify to the "probity" of jailed drug-trafficker Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela.

Acosta responded with wild charges of a "conspiracy" against him orchestrated by Carrillo and friends, and insisted that he still had "sufficient testicular strength and heat between my legs" to unmask his enemies. Vargas defended his Madrid trip as following the papal injunction of "charity for prisoners."

Acosta's vulgarities and Vargas's shameless admission

of links to the mob outraged the worker assembly which had just heard Pope John Paul II inveigh repeatedly against the corruption of drugs during his week-long visit to Colombia in July. As a result, 16 of the UTC's regional affiliates and 15 major national trade unions—the majority of the UTC's base—staged a walk-out from the plenum and announced the formation of a National Movement of Labor Unity. Acosta was left with an empty shell of an organization, and could do little more than employ AIFLD funds to buy the remaining handful of votes for the expulsion of Comptroller Obregón, Utraboc secretary-general Pedro Rubio, and UTC secretary Freddy Orozco from the UTC executive board.

Pedro Rubio, a close friend and associate of Carrillo, is also one of the coordinators of the Ibero-American Trade Union Commission of the Schiller Institute. Founded by Lyndon and Helga LaRouche, the international Schiller Institute has devoted its energies worldwide to bringing about a new world economic order and to battling the drug trade and the drug "culture" that accompanies it. The Trade Union Commission has organized for a unification of the Ibero-American labor movement to put muscle into the fight for economic integration and against the usury of the international creditor banks.

AIFLD and the mob

A similar collision to that of the UTC occurred around the national plenum of the Colombian Workers Confederation (CTC), taking place simultaneously in the city of Bogotá. CTC president Manuel Felipe Hurtado, who had accompanied the UTC's Vargas on his infamous "mission of mercy" to Madrid in 1984, was publicly charged by CTC secretary-general Guillermo Pedraza with links to the mob, malfeasance in office, and with "mortgaging the labor sovereignty of the CTC" to AIFLD, which Pedraza claimed paid "honorariums" for no specific tasks to more than half of the CTC executive. Pedraza resigned from the CTC in protest, and the exposed Hurtado in turn expelled from the CTC seven other executives—mostly linked to the Bogotá-based CTC affiliate—who had shared Pedraza's criticisms. The CTC is now holding unification talks with its counterpart, Utraboc.

The focus on these labor mobsters' ties to AIFLD in both union confederations is not accidental. As *EIR* has documented, AIFLD has been a leading source of corruption inside the Ibero-American labor movement since its 1962 founding, when AIFLD was created as an arm of W. R. Grace and Rockefeller interests on the continent. AIFLD's activities have, in case study after case study, been interwoven with the drug mafia.

Exemplary is the case of the UTC's *Banco de los Trabajadores*, which was enthusiastically endorsed by AIFLD and given founding money in 1974 by the Interamerican Foundation, upon whose board sits the current AIFLD executive director William C. Doherty. Under then UTC president Tulio Cuevas's auspices, the labor confederation sold its stocks in the bank to Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela, who succeeded in turning the bank into a major money-laundry for the mob. This is the same Rodríguez Orejuela on whose behalf the UTC's Vargas and CTC's Hurtado traveled all the way to Spain.

A similar effort to use a "labor bank" as a front for the mob was attempted by AIFLD in Peru, but failed when honest trade unionists sensed AIFLD's involvement and blew the whistle.

The fact that AIFLD, ostensibly the international "labor education" arm of the AFL-CIO, receives the bulk of its "official" annual funding—\$13.5 million—from the U.S. State Department's Agency for International Development, raises a question for the Reagan administration, which has just committed itself to waging a serious war on drugs: Why is the U.S. State Department funding Colombian drug mobsters?

While the U.S. government ponders that question, AIFLD's operations in Colombia are suffering a severe case of "overexposure," which could prove contagious continentally.

A new direction

The timing of these unprecedented confrontations between the pro- and anti-drug forces within the Colombian labor movement is not accidental. With the departure of the strongly anti-drug President Belisario Betancur from office on Aug. 7, the drug mob had high hopes of moving in on the next administration. Liberal President-elect Virgilio Barco was a relatively undefined political figure, but the Liberal Party forces who put him in power include former president Alfonso López Michelsen, one of the mafia's leading "citizens above suspicion" and protectors.

The visit of John Paul II to Colombia from July 1-7 put a crimp in those plans. His repeated personal appeals for an end to the violence and corruption of the drug trade, and the hedonism that accompanies it, were heeded by millions of Colombians concerned that the bold and patriotic initiatives of Betancur would be abandoned. The Pope's influence was especially noteworthy in Barco's July 2 statement that "the program that the Pope proposes is the same as mine," a

reference to the Pope's call for reorienting economic policy toward the urgent needs of the population and national development.

That same concern is behind the new "National Movement for Labor Unity" born out of the UTC plenum. In fact, a joint communiqué issued by the unity movement emphasizes that the reason for its existence is twofold: the fight for morality, and the fight for economic progress.

According to the document: "We accept that morality cannot be separate from any human activity, and we intend to bring this teaching into practice inside democratic trade unionism. . . . That is why we oppose narco-terrorism, since the moral fiber and future of our society is being shattered by those who traffic in illegal drugs. . . . We know that the money of the mafia will continue to try to buy consciences. . . . It is not accidental that the labor movement is being besieged by narco-financial interests."

At another point, the unity document emphasizes that the labor movement in Colombia is under attack precisely because creditor institutions like the International Monetary Fund, "anticipating the resistance of the workers to [austerity] programs and assaults—have given the order to disable, weaken, and destroy democratic trade unionism, with the complicity of leaders who take anti-labor positions."

Finally, the document argues that—because responsibility for solving the country's economic problems "is not the exclusive responsibility of government, other branches of public office, the economic and industrial associations, [or] the financial institutions, but of a united and strong union movement"—the following program should be pursued:

"We feel it is urgent that, regarding immediate measures to fight unemployment, we undertake a program of infrastructure to give the nation railroads, canals, highways, ports, public health, etc., road all of the nation. For this, a large percentage of foreign capital is not necessary, merely the mobilization of national resources. . . ."

The unity document cites the concept of "harmony of interests" among all layers of society as the underlying basis for a proper approach to solving the economic and social problems facing Colombia. Not accidentally, "harmony of interests" is the same argument presented repeatedly by Labor Minister Carrillo as the goal to which his ministry was dedicated over the past year, and as the basis for his repeated successes in solving business/labor disputes. During an address to 2 million workers and their families in Bogotá, Pope John Paul II made special reference to "the harmony of interest between labor and capital."

The latest developments in the Colombian labor movement are expected to have a major impact elsewhere on the continent. On Aug. 13, prominent labor leaders from around the continent will meet in Lima, Peru to discuss the process of unification and the fight against the International Monetary Fund. Jorge Carrillo, who will no longer be Colombian labor minister, is expected to attend.