

Colombian labor unites in mighty new anti-mafia confederation

by Valerie Rush and Gerardo Terán

Some 2,000 delegates from 44 trade unions, representing 80% of Colombia's organized labor force, gathered in Bogota Nov. 15-17 to consolidate a new non-partisan organization of labor, and to deliver a final blow to those mafia-ridden remnants of the trade-union federations from which the new movement has broken free.

In its founding principles, the new organization took responsibility for combating the international usury which it identifies as the primary evil ravaging the continent, and pledged to seek "sovereign solutions" to the problem of underdevelopment for Colombia, and Ibero-America as a whole.

Into a vacuum

The founding of the 700,000-member CUT could not have occurred at a more appropriate moment for Colombia. The escalating violence of the drug mafia and its hired thugs, the constant murders, kidnappings, threats, and bribes directed at the Colombian judicial system, have virtually paralyzed that branch of government. Over half of the Colombian Supreme Court has been slain by the drug traffickers, and the rest are resigning in terror. What remains of the anti-drug law enforcement capability of the Betancur era is being similarly eradicated.

A combination of terrorism and internecine squabbling among the political parties has brought the operations of the Colombian Congress to a screaming halt, and mutual recriminations and demands for ministerial resignations appear to be the legislative order of the day. Frozen inside this congressional limbo are three pieces of legislation that have been presented by the Colombian executive, the sole product of the Barco government's first 100 days in office.

Into this vacuum has stepped the new 700,000-member labor organization. "Today we meet, the immense majority of Colombia's organized labor, to make real what until just a few months ago seemed impossible: the unity of the workers in one democratic, pluralist, working class, and progressive confederation," declared the CUT's new president, former labor minister and veteran trade unionist Jorge Carrillo, in his opening speech. Carrillo was not only addressing old colleagues from the so-called democratic UTC, CTC, and

CGT federations, but also new ones from the former Communist Party-run CSTC federation and numerous independent trade unions of various political leanings.

Despite slanders from mafia-linked elements in the deserted federations, that the CUT would become an instrument of Communist manipulation, Carrillo has repeatedly assured the press that it is concrete programmatic solutions, not mindless slogans, that labor—and the country—demands.

Unity against usury

During the CUT deliberations, an economic and social platform was approved which gave urgent priority to solving the foreign debt crisis. "An unpayable debt of nearly \$400 billion weighs upon our economies," warns the document, which goes on to propose "giving a political treatment to the problem of the debt and confronting, together with other Latin American countries, the international financial system. . . . Achieving a flow of new resources for the financing of productive output, but with a substantial reduction in interest rates and extension of repayment deadlines. . . . Battling the speculative sector and the economy of the drug trade which economically, socially, and morally damages the population."

In addition, the CUT congress called for nationalization of a private banking system swollen by drug money, and the application of a tax system which punishes speculation, and not the workers and the productive sectors of the economy.

Finally, the document recommended the achievement of these objectives through the creation of "a common front of nations respecting the problem of the foreign debt and the recapture and strengthening of the process of sub-regional integration."

Carrillo has made perfectly clear that, far from functioning as merely another bargaining agent for trade union members, the CUT under his leadership would seek a voice in how Colombia is going to be run.

As labor minister under the previous Betancur administration, Carrillo did not hide his hostility to economic austerity programs foisted on the country by the International Monetary Fund. He was strongly critical of employment policies

based on labor-intensive, "micro" activities and of wage policies which blamed "excessive worker demands" for Colombia's serious unemployment problem. He was outspoken in favor of the creation of great development projects—like a second inter-oceanic canal through Colombia—and of creating a modern capital-goods sector in the country.

Carrillo was asked by one reporter during the CUT conference if the new organization would work more for political or for economic benefits. The former labor minister responded by insisting that "economic returns would be impossible without genuine political changes." Those changes, he argued, would come through "a strengthening of the democratic process, possibly with new political forces on the national scene." Asked by *EIR* if the CUT would offer "a political alternative for independent workers to the current political parties," Carrillo said, "I believe that it is necessary for workers to have their own political power . . . but this is not, yet, the goal of the CUT."

Documentation

The following are excerpts from the opening speech given by former Labor Minister Jorge Carrillo Rojas to the founding conference of the Unified Workers Confederation (CUT) of Colombia Nov. 15, 1986. Carrillo was later elected president of the CUT.

We, the immense majority of Colombia's organized labor, meet today to make real what until just a few months ago seemed impossible: the unity of the workers in one democratic, pluralist, working-class, and progressive confederation.

This meeting has been preceded by hundreds of assemblies in which the workers have freely and sovereignly designated us to constitute today the Unified Workers Confederation of Colombia in their name.

Thus, there is not the slightest doubt of the authenticity of the worker leaders congregated here from every corner of our fatherland. Here are the representatives of the peasants and Indians who demand an advanced agrarian reform; the workers from the banana zone who with their efforts contribute to the progress of a rich but forgotten region; metallurgical workers and miners; state workers; textile workers; port workers and railroad workers; roofers; people of the sea.

In sum, all of us who have never failed Colombia and its people are here, the worthy and proud working class, holding up as our banners the most valued interests of liberty and redemption of the humble classes of Colombia. Here are we workers who fight for a society in which all the fundamental rights of the individual, civil liberties and social rights are

protected, a society which lives in an environment of peace and harmony, in which violence and terrorism do not extend their macabre reign and continue cutting short the lives of our brothers, a society in which youth can grow up in a clean atmosphere.

Our country belongs to the so-called Third World, the so-called poor world which paradoxically has among its inhabitants some of the richest persons on the planet. We are a piece of Latin America, a subcontinent which in 1984 registered 390 million inhabitants of which 110 million are unemployed or underemployed, where 70% of the people live in conditions of critical poverty, where hunger is such that its inhabitants daily consume 1,200 calories less than in developed countries.

We are burdened with a foreign debt of about \$400 billion, a debt catalogued as unpayable because of its exorbitant growth, because of the economic oppression to which we are submitted, because of plundering by the multinational financial oligarchy. Each Latin American is a debtor owing a \$1,000 parcel of foreign debt, condemned to sacrifice his opportunities for improvement in order to pay debt service punctually. In the concrete case of Colombia, the cost of a family market basket has grown 30 times in the past 15 years. Three million compatriots earn the minimum wage, and in many cases less. What better argument could we workers have to convoke the unity of all Colombians, to seek a solution of national salvation in the face of the picture sketched here?

The tax-reform proposal the Executive has presented for congressional consideration only aims at easing some problems of the fiscal deficit by imposing new burdens on wage earners and the middle class. The reform proposal lacks a social redistributive aspect.

Nor does the urban-reform proposal really merit that name, since it is a law for expropriation in the cities with payment at profitable prices.

Since 1979, our rural economy has undergone a sharp crisis, while the state socializes losses made by banking or industrial monopolies with resources which originated in the countryside, like those from the coffee bonanza. . . .

Our worker confederation, which we form today, will present concrete proposals for solutions to the gravest economic and social problems affecting the population; we will present all the documentation needed to obtain proper juridical status, and we announce we will move the workers through the streets and plazas of Colombia to demand what in justice belongs to us.

We proclaim from this high popular tribunal that we will never give up in the glorious struggle to direct the struggles of the workers of Colombia by routes of peaceful political coexistence and ethical and moral greatness toward the conquest of their historic destiny.

May God and the workers accompany us in such a formidable endeavor.