

The crimes of the Medellín Cartel

by Valerie Rush and Gretchen Small

On Nov. 18, 1986, the U.S. Southern District Court in Miami, Florida unsealed a 50-page indictment against nine leaders of the Medellín Cartel, the "international criminal narcotics enterprise" named after the Colombian city which serves as the headquarters for the South American cocaine trafficking mafia. The indictment describes the "company," established by 1978, which controls the production, shipping, and sales of as much as 80% of the cocaine entering the United States each year.

In his 15-point warplan to crush narcotics trafficking in the Western hemisphere, issued in 1985, Lyndon LaRouche described the enemy as a "quasi-state . . . an evil and powerful government in its own right . . . greater than that of entire nations within the Americas." The indictment issued under direction of U.S. Attorney Leon B. Kellner, confirms LaRouche's description.

"The Cartel operated to coordinate and consolidate the production, distribution, and importation of cocaine into the United States. Through the Cartel, major cocaine organizations were able to pool resources, including raw materials, clandestine cocaine conversion laboratories, aircraft, vessels, transportation facilities, distribution networks, and cocaine to facilitate international narcotics trafficking," the indictment charges. "To protect its business operations and enforce its mandates, the Cartel corrupted public officials of foreign governments, and utilized force and violence, including threats to, physical assaults on, and murders of informants, discordant employees, and opponents of the Cartel."

Named are the **Ochoa brothers** (Jorge, Fabio, and Juan David), charged with controlling a massive cocaine manufacturing and distribution network. **Pablo Escobar Gaviria** and **Carlos Lehder** ran similar networks, with Lehder also identified as on-site operational supervisor. **Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha** arranged for the distribution of cocaine through Panama to the West Coast of the United States, and helped establish the Cartel's Nicaraguan operations. **Federico Vaughan**, an assistant to Nicaraguan Interior Minister Tomás Borge, aided the Cartel in setting up cocaine laboratories and distribution facilities in Nicaragua (including use of a Sandinista military airbase as a fuel stop). **Rafael Cardona**

Salazar organized smuggling operations into the United States, and served as the Cartel's enforcer. The ninth figure indicted is a Cartel accountant and financial adviser, named as "**John Doe, a/k/a Jota**," who managed inventory and kept records of drug shipments and payments.

The 39 counts against the nine defendants range from racketeering to manufacture and trafficking in a controlled substance, obstruction of justice, conspiracy, and murder. If caught and convicted, the Cartel directors face maximum sentences of life imprisonment and fines of over a million dollars each. Thus far, Carlos Lehder is the only one caught. He was extradited on the basis of an earlier, and more limited, 1981 indictment, but the U.S. court is reportedly seeking Colombian government approval to try Lehder under the 1986 indictment as well.

A regional power

The Cartel cannot be understood as a "Colombian" operation. The raw material for cocaine, coca leaves, is produced primarily in Bolivia and Peru, but coca growing has become extensive in Brazil and Ecuador, and has begun in Venezuela, Colombia, and Argentina. Some part of virtually every country or island in the Caribbean Basin, including Central America, Venezuela and Mexico, is used as a transshipment point in the route to the United States, while drugs pour out of Brazil's Amazon into Europe, and back to the United States. As Colombia, Peru, and now Bolivia wage war on its operations, the Cartel has simply moved to more hospitable areas.

The Miami indictment details how the Cartel moved major cocaine operations into Nicaragua in 1984, after the Betancur government in Colombia launched a war against the mafia, ending the security which the Cartel had enjoyed under the two previous Presidents. After Colombia's military seized the vast jungle cocaine laboratory "Tranquilandia," in March 1984, and then swept the country in the wake of the assassination of Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla on April 30, 1984, the Sandinista *comandantes* offered Nicaragua as a secure center for the Cartel's poisoning of the Americas.

Not so in Panama. With 80% of its economy controlled by foreign financial interests, Panama has often been used as an "offshore" center by those interests. But when the Ochoa brothers decided in 1984 to turn Panama into a new cocaine-processing center, they found that they would have to overthrow or assassinate the head of Panama's Defense Forces, Gen. Manuel Noriega. Retired Panamanian Gen. Rubén Darío Paredes, the man Henry Kissinger promoted for President in 1983, provided the Ochoas with their top "inside" man for the coup, Lt. Col. Julian Melo Borbua. But the operation was detected, and Melo was thrown out of the Defense Forces to be tried by a civilian court.

The Cartel upgraded its Honduras operations in 1986, when its chief, Juan Ramón Matta Ballesteros, moved his headquarters there, after escaping from jail in Colombia. He

had been held as an accomplice in the 1985 assassination of U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration agent Enrique Camarena in Mexico. A Honduran national who had moved to Colombia at the beginning of the cocaine boom, Matta Ballesteros's drug-running networks include the Nicaraguan Contras, Israeli mob networks in Costa Rica, and the Medellín Cartel's "Mexico connection."

Costa Rica, now the third-largest laundering center in the Hemisphere for drug monies, has been targeted as another major dope center. Cartel members consider Costa Rica their "personal office," law enforcement officers report. On Sept. 20, 1986, police seized a cocaine-processing laboratory in Costa Rica.

The problem is not limited to Ibero-America. A Pennsylvania branch of the Medellín Cartel was indicted in August 1986, charged with bringing an estimated 7.5 tons of cocaine into the United States over a several-year period in the mid-1980s.

The case of AIFLD

What has allowed the Cartel to build up its aura of invincibility, is the protection provided by the "men above suspicion," who from their positions in government or finance have ensured the integrity of the criminal enterprise as a whole. The State Department-funded American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), which has repeatedly intervened to protect the operations of the Medellín Cartel, is exemplary.

Not named in the Miami indictment is an individual whose inclusion could spark a huge diplomatic scandal, **Gilberto Rodríguez Orejuela**. Rodríguez was a "respected" Colombian banker for years, until his November 1984 arrest in Spain on narcotics-trafficking charges. Arrested with him was Jorge Ochoa Vásquez, one of the five leading Cartel figures. Rodríguez and Ochoa, it turned out, were joint owners of a Panama-based bank, First Interamericas (FIB), shut down in March 1985 for violating Panama's banking code.

Despite a prior extradition request for the two from the United States, both Rodríguez and Ochoa were extradited back to Colombia. Ochoa was released on bail and disappeared, while Rodríguez is still sitting in jail at last report. A little investigating by *EIR* turned up the fact that the manager of Rodríguez's bank when it was closed in Panama was one Antonio Beltrán, formerly the financial secretary of the UTC labor federation in Colombia and on the executive board of the UTC-run Banco de los Trabajadores (Workers' Bank).

The UTC, heavily funded and politically deployed by the AIFLD, had controlled the bank since its 1974 founding, but not long afterward sold its stocks to Rodríguez Orejuela through the good offices of Beltrán. UTC executives like President Tulio Cuevas and Beltrán himself, remained on the bank's board.

Since that mid-'70s takeover by Rodríguez and friends, the bank did worthy service for the Medellín Cartel. In the

early 1980s, the Banco was named as one of at least four Colombian banks involved in drug money laundering for Hernán Botero, a Medellín-based businessman and soccer team owner now doing 30 years in a Florida jail for drug trafficking. When former Colombian Justice Minister Enrique Parejo González was the target of a nearly successful mafia assassination attempt on Jan. 13, something calling itself the "Hernán Botero Brigade" claimed responsibility. Parejo signed the extradition order that made Botero the first Colombian trafficker to be handed over to the United States.

Botero's soccer team, after his extradition, was taken over by Mario Valderrama, the head of the UTC branch in Medellín and recently appointed a UTC vice-president. Valderrama was favored for the post by the current UTC President Victor Acosta and his sidekick, Secretary-General Alfonso Vargas. It was Vargas who, with Acosta's blessings, traveled to Spain in 1985 with his colleague Felipe Hurtado of the rival CTC labor federation, specifically to argue Rodríguez Orejuela's innocence before the Spanish courts. Were it not for the intervention of AIFLD's paid agents in Colombia, Rodríguez Orejuela and his business partner Jorge Ochoa Vásquez would probably be sitting in a Florida jail-cell with Carlos Lehder today.

The case of Colombia's Banco de los Trabajadores and the UTC-mob connections are no mere "abuse" of AIFLD's confidence. Tulio Cuevas, UTC president for more than a decade, was a long-term member of AIFLD's board of trustees, along with Julio Cruzado, the president of Peru's CTP labor federation and a close associate of convicted drug trafficker Carlos Langberg Meléndez. During the 1977-83 tenure of AIFLD director Bernard Packer in Peru, Cruzado and Packer attempted to create a Banco de los Trabajadores in that country—with Langberg providing the financing, as Rodríguez had done in Colombia. Fierce opposition to Cruzado within the trade union movement forced them to scotch the plan.

Apart from AIFLD's direct collaboration with drug runners, it has also embraced proposals and entities which explicitly foster the growth of the drug trade in Ibero-America. In 1984, it endorsed the recommendations of Henry Kissinger's National Bipartisan Commission on Central America, which urged conversion of that region's economies into Hong Kong-styled "free markets" which would offer a ready haven to the region's drug producers and traffickers. And, in repeated statements both private and public, AIFLD officials have praised the work of the International Monetary Fund, defending it from charges that its unyielding austerity terms produce ready conditions for the spread of the drug trade.

The Vesco connection

A second individual not yet indicted, provides a key to the networks protecting the Cartel's operations. **Robert Vesco**, the Cartel's financial and logistical chief, has lived in Cuba since 1984 under the protection of Fidel Castro, as

Castro himself told reporters on Aug. 4, 1985. Calling Vesco a persecuted "family man," Castro asked, "Is it just to hunt down a man who no longer has even a place to hide, as if he were a beast? I have told Vesco, 'If you want to live here, live here,'" Castro said.

The advantages to the Cuban intelligence services' own drug-running networks, of hosting a major Cartel director, are obvious. But it is Vesco's still-live access to Western financial and business interests, which makes him most valuable to the Castro regime, including for helping set up illegal trading networks to bring embargoed U.S. technology into Cuba.

Vesco's frequent trips to Costa Rica, and his extensive networks there, are an open secret in that country, as Costa Rica's *La Nación* reported on Nov. 30, 1986. Why have Costa Rican authorities not moved against the drug-runner's operations? Here again, the answer lies in the protection provided the Medellín Cartel by the corrupted U.S. intelligence networks controlling AIFLD. It was to Costa Rica that Vesco first fled when he was wanted by U.S. authorities in 1972, and he was welcomed by no less a man than the country's then President, José "Pepe" Figueres. Today, if you

want to see Vesco in Cuba, it is to Pepe Figueres that you must turn for clearance, Vesco-promotor Arthur Herzog reported in *Fortune* magazine last November.

Figueres was a founder of the Caribbean Legion, a Nazi network in the Caribbean turned over to Soviet control after World War II, according to U.S. military intelligence documents of the period. If that history has long since been buried, it is because Cord Meyer, the World Federalist turned CIA official who founded AIFLD, used Figueres to carry out many "U.S." political operations in South and Central America. In 1967, Figueres publicly described himself as a "CIA agent."

The revelation that Vesco's Swiss-based financial lieutenant, Willard Zucker, was the mastermind for the arms and money supply network set up by John Poindexter's National Security Council for the Nicaraguan Contras (see *EIR*, Dec. 19, 1986 and Jan. 23, 1987), confirms the mounting evidence that Vesco's access to the West has been protected by a network within U.S. intelligence itself. Here, the track to be pursued remains Vesco's relationship to his former lawyer, Kenneth Bialkin of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith.

LaRouche: How to run the war on drugs

In a statement prepared for congressional hearings on the Department of Justice's budget on Feb. 3, 1987, Lyndon LaRouche outlined the crucial points for a "battle-plan against the international drug-trafficking," excerpted here:

There are six points, at each and all of which the international drug traffic must be crushed, if we are to be effective. 1) In the nation in which the substances are originally produced. 2) In movements of substances across national borders. 3) Through intensive inspection of all vessels and aircraft entering the United States. 4) Through tracing the flow of revenues from the drug-traffic through financial institutions, and through administering crushing penalties to institutions whose negligence fosters the existence of channels of laundering of drug-revenues. 5) Through sweeping the drug-pushers from the streets. 6) Through strict and vigorous law-enforcement action, with severe penalties, against the users who represent the market on which the existence of the drug-traffickers depends.

Although appropriate types of military aircraft, helicopters, and electronic equipment, are indispensable for dealing with the production and bulk transport of such

substances, no amount of equipment would produce success without improvement in the system of human intelligence affecting all six layers of interdiction.

Friendly nations are crippled by lack of proper radar, and shortages of aerial flotillas which combine gunship planes and helicopters. With adequate equipment military arms of nations below our Rio Grande border can be very effective in doing their part. We must be more consistent in aiding these governments with access to current satellite and AWACS-type information, to assist in selecting and planning military and similar operations. We do not need to send in U.S. Green Berets, except as civilians assigned to liaison with relevant agencies of those governments.

Apart from this modest amount of assistance to cooperating foreign governments, the most massive problem today, is a shortage of qualified anti-drug intelligence personnel in federal, state, and local U.S. agencies. Although law-enforcement is an integral part of this, effective law-enforcement by itself is not the answer. The key is the use of high-quality methods of intelligence detection, tracking, and operations, in pinpointing targets for appropriately military or law-enforcement action. . . .

We must increase the allotments for the War on Drugs in two categories. 1) We must increase allotments of materiel required as assistance to cooperating governments. 2) We must increase substantially the number of anti-drug intelligence officers in every responsible agency. If we do not find the will to do these two things, we can not be said to be serious about fighting a War on Drugs to win.