

# Colombian labor federation takes on the issue of IMF austerity

by Carlos Potes

In the midst of the severest challenge it has ever confronted, the Union of Colombian Workers (UTC), Colombia's largest labor federation, celebrated its yearly national conference Dec. 1-4 in the Caribbean port city of Barranquilla. Caught between the rock of increasing austerity measures and the hard spot of a confrontation with the Colombian government, which at the very least would isolate the union from any real possibility of solving anything, the UTC opted for an in-depth programmatic approach to the national and international economic situation, while locating for all its affiliates the global strategic context in which their grievances must be placed in order to even hope to make some progress on the local front.

With its slogans opposing the International Monetary Fund and its calls for the formation of an Ibero-American common market to facilitate industrial development, the three-day conference of the UTC was characterized by an educational focus on the global realities which make any less comprehensive approach folly. What was unique is that 1,500 labor delegates from across Colombia came together under brutal conditions of mass unemployment, collapsing living standards, and near open warfare with the country's powerful drug-running interests and yet, instead of the making usual gripes and squabbling over how to divide up and defend the shrinking pie, the delegates took on a leadership role in formulating a program for industrial recovery and growth.

## How to go about it

"Obviously, we support a moratorium on Colombia's foreign and domestic debt," said Victor Acosta, the president of the UTC, in his inaugural speech, "and we support this being done jointly with other Andean Pact and Latin American nations. . . . We also back the proposed Latin American Common Market which was formulated at the meeting of the Andean Labor Council."

Reiterating the continental reach of the federation's present policy course, leaders of the UTC affiliate in the Pacific Coast province of El Valle, UTRAVAL, presented an electrifying analysis of the means by which international banks impose genocidal conditions on developing countries, and concluded: "As the UTC has reiterated on numerous occasions, in the face of this ruthless offensive by the international

bankers, who act, in fact, as a creditors' cartel, there is no other option but to respond collectively. Our nations must build a 'union of debtors' which will declare a moratorium on foreign debt, to begin with." UTRABOC, the UTC's affiliate in the Bogotá-Cundinamarca region, added that, "when we workers have competent ideas and serious proposals, we can make history."

## A labor-government alliance

The trap the UTC is avoiding, and working to keep the rest of the labor movement out of, is a possible confrontation with the government of Colombia's President Belisario Betancur, which is now in the midst in a deadly fight against extremely powerful, internationally connected drug and financial networks—networks which to this point have held a vise-grip on all flows of credit and investment. The recent kidnaping of Betancur's brother is one indication of the extremes to which this mafia is willing to go to break the country's will to set its development goals independently of the drug-running role assigned it by the debt collectors.

In spite of constant attempts by provocateurs within the UTC and other labor federations and international organizations, including the AFL-CIO's American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), to channel massive popular discontent over the general economic conditions of the country into a wave of strikes which would paralyze production and set off all kinds of anarchist disruptions, the UTC has managed so far to focus everyone's attention—including the government's—on the financial blackmail imposed by international institutions like the IMF to attempt to secure impossible debt repayments.

## A global responsibility

The strategic significance of the UTC placing international political and economic issues before petty, factional squabbles is twofold. For one, it offers the Betancur government an opportunity to join ranks with popular forces knowledgeable of the circumstances in which the fight for development is being waged. This alliance can strengthen Betancur considerably in his bid to boost Colombia into taking a leadership position in that fight. Second, the UTC's international perspective provides all other Ibero-American labor federations

with a model to follow on a regional scale, enabling them to coordinate activities which can best position them politically to influence the stand taken by their respective countries on issues of debt, trade, and development. Already a position paper written by the UTC has become the working policy of the newly created Andean Labor Council.

As the presentation of the UTC's Bogotá-based affiliate, UTRABOC, at the conference emphasized: "We, the working class, have a great responsibility because, despite the fact that the presidents of the Andean Pact and of Ibero-America have on several occasions called for collective renegotiation of the foreign debt and for the creation of a debtors' organization, either for reasons of indecision or lack of clarity, they have not acted with the urgency that the world crisis demands."

### **'Operation Juárez'**

The statements of UTRABOC as well as others throughout the conference reflect the influence of U.S. economist Lyndon H. LaRouche's "Operation Juárez" proposal, which has circulated throughout Ibero-America over the past year. "Operation Juárez" identifies the \$300 billion Ibero-American debt as the greatest single problem facing the continent, a problem that forces nations to cannibalize themselves in order to service foreign creditors. It calls for Ibero-American nations to unite in declaring a debt moratorium to force the issuance of new, low-interest credits so that these nations can obtain needed industrial goods from the United States and other advanced sector nations. It also calls for the formation of an Ibero-American common market to promote industrialization. Unless this is done, says LaRouche, the continent will die, bringing the rest of the world economy down with it.

LaRouche sent a message to the UTC on the second day of the conference, which read: "I have been told by many Ibero-Americans that if they could vote in the elections, I would be President of the United States. I see no hope of Ibero-Americans voting in the next U.S. elections, which I consider unfair, but I will do my best for Ibero-America nevertheless. Greetings to your Congress. You know my policies."

### **Following up**

In concluding discussions among the different regional federations present, it was determined that the UTC required a permanent planning and economic intelligence department, including a data bank, to maintain constant surveillance and evaluation of the national and international situation, and to present competent programmatic initiatives to government agencies on both a national and continental scale. Maximiliano Londoño, secretary-general of the LaRouche-affiliated Andean Labor Party (PLAN) in Colombia and an adviser to UTRABOC on economic affairs, is being considered to head up this department.

*The following are excerpts from Victor Acosta's inaugural speech at the national conference of the Union of Colombian workers in Barranquilla, on Dec. 1. Acosta is the president of the UTC.*

. . . [We demand that business] invest in a creative, innovative spirit so as to create a heavy industrial sector: Steel plants, machine tools, capital goods, construction materials and equipment for the generation of electricity. . . .

Modernization and industrialization of agriculture must be expanded. Small farmers must receive from the state the necessary guarantees for them to become prosperous farmers and expand the area of their plots to become economically viable. . . .

By the end of this century we must double the rail system from three thousand to six thousand kilometers; rural roads and paved highways must be increased. We must increase one hundredfold port capacity. . . .

Obviously, we support a moratorium on Colombia's foreign and domestic debt, and we support this being done jointly with other Andean Pact and Latin American nations. . . . We also back the proposed Latin American Common Market which was formulated at the meeting of the Andean Labor Council.

The state must establish control over the issuance of credit, to guarantee low-interest rates for productive projects and punishment for speculators. For these purposes must be created a true central bank which will issue and channel credit for productive activities, because the Banco de la Republica is really a bank in which investment is mainly controlled by private banking.

*The following are excerpts from the presentation given by UTRAVAL (Valle Workers' Union) at the national conference of the UTC, Dec. 1-4.*

The annual gathering of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, which took place late last September, declared unequivocally a war to the death against the nations of the Third World. The renewal of savage austerity against populations and the accelerated looting of natural resources was officialized at that financial summit. . . .

In the face of this ruthless offensive by the international bankers, who act, in fact, as a creditors' cartel, there is no other option but to respond collectively. Our nations must build a union of debtors which will declare a moratorium on foreign debt, to begin with.

For us workers, our country is America, and we see it as an obligation to defend our Nation of Republics against any foreign aggression. In this case, the pirates are the IMF, the World Bank and the leading Swiss and Anglo-American banks.