

Colombia Surrenders War on Narco-Terror, For IMF Promises

by Valerie Rush

Newly inaugurated Colombian President Alvaro Uribe Vélez came up to Washington, D.C. on Sept. 24, looking for political and financial support for his war against narco-terrorism. He returned home three days later, with promises of *future* loans from the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and others; but in exchange for those promises, he embraced the very IMF austerity prescriptions that have driven the nation into the arms of the drug trade and narco-terrorism.

In a high-profile address to a combined audience of establishment think-tanks—including the Council on Foreign Relations, the Inter-American Dialogue, the Heritage Foundation, the Wilson Institute, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and others—Uribe appealed for help in the war against narco-terrorism, but then justified that appeal by pitifully insisting that his country's "greatest asset" was that it had never defaulted on its debt, domestic or foreign. "Make no mistake that we will remain current in all financial obligations," he said.

While Uribe thus pledged his nation's fast-dwindling resources to keeping the bankers happy, Colombians at home despair as they watch their economy get whittled away by Uribe's budget-slashing, more and higher taxes, and his proposed new pension and labor legislation—all guaranteed to drive still more citizens below the poverty line. Major protest strikes have been one of the results.

Despite the fact that Uribe was elected in May with an overwhelming popular mandate, his administration was just 40 days old when more than 700,000 state and government workers, backed by thousands of farmers, struck on Sept. 16 for 12 hours, in Bogotá and 31 provincial capitals, to protest Uribe's economic policies.

The protests targeted Uribe's so-called labor and pension "reforms," which are intended to wipe out overtime pay, reduce bonus pay, facilitate hiring and firing of workers, raise the retirement age, eliminate many traditional pension benefits, and more. Farmers were demanding an end to the mass import of foods which they already grow, and to protest government support for the Bush Administration's Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), which they rightly fear will destroy any remnants of agricultural and industrial production. The labor federation leaders who organized the strike advertised that their action was to protest "the neo-liberal

offensive of the government imposed by the International Monetary Fund, the rise in unemployment, and the violence that is affecting the entire population." The government's own figures were cited, which indicate that unemployment is an estimated 20%, and underemployment another 35%, of the labor force.

According to Labor Minister Juan Luis Londoño, studies have shown that there are 700 new suicides every time the unemployment rate grows by a percentage point. "We've found that people can't last through prolonged unemployment," Londoño is quoted saying. And yet, the government is planning to cut tens of thousands of workers from the government payroll, when the depressed Colombian economy is incapable of absorbing them into new productive jobs in the private sector.

During his visit to Washington, President Uribe declared that money will be allocated to the creation of 400,000 new jobs over the next four years. But the only plan for "creating" jobs that he proposed was to further reduce wages, while offering government bonuses to employers for every new worker they can be convinced to hire. No plans to build the energy, transportation, and communication infrastructure the country so sorely needs.

According to Colombia's labor federations, a new nationwide strike will be called on Oct. 30, to protest Uribe's refusal to abandon IMF austerity policies.

More Anti-Terrorist Aid

As for Uribe's war with the narco-terrorist guerrilla groups FARC, ELN and AUC, he pushed all the Bush Administration's anti-drug/anti-terrorism buttons during his visit to Washington, and came away with a handful of useful concessions. The Administration is pledging to come up with another \$450 million in aid from Congress, most of which would be earmarked for security. U.S.-Colombian intelligence sharing, which had been absurdly restricted to counternarcotics (and not "counterterrorism") under the Clinton Administration, will now be freed up to give Colombians a better weapon in their battle with the narco-terrorists. U.S. special forces will be providing specialized counterinsurgency training to several of Colombia's Army brigades, and aerial drug interdiction based on U.S. intelligence is expected to resume shortly.

However, as the LaRouche-allied Ibero-American Solidarity Movement (MSIA) in Colombia has repeatedly insisted, defeating narco-terrorism requires, above all, abandoning the economic model which puts creditors' interests above those of the general welfare. Wrote MSIA President Maximiliano Londoño in a recent statement, "The reality is that if the IMF's austerity programs are not abandoned, the FARC and its Wall Street/City of London patrons will soon be able to force President Uribe to surrender to negotiations with the FARC, under conditions which will make [former President Andrés] Pastrana's 'peace process' look like a cakewalk."