
Interview: Jorge Carrillo, Colombian labor leader

Colombia needs heavy industry, modern technologies, and bank nationalization

In the coming weeks and months, as the debt crisis comes to a head, the fate of Latin America's population will depend on the emergence of political forces and alliances prepared to intervene with new programmatic solutions. Primary among these forces will be the continent's labor movements which, perhaps more than any other element of society, understand the present monetary crisis as a matter of life and death for the continent's people.

The Club of Life, the international anti-Malthusian institution founded in Rome last October, has undertaken to promote a "North-South Labor Committee" which would serve as a bridge between the developing- and advanced-sector labor/farmer movements for coordinating effective policy.

Jorge Carrillo is one of those labor leaders. As a vice-president of Colombia's largest labor federation, the Union of Colombian Workers (UTC), and the UTC's chief negotiator with the government of President Belisario Betancur, Carrillo has undertaken to simultaneously educate Colombia's 3 million trade-unionists and the well-disposed but often short-sighted government and business sectors with which labor must coordinate strategy.

In the following excerpts from a lengthy interview conducted with Carrillo the week of Colombian labor's mass demonstration for joint debt renegotiation, bank nationalization, and better living standards, the union leader details the contents of his programmatic proposals and the challenges labor faces in forging a labor-government-business alliance for progress.

It is important to note that one week after the mass labor rally in Bogotá, the Betancur government agreed to grant a 25 percent increase in the minimum wage, matching the inflation level and meeting an important demand of the labor march. That agreement has eliminated a dangerous source of destabilization of the Betancur administration and laid the basis for precisely the sort of alliance Carrillo discusses.

The following is an interview conducted in December 1982 by our EIR correspondents in Bogotá, Colombia with Jorge Carrillo, president of the Union of Colombian Workers for

Bogotá and Cundinamarca (Utraboc) and vice-president of the national labor federation UTC.

EIR: What is the program the UTC has been urging for the present situation, and how have the other labor federations responded in terms of presenting a unified policy to the government?

Carrillo: On the occasion of the meeting of the National Council of Labor and Salaries, held some 70 days ago in the presidential palace, the UTC had an opportunity to present to President Betancur a program for fighting unemployment and improving living conditions for the entire population. That program has as its goal reactivating national industry and the agrarian sector. To accomplish this we have proposed that the agricultural sector modernize its technologies; that the government, as the great promoter of this agrarian policy, assume responsibility for mechanizing the countryside and training the growers toward this end; that the government provide not only the indispensable technical aid but also sufficient credit so that a policy of food production can be developed which would not only suffice to supply the internal market, but would yield a surplus for export to the rest of Latin America.

On industry we have said that the government must decide to promote a modern industrial sector, a sector of heavy industry, an industry which within 20 years will place our country at the level of at least some of the European nations, such as Italy. For this we require a frontal battle against those who have insisted that the industry of the country should be limited to assembly of household appliances, a policy which has led the country nowhere.

We have said that we are rich producers of certain indispensable raw materials for industry, such as coal and nickel, and that, using the Atlantic coast, we could install there great plants that would use iron—not just domestic but also Venezuelan iron—for establishing an important heavy industry component. We would have to reactivate the Magdalena River, doing whatever is necessary to recover the lands bordering the river so that they can be used for cultivation,

solving the problem of flooding which periodically occurs and leaves millions of people in misery and abandonment.

We have said that cattle raising could be developed in the Eastern Plains [Llanos Orientales] through modern techniques, that we would have to construct kilometers of highways and railroads, and that this could be made feasible through an economic policy which avoids investing our reserves in unnecessary imports. We have, therefore, argued for an economic plan which would create stable and well-paid employment, which would provide the worker better working conditions and mobility in his job through the incentive of better wages and a better living standard for his family.

EIR: And regarding the labor federations, what points of agreement have been reached?

Carrillo: The leading labor federations of the country have viewed the positions of the UTC with great sympathy, because they are fully aware that the labor movement can only develop and strengthen itself to the extent that we have an important industrial sector, and that the agrarian workers will be more easily organized and enlightened regarding their and their country's needs through these new production techniques.

We, through the program we have put forward—which has already been approved by the UTC National Congress and presented to the UTC Executive Committee—have the support of the organized working class.

EIR: How have businessmen and the government responded to these initiatives?

Carrillo: It would seem the government is in agreement, if not with 100 percent of the program we have presented, at least with a good part of it. But there is still missing the necessary pressure from the population so that this program will be embraced in its entirety by the State, so that the part with which it is in agreement will be rapidly implemented. The industrialists have said that the program is very good, only that it is "very ambitious"; they feel that some of it can be done but not to the extent we want.

EIR: In other words what you are pushing is a worker-industrialist alliance, in order to push the country forward. But I understand there have been some differences on wages policy. . . .

Carrillo: Yes. We have called on the business sector of this country to form an alliance with us to move the country forward; we have invited them to think big, to stop thinking in terms of their small businesses and their small limits to production, but to think in terms of having the human material required to carry out a program of such a magnitude. Unfortunately, we have already come across our first obstacle, which is the labor policy espoused by the government, a policy of freezing salaries and decontrolling prices; in other words, a policy which has been rejected already by the entirety of the population. The businessmen, who are very

shortsighted regarding their own situation, have been pressured to show agreement with this policy which would appear to benefit them but which, in the long run, would bring about the ruin of their businesses.

EIR: What is the current state of negotiations in the National Labor Council?

Carrillo: The UTC is heading up the position that the increase in wages must be above the inflation index registered this year as a barely just means of assuring minimum-wage workers—who are 3 million Colombians and their families—better nutritional levels, because the problem of malnutrition of these workers and their families is a matter of calories. Workers who draw a minimum salary are not eating what is required for subsistence.

On the other hand is the government's position, that minimum wages should be increased below the inflation rate. To this we have said: with such a policy the government is asking the minimum-wage worker to eat less than he did a year ago. That is, that his chances for mere existence worsen; that the children of these workers—many of whom are already dying from malnutrition—well, that their mortality rate increase; and that the families of these workers practically disappear.

Thus what is at stake in effect is neither more nor less than whether three million Colombians, their children, and their spouses, will be able to subsist or not in the coming years.

EIR: What are your thoughts about the financial sector: in recent years there have appeared a series of scandals leading even to the nationalization of one entity. What is the position of the labor federations, or of the UTC, on this matter and how do you view the measures the government has taken in this respect?

Carrillo: One of the demands of the labor federations—all the labor federations—that we have presented to the government of President Betancur is that of nationalization of the banks, because we feel that the financial sector being in the hands of just a few is the cause of the economic calamity which has overtaken the country. We feel that the only means of guaranteeing that the money from national savings goes to the productive sector, to industry which creates jobs, would be if the government takes into its own hands the role of attracting savings and distributing credit, a job made easier by the fact that the government already owns 50 percent of the banks and even more, given that the government itself has said that although it doesn't plan to nationalize the banks, it will do so if they continue to go bankrupt. We cannot, however, wait for more of them to go bankrupt to nationalize the banks; it should be a government policy. Public services should be in the hands of the state; the interests of the community must take precedence over the interests of individuals. A handful of financiers cannot be left holding millions and millions of the national wealth, but the state should intervene to make sure this does not continue to occur.