

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

'Peronism' in Colombia?

The oligarchy fears that President Betancur is building a new nationalist movement as a springboard for power.

Belisario Betancur's consolidation of labor and church support for a new nationalist political machine in Colombia is drawing howls of rage from the drug-linked alliance of Liberals and Conservatives who hope to recapture the presidency in next year's elections.

Betancur's bitterest enemy, former President Alfonso López Michelsen, openly accused the head of state of using his popularity to forge "a species of Peronism" to assure his reelection. When challenged by reporters on Betancur's intention, López admitted, "Well, I wouldn't say he'll be a candidate, but a decisive factor in the country's politics in the year to come."

López's accusations were repeated by his henchman, former labor leader and congressman Tulio Cuevas, who swore that "Belisario's Peronism will not triumph in Colombia." Virgilio Barco, the Liberal Party's designated presidential candidate and a political puppet of López Michelsen, meanwhile protested that "the absurd and dangerous fiction" of Ibero-American unity was circulating in Colombia, and had to be stamped out.

These fits of ire by the country's entrenched oligarchy are not without grounds. Since Betancur's unprecedented appointment of trade-union leader Jorge Carrillo to the post of Labor Minister last month, Betancur's efforts to construct a new alliance of political forces—based on labor and

the church—to challenge "traditionalist" oligarchic rule and address the country's social needs has given López and company some sleepless nights.

Labor Minister Carrillo's "think big" approach to solving the country's social ills is summed up in a speech he gave Sept. 18 to a national assembly of the National Industrialists Association (ANDI).

"Now is the time for us to establish the solid base to convert our nation into an industrial power," said Carrillo. We must have "an alliance for production among businessmen and workers" dependent upon "industrial and technological progress. . . . The common enemy of capital and labor is usury. . . . The high interest rates in effect today are crushing industry and agriculture, at the same time they condemn thousands to unemployment. . . . This worker-industrialist alliance, founded on a development program, which I propose, is the only competent weapon to solve the extreme problem of unemployment."

Carrillo's development program, which proposes the construction of giant infrastructure projects to help unite the continent, is similar to the "integration" thesis presented in a private meeting Sept. 13 with President Betancur by Peronist leader Juan Labaké. It is not accidental that López Michelsen came up with "Peronist" as the epithet he flung at Betancur.

The Colombian Catholic Church

has recently endorsed precisely this integration approach. In a special document issued by an emergency meeting of the Colombian Episcopal Conference, the Church calls for "Latin American solidarity to advance dialogue . . . with the democratic industrialized nations, as a means of producing a continental plan of cooperation to assure development, fraternity, and peace." The same document also denounces speculation, usury, capital flight, and drug-trafficking, all the private domain of Colombia's financial oligarchy.

Betancur's moral commitment to the nationalist development of his country notwithstanding, he continues to exhibit a serious flaw in economic understanding which threatens to undermine his best efforts at breaking the oligarchy's long-standing stranglehold. That flaw, in essence a lack of cultural optimism in the capacity of the nation and the Ibero-American continent as a whole to industrialize itself, was demonstrated in his long-awaited address to the nation on employment policy. Instead of embracing Carrillo's nation-building strategy, Betancur once again endorsed the "micro-business" approach authored by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund—an approach which has been explicitly denounced by Carrillo as incapable of addressing the country's pressing development needs.

"Micro-business," a euphemism for labor-intensive services and cottage industry, was also endorsed by Colombian Cardinal López Trujillo, an enthusiastic backer of President Betancur's policies.

In an interview granted last year to journalist Jaime Montoya Condamil, Trujillo stated that he wished to "congratulate every effort that this building of micro-businesses is beginning to make."