

Andean Report by Valerie Rush

A Colombian May Day

Colombia's labor movement has become a microcosm of the battle for that nation's future.

This year's celebration of May Day in Colombia offered a striking view of the forces that are contending for power in the country. The march of the Unified Workers Confederation (CUT), representing 80% of organized labor, drew 100,000 to Bolivar Plaza in Bogota, to hear CUT President Jorge Carrillo propose an economic recovery program based on great infrastructural projects such as a new sea-level canal from Atlantic to Pacific, reduction of foreign debt repayment to 10% of Colombian export income, and the active participation of workers in the country's political process. The CUT held May Day marches in 52 other cities, as well.

A second march, with 2,000 participants, was sponsored by the rival UTC/CTC federations, whose ranks were decimated last year when the membership rejected its leaders for delivering their unions to the drug mob, under orders from AFL-CIO's Lane Kirkland and Project Democracy's American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD). A mass walk-out from those federations led to the creation of the CUT.

Joining the UTC/CTC march in Bogota was congressman Ernesto Lucena Quevedo, a colleague of Liberal Party executive member and notorious mafioso Santofimio Botero. Lucena Quevedo is well remembered among Colombians for his 1983 role in leading a drug mafia-sponsored smear campaign in Congress against then Justice Minister Rodrigo Lara Bonilla. On the eve of May Day, 1984, the anti-drug minister was slain by mafia hit men.

Lucena Quevedo described his participation in the UTC/CTC May Day as a "Liberal Party re-encounter with its old trade union base." While the congressman marched with his mafia allies in Bogota, his boss, Santofimio Botero, was the honored speaker at the UTC/CTC rally in Tolima province, his home base, where he railed against the country's extradition treaty with the United States—Lara Bonilla's anti-drug legacy to the nation—as "ignominy" against Colombian nationhood.

In March 5 statements to the daily *El Tiempo*, Lucena Quevedo defended his corrupt UTC/CTC friends, charging the CUT with "abandoning its trade union objectives, and becoming a political instrument of former President Belisario Betancur." His mobster friends in the labor movement went further, accusing CUT leader Carrillo of delivering the labor movement to the Communists.

The same day, the death squad called the MAS—which stands for "Death to Kidnappers," and which was founded by the drug mob—threatened Carrillo's life. In a communiqué published in the daily *El Bogotano*, the MAS pledged to exterminate communism, and accused Carrillo, among others, of collaborating with the enemy.

The threat against Carrillo occurs in the midst of the most dramatic resurgence of political and criminal violence since the 1950s experiment in genocide known as "La Violencia." According to the *New York Times*, 11,000 Colombians were murdered in 1986. In the first quarter of 1987 alone,

300 leaders of the Patriotic Union (UP) party have fallen victim to assassins of the MAS and similar para-military squads, plus hundreds from across the political spectrum.

The escalation of violence coincident with the government's offensive against the drug trade is not accidental. The drug traffickers and their political allies rely on the violence and the institutional instability it fosters to maintain their power. They especially depend upon perpetual Communist insurgency to mask their murderous activities, a narco-terrorist symbiosis clearly exemplified by the November 1985 siege of the Bogota Justice Palace. The UP party has become a special target of these forces, since its members are former guerrilla fighters who accepted a government offer to exchange weapons for the political battlefield.

In this scheme of things, the CUT represents a special threat, for it is the first time in the history of the Colombian labor movement that a single federation has been able to constitute itself out of the ranks of Liberal, Conservative, and Communist trade unions, and keep its independence from all three. Moreover, as Carrillo emphasized in his May Day address, the CUT will take an active part in the first-ever mayoral elections of March 1988, a prelude to the constitution of a Colombian workers' party.

Every political tendency in the country is looking to those mayoral elections as the factor that will determine the 1990 presidential contest. The drug traffickers, who already control a large number of municipalities through a combination of threats and bribery, see those elections as their ticket to power. Thus, there is every reason to anticipate that the coming months will see an intensification of political warfare—and the other kind, as well.