

Exiled Colombian union leader fighting for global justice

USWA recruits college students for their Associate Members program

Fadhel Kaboub May . 03 . 2004

More than 25 students, workers and labor activists from the Kansas City area gathered on April 26 at UMKC in an event featuring Luis Adolfo Cardona, a Coca-Cola Union leader forced to flee Colombia and Tara Widner, United Steelworkers of America (USWA) Staff Representative and an organizer of the Miami Free Trade protests.

Mr. Cardona told the audience his story and how he had to leave his country in 2002 because of the persecution of union leaders in Colombia.

"It is a problem that involves not only paramilitary, government, guerillas, but also multinational corporations," said Mr. Cardona.

"When the Colombian government heard that I was in the U.S. talking about corruption and all the social problems, my family was threatened with death." That's when Mr. Cardona had to petition for political asylum here in the U.S. to bring his family to safety.

Coca-Cola has 22 bottling plants in Colombia. Mr. Cardona is a member of SINALTRAINAL, a union that represents workers in 20 of those 22 plants.

"In the last 10 years, Coca-Cola has had nine union leaders assassinated, three have disappeared, three are in exile, and five have been incarcerated (8 to 12 months) because of false testimony," said Mr. Cardona. "45 families have been displaced from their hometown, and 65 union leaders have been threatened with death," he added.

Mr. Cardona recounted the details of the assassination of a union leader in the plant where he used to work, how he was kidnapped and then managed to escape from his kidnapers.

Mr. Cardona referred the audience to a website www.killercocacola.org that has information about Coca-Cola's involvement with paramilitary groups in Colombia. He is now running a worldwide campaign against Coca-Cola since July 2003, to raise awareness among consumers and to boycott Coca-Cola products.

The purpose of this Global Justice Tour is not only to raise awareness about Coca-Cola workers in Colombia, but also to recruit students to join the USWA's Associate Member program, which gives members access to the USWA staff for job related issues such as workers' rights in the work place, workers comp, as well as safety and health issues.

According to Judy Ancel, director of the UMKC Institute for Labor Studies, the idea of building a union of working people that includes students but is not exclusively tied to workplace representation is not new. In the 1880s the Knights of Labor had 750,000 members in the United



Judy Ancel (left) translating the Global Justice speech by Luis Adolfo Cardona (right)

States.

"They were workers of virtually all backgrounds; anyone who worked could join, even entrepreneurs. Their platform called for reforms that would bring the corporate rule of the United States under control," said Judy Ancel. "While they didn't last long, they did succeed in taking over a number of city governments and making reforms; including Kansas City, Kansas."

"UMKC students are overwhelmingly working class," said Judy Ancel. "They come from working class families and many of them are working like demons while at the same time going to school."

Judy Ancel told the KC Aurora that the steelworkers' proposal is an attempt to broaden labor's base and realize a more comprehensive program based on common interests.

The event was co-sponsored by USWA Associate Member Program, the UMKC Institute for Labor Studies, National Lawyers Guild-UMKC, the UMKC Economics Club, the UMKC Students for the Social Science Consortium, the UMKC Zeta chapter of Omicron Delta Epsilon, and SWAGS.

For more info visit:

[Colombia Action Network](#)

[United Steelworkers of America](#)

www.killercocacola.org

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