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Coca-Cola pours scorn on student boycott. (Home news)

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COCA-COLA is in such a fizz about a planned boycott of its famous soft drink at four university campuses across Ireland that it has sent some of its most senior executives to Dublin to discuss the students' concerns, writes Scott Millar.

The protest is being led by students at University College Dublin, who are unhappy with the firm's alleged ill-treatment of the Colombian workers who bottle drinks for sale in Latin America. The boycott is being supported by students from Trinity College Dublin, NUI Maynooth and Queen's University, Belfast.

Coca-Cola is concerned about the adverse publicity being generated about its product by the boycott. Loss of business for the company could have a detrimental effect on its Irish workforce of more than 1,000, who are involved in bottling, distributing and selling the soft drink.

Siptu, the trade union which represents the Irish workers, has held meetings with the company. Rafael Fernandez Quiros, Coca-Cola's director of communications in Latin America, has been sent to Ireland to "express the true facts of the situation in Colombia".

Quiros said: "I don't know why we are having this problem in Ireland. This boycott is not even of importance in Colombia, where the issue has been addressed by the courts and the company has been found to be blame-free."

"These are the facts of the case, and once people are aware of them, there is no need for us to enter some form of debate with those who present these fictions, for whatever reason."

Quiros has met with Siptu representatives and Coca-Cola workers. He also intends to visit university campuses but does not intend to meet those co-ordaining the protests.

But Luis Eduardo Garcia, a Coca-Cola employee and union official, will also go the university campuses this week to speak in support of the boycotts.

Garcia works with the Sinaltrainal trade union, which holds Coca-Cola responsible for the deaths of eight of its members, who were murdered by right-wing paramilitaries in one of the company's subsidiary plants in northern Colombia in the mid-1990s. The case is currently before an appeal court in Miami.

The drinks boycott is dominating college campus politics. Coca-Cola supporters at UCD are hoping to overturn the results of a referendum last month that banned the selling of Coke products in student union shops.

Student opponents of the company are also collecting signatures in Trinity, Maynooth and Queen's in an attempt to force a vote on the issue in their universities.

The boycott is being supported in a number of bars in Northern Ireland. The John Hewitt Bar on Belfast's Donegal Street banned Coke products in September and will host a talk by Garcia this week.

Pedro Donald, its manager, said: "This bar has always been associated with progressive politics and, in that vein, I and a group of regulars decided it was right to join this boycott."

The ban is not being supported by the Irish trade union movement, however.

Anne Speed, a Siptu branch secretary, said: "We are here to defend the interests of our members. Sinaltrainal have not discussed these issues with us, and we are not going to endorse something which threatens the livelihood of up to 1,000 employees in Ireland."

Aisling Garvey, a spokeswoman for Coca-Cola Ireland, said the company is at loss to understand what is behind the current student campaign.

"This seems to have come out of nowhere," she said. "There is obviously some sort of political or anti-globalisation input. Although the problem is thankfully minor at the moment, it's just a pity Coca-Cola employees will suffer if this spreads."

Rory Ahern, a Trinity student who collected signatures to force a referendum on a boycott, said: "This is an issue of workers being killed with the complicity of Coca-Cola. Giant multinationals can be made to suffer for actions abroad by people in Ireland until they accept their responsibility."