

# Activists Confront "Killer Coke" in Downtown Atlanta

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ATLANTA – Demonstrators gathered in front of Coca-Cola corporate headquarters here yesterday to demand an end to what they said were the company's "killer" practices in Colombia and Africa. The demonstration included a rally and a mock funeral procession to the gates of the building on North St. Police were called when one of the demonstrators entered Coke property to deliver a box of petitions addressed to members of the company's board of directors. No arrests were made and the protest ended peacefully.

Leading the procession was Ken Little, a union carpenter from Seattle and the labor coordinator for School of the Americas Watch (<http://www.soaw.org>). Little and others had gathered approximately 3,000 signatures on petitions demanding that Coke look into charges that the companies it hires in Colombia engage in human rights violations. The Coca-Cola Co. was named as a defendant in a lawsuit filed in U.S. federal court in 2001, charged in the deaths of two members of SINALTRAINAL, the Colombian beverage workers' union. Coke has since been dropped from the suit, which is going forward against the local bottlers.

Part of the petition reads, "there are undisputed reports that Coca-Cola bottling plant managers in Colombia, South America, allowed and encouraged paramilitary death squads to murder, torture and kidnap SINALTRAINAL leaders and members in an effort to crush their union." The petition is part of a broader campaign (<http://www.killercoke.org>) designed to raise awareness about Coke's practices in countries like Colombia, where human rights violations are rampant. Colombia is the largest recipient of U.S. military aid in the Western hemisphere, and Coca-Cola is the best-known corporate brand in the world, according to the organizers of the boycott.

Elizabeth Allen, 21, a student at Salem State College in Massachusetts, attended the protest after hearing a Colombian trade unionist's eyewitness testimony about what he and his colleagues endured. Allen said that the worker, Luis Cardona, had seen his friends shot and killed by right-wing paramilitary death squads in the bottling plant where they worked. "I tell my friends not to drink Coke, I tell my family not to drink Coke," she said, adding that she would likely start an active campaign against the company on her campus. "I think it's worth it," Allen said.

Joining Allen at the protest was Aaron Jacobson, a 26-year-old boycott leader for the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) and a translator for Cardona when he was in the Southeast. Jacobson said he was talking to the 10,000 workers his organization represents about the Coke campaign, telling them "if they drink Coke, they're drinking the blood of Colombian trade unionists – their brothers and sisters in Colombia who have been killed on the Coke bottling plant floors there."

The rally began at noon, and by 12:30 p.m., ten demonstrators made their way in a mock funeral procession with black-shrouded coffins and a 15-foot tall puppet "carrying" the petitions. When Little took the petitions onto Coke property, local police, who were parked nearby, were called in by Coke employees.

Little presented the petitions, and offered stacks to the employees to carry inside, asking them "Are you familiar with these names?" At that point, he began reading the names of Colombian workers who have been killed in the bottling plants since 1989. One of the police officers, responding to a request from a Coke



Ken Little reads names of murdered Coke workers.

employee, told Little "We're going to ask you to leave right now." The Coke employee asked the officer to get identification, at which point Little turned and said "I don't have to give you anything." Police then asked Little and the other demonstrators to get off the sidewalk in front of the building, which they insisted was an infringement of their right to peaceably assemble. Shortly thereafter, the procession crossed back over the street, and the protest ended.

The Coke employee who asked for Little's identification produced two company statements, one regarding the lawsuit and the other regarding the boycott. When asked for his name, the employee replied, "I'm not with the media group."

The statements from Coke deny any wrongdoing in Colombia, citing the fact that the company was dropped from the suit. "The court found that the plaintiffs failed to offer any factual or legal basis to support their claims that the Company was responsible for wrongful conduct in Colombia," the statement read. The statement about the boycott being run by the "Campaign to Stop Killer Coke" contained similar language. "Given the nature and the purpose of the Coca-Cola business, we believe that calls for boycotts of our products are not the appropriate way to further any cause, as they primarily hurt the local economy, local businesses and local citizens." The full statements can be found at <http://www2.coca-cola.com/presscenter/colombia/index.html>.

Little sees the company's response to the boycott as an indication that it is vulnerable to consumer pressure, despite being dropped from the lawsuit. "Coke needs to respect workers rights/human rights," he said. "They could be a leader of corporations if they came out with a statement that respects the rights of the workers."