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Labor Solidarity In the New World Order: The UMWA Program in Colombia

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Labor Solidarity In the New World Order: The UMWA Program in Colombia

Abstract

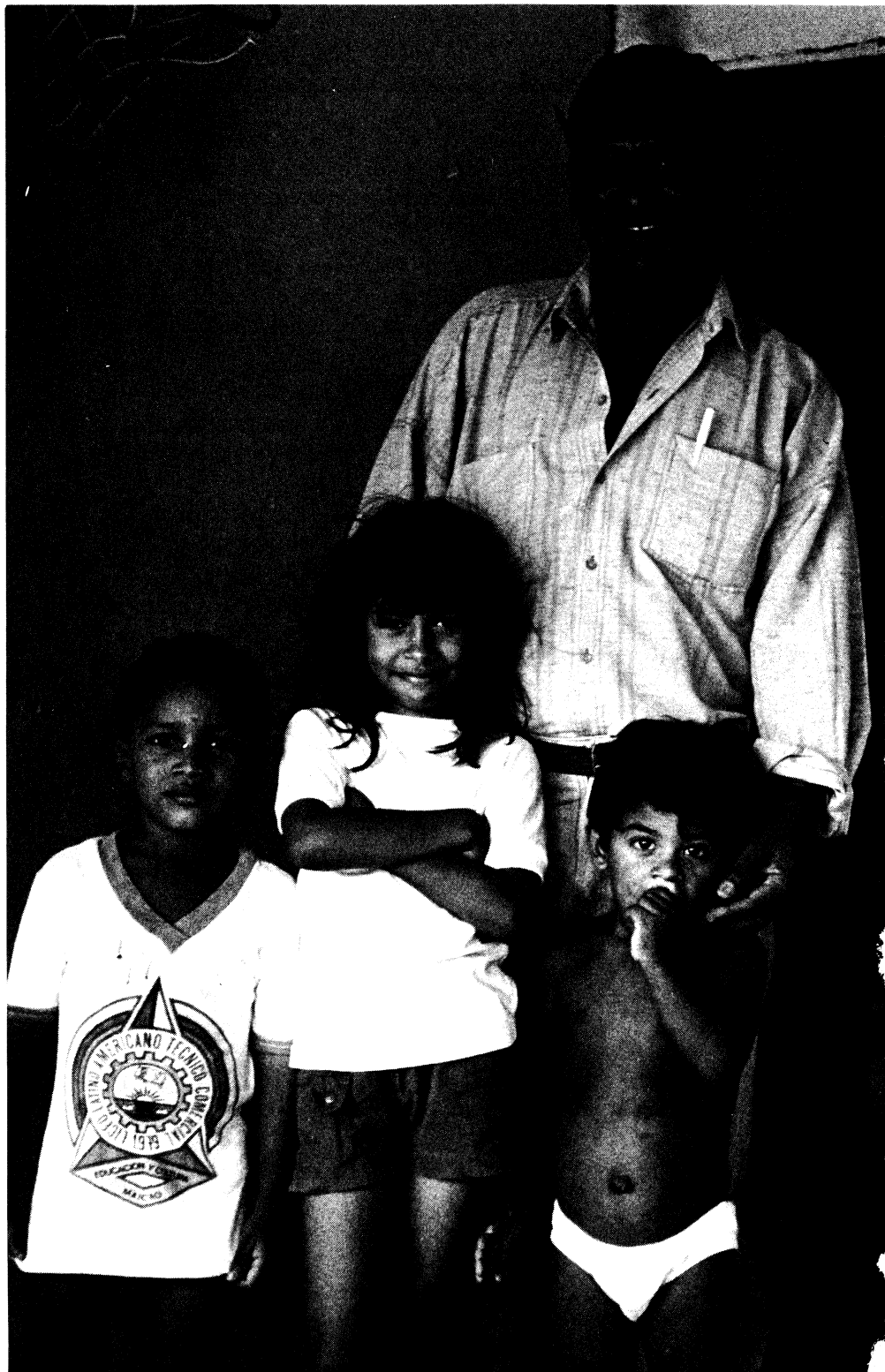
[Excerpt] Globalization of capital is not a new problem, but it is a persistent and growing one. Capital's ability to search the world over for the cheapest labor enables corporations to maintain oppressive working conditions and leads to downward pressures on living and working standards throughout the world. U.S. coal miners and their union, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), realized many years ago that waging struggles in this country was not enough to successfully deal with the reality of job and capital flight to repressive, low-wage countries.

Just using the old methods won't work anymore. We must also join forces across industry lines and national boundaries if we want to be successful. And we must come up with new and creative means to confront corporate power. But it often takes years of developing relationships and working together to develop the close bonds and trust that are necessary for effective solidarity. The UMWA has been forging these bonds with the Colombian mine workers' union, Sindicato de los Trabajadores del Intercor (SINTERCOR), since 1988.

Forging alliances is only half the work of effective international solidarity. Unions also need comprehensive strategies that attack corporations from every possible angle. Only by employing an arsenal of different approaches can we ever hope to confront a multinational corporation as huge and powerful as Exxon.

Keywords

labor movement, unions, United Mine Workers of America, UMWA, Colombia, SINTERCOR



Labor Solidarity In the New World Order

The UMWA Program in Colombia

■ Kenneth S. Zinn

“Capitalism is in business for profit and wherever it is going to realize the most profit out of human blood there it is going.”

– Mother Jones, 1911 convention of the UMWA

Globalization of capital is not a new problem, but it is a persistent and growing one. Capital's ability to search the world over for the cheapest labor enables corporations to maintain oppressive working conditions and leads to downward pressures on living and working standards throughout the world. U.S. coal miners and their union, the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), realized many years ago that waging struggles in this country was not enough to successfully deal with the reality of job and capital flight to repressive, low-wage countries.

Exxon Corporation, the second-largest company in the world, is an example of a U.S. energy producer which operates globally. With revenues of \$101 billion, Exxon surpasses the economic power of most countries in the world. Although headquartered in the United States, Exxon's operations in 80 other countries pull in 78 percent of its revenues. Thus, even if Exxon's entire workforce in the United States – from the oil wells to the refineries to the chemical factories to the coal mines –

joined forces in solidarity, only 22 percent of the revenues of the company would be affected. It's clear that in the case of such a company, international labor solidarity is not a luxury, *it's essential*.

How can we as workers hope to have any influence over this corporate goliath or any other multinational corporation? How can we protect the interests of our members when it comes to wages, health care, pensions, health and safety, and dignity on the job? And how do we confront the reality of job and capital flight to repressive, low-wage countries?

Just using the old methods won't work anymore. We must also join forces across industry lines and national boundaries if we want to be successful. And we must come up with new and creative means to confront corporate power. But it often takes years of developing relationships and working together to develop the close bonds and trust that are necessary for effective solidarity. The UMWA has been forging these bonds with the Colombian mine workers' union, Sindicato de los Trabajadores del Intercor (SINTERCOR), since 1988.

Forging alliances is only half the work of effective international solidarity. Unions also need comprehensive strategies that attack corporations from every possible angle. Only by employing an arsenal of different approaches can we ever hope to confront a multinational corporation as huge and powerful as Exxon.

A STATE OF THE ART MINE CLOSES IN THE U.S. AND OPENS IN COLOMBIA

In 1979 Exxon opened a \$50 million mine in Wayne County, West Virginia, saying there was at least 40 years of work at the operation. But just four years later, Exxon closed it down and opened El Cerrejon, a mine in Colombia. The closing left miners like Terry Ramey of UMWA Local Union 2423 high and dry.

"I was proud to serve my country in the military," Ramey, a bronze-star Vietnam veteran, told the *UMW Journal* in 1985, "and proud to be a coal miner and a UMWA member. And when Exxon opened the Monterey mine, I saw it as a chance to provide some security for my family. Isn't that what America's all about?"

"Then Exxon opened a mine in South America," Ramey continued. "That's where my job went. Now, I've been out of work for two years and I can't even get welfare or food stamps."

Since the closing of the West Virginia mine, El Cerrejon has continued to expand its production and Exxon has sold off more North American holdings. Today, all that's left of Exxon's coal operations in North

America are two mines in Illinois, Monterey Coal #1 and #2, where about 800 UMWA miners are employed.

In the meantime, production at Exxon's Cerrejon mine, and in Colombia generally, is steadily increasing. Colombia now exports more than 19 million tons of coal per year, soon to be increased to 29 million tons. This may seem like small potatoes compared to a U.S. industry which produced over one billion tons of coal last year. But coal imports in the U.S. have grown by 284 percent over the last decade (with Colombian coal imports growing by 465 percent over that same period). In the export market, coal produced in low-wage, repressive countries like Colombia is taking a larger and larger share. As a result, total U.S. exports have declined by 24 percent in the last decade and thousands of U.S. coal mining jobs have been lost.

A LOW-WAGE MINE OPENS IN COLOMBIA

Jointly owned by Exxon Corporation and Carbochol, a Colombian government parastatal (state-held company), El Cerrejon is the largest export coal mine in the world. Exxon manages the mine through its wholly-owned subsidiary, International Colombia Resources Corporation (Intercor). While U.S. mining jobs plummeted, the U.S. Export-Import Bank, a U.S. government agency, provided crucial financing totaling \$565 million for the construction of the mine.

"I was proud to serve my country in the military and proud to be a coal miner and a UMWA member. Now, I've been out of work for two years and I can't even get welfare or food stamps."

Last year, El Cerrejon produced 13.6 million tons of coal, all for the export market. The coal from this mine is burned in power plants throughout Europe and here in the United States at utilities such as New England Power Co., Jacksonville Electric Authority, Public Service Electric & Gas, Northeast Utilities, and Public Service Co. of New Hampshire. But under what conditions is the coal for these plants obtained?

In Colombia the labor movement has struggled against intense repression and the on-going gross violations of human rights. According to Amnesty International, political violence has claimed 20,000 lives in Colombia since 1986. And, contrary to the widespread belief in the U.S. that most of these murders are drug related, Amnesty estimates that only a very small percentage of the killing is due to narcotics trafficking.

Most of the victims, according to the human rights group, “are defenseless peasants, cut down in the army’s drive to crush Colombia’s guerilla movements.” To give but one gruesome example of how the killings are not limited to combatants, it is estimated that in 1993, 2,190 children, an average of six per day, were murdered in Colombia.

Of course, the Colombian power elite perceive those engaged in union organizing as among the biggest threats to the status quo. The Central Unitaria de Trabajadores (CUT) labor confederation reported last year that 1,020 of its members have been killed since the organization was formed at the end of 1986. During 1992 alone, 170 union activists were killed in Colombia – *the highest number of any country in the world.*

It is in this environment that SINTERCOR is attempting to best represent the 4,000 workers at the El Cerrejon coal mine in La Guajira province in the northeast corner of Colombia. Ironically, Exxon originally created SINTERCOR in 1983, but unfortunately for the company, the workers were not content with a company union and in 1985 succeeded in severing the company’s control.

The conditions under which Colombian worker’s labor require a strong independent union. For example, unsafe mining conditions claimed the lives of 14 workers in El Cerrejon’s first 11 years of operation. And today workers still do not have the right to stop work if they believe conditions are unsafe.

The first two rounds of bargaining between Exxon and SINTERCOR in 1986 and 1988 ended with military intervention. While limited gains were made in each new contract, by 1988 Colombian miners were earning only \$0.95 per hour.

UMWA GETS INVOLVED IN INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN

After the 1988 strike, the UMWA sent a delegation from its Illinois District 12 to Colombia. After learning about the situation first-hand, the UMWA vowed to step up its solidarity efforts for the 1990 round of bargaining at El Cerrejon. The union leadership understood that the fate of the Colombian mine workers and UMWA were intertwined. UMWA President Richard Trumka explained, “Our goal is to strengthen unions in low-wage countries so they are strong enough to fight for decent wages and working conditions to raise their standard of living up to our level. If we don’t, the multinational corporations will attempt to lower our standards to the lowest international common denominator.” (For a related story on global labor standards, see Lance Compa’s article “And the Twain Shall Meet?” p. 51.)

As had occurred in previous rounds, negotiations between Exxon and SINTERCOR collapsed in March 1990. To increase U.S. awareness of Exxon's horrendous labor practices, the UMWA sponsored a whirlwind solidarity tour by SINTERCOR's Vice President Walter Castillo. Mr. Castillo arrived in the U.S. on the day before the Colombia union began a strike.



He met with an unusually broad range of people who could influence or were affected by the struggle in Colombia. In Illinois, Castillo met with UMWA locals from the two Exxon mines; in Houston he addressed Exxon shareholders and met CEO Lawrence Rawl. As Castillo remarked, "It isn't every day when a striking coal miner from Latin America gets to confront the CEO of a \$101 billion multinational corporation."

But it was a meeting in Washington, D.C. with the UMWA's international executive board that "upped the ante" for cross-border solidarity. After hearing about the plight of Colombian mine workers, the union committed to providing crucial support for SINTERCOR, including:

- Securing thousands of dollars in funds to help support the Colombian mine workers.
- Meeting with some of Exxon's largest investors to explain how their dollars were linked to labor rights abuses.
- Working with the Danish union confederation to pressure Danish utility companies importing coal from Colombia to put the heat on Exxon.

Unfortunately, these efforts were not sufficient to stave off the combined power of Exxon and the Colombian government. In May 1990, 800 armed soldiers entered the mine with armored tanks, and the president of Colombia ordered the miners back to work. Despite these pressures, SINTERCOR was able to reach a new agreement that included wage increases and a program to allow miners to purchase their own homes.

The Colombian military response to the miners' strike brought the UMWA to the realization that simply waiting until a strike occurred was not effective solidarity work. So UMWA officials, along with SINTERCOR and the Miners International Federation (MIF), the *international trade union secretariat* representing miners worldwide, began planning a pro-active campaign to assist SINTERCOR in preparation for the 1992 round of bargaining.

A NEW LEVEL OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZING

The UMWA committed to bringing a wide array of weapons to bear against Exxon between 1990 and 1994. Its strategic campaign marked a new level of commitment in its cross-border solidarity campaign.

- **UMWA filed a *Generalized System of Preference* petition.**

The UMWA joined with the human rights group America's Watch to submit a petition to U.S. Trade Representative Carla Hills. Under the law, the U.S. Trade Representative can deny GSP benefits to countries which violate "internationally recognized worker rights." Despite the fact that the petition cited over 46 selected cases of flagrant labor rights abuses in Colombia, including murder by death squads, the Bush Administration refused to grant even a hearing on the petition.

- **MIF held an inter-American union solidarity conference.**

In July 1991, the MIF held its first inter-American miners conference in almost 40 years in Bogota. Officials from the UMWA, and miners unions from Guyana and Chile, which represents copper miners at an Exxon mine in that country, toured El Cerrejon and met with SINTERCOR officials.

- **MIF officials pressured Colombian government officials.**

While in Bogota, MIF General Secretary Peter Michalzik met with the Colombian Minister of Energy and Mines and the Minister of Labor. In those meetings, the ministers agreed to look into the industrial relations practices at El Cerrejon, acknowledging that international labor standards should be observed and that armed troops should not be used in industrial disputes.

- **UMWA set up cross-border training.**

The president of SINTERCOR, Rafael Velasquez, came to the United States for extensive strategy discussions and training on negotiations, strikes and corporate campaigns.

- **Mine worker officials around the world pressured Ambassadors.**

MIF officials met with the Colombian ambassador in Brussels; Australian union officials met with the ambassador in Canberra; and UMWA officials met with the ambassador in Washington, D.C. Through these meetings the Colombian government was warned

not to repeat the experience of 1990 by deploying troops at the mine and allowing Exxon to fire union officials.

- **UMWA and SINTERCOR workers declared cross border solidarity.** UMWA miners at the Exxon mines in Illinois began wearing hat stickers on the job declaring their support for SINTERCOR. Soon after, SINTERCOR miners began sporting the same stickers on their hard hats at El Cerrejon.

- **UMWA and MIF initiated a letter writing campaign.**

Exxon received letters from the China Light & Power Co. Workers' Free Union in Hong Kong, the United Mine Workers of Australia, Exxon petrochemical workers in Europe, the Oil, Chemical & Atomic Workers and the AFL-CIO in the U.S., and the International Federation of Chemical, Energy and General Workers Unions. Human rights groups such as the Colombia Human Rights Network and the Washington Office on Latin America communicated their concern to the Colombian government and the U.S. State Department.

- **UMWA and U.S. elected officials applied diplomatic pressure.**

At the UMWA's request, both Senator Christopher Dodd, chairman of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee of the U.S. Senate, and Rep. Robert Torricelli, chairman of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee of the U.S. House of Representatives, sent letters to Colombian President Cesar Gaviria Trujillo urging that worker rights be respected at the mine and that the government refrain from deploying the armed forces.

- **UMWA was in Colombia during negotiations.**

UMWA Secretary-Treasurer Jerry Jones held a press conference on February 10, 1992 in Barranquilla, Colombia, the day before negotiations were due to begin. "We're here to help SINTERCOR prepare for negotiations, to advise them during their contract talks and, if necessary, assist them in any strike action," said Jones.

Company officials were furious at the UMWA's presence in Colombia, refusing to meet with SINTERCOR if the North American miners were present. They also expressed their anger at the pressure they were receiving from Bogota as a result of the letters sent by Senator Dodd and Congressman Torricelli to President Gaviria.



Kenneth S. Zinn

Strip mining at Colombia's El Cerrejon mine.

SUCCESS IN 1992 AND 1994

The campaign clearly had an impact. In just a few short weeks, the union and the company reached an agreement that included a 29 percent wage increase the first year and a 23 percent wage increase the second year. In addition, the new contract provided for a 50 percent increase in housing as well as vacation and Christmas pay extended from 23 to 26 days. Exxon also promised not to fire workers without a hearing that includes union participation. Perhaps even more important, for the first time ever, SINTERCOR and Exxon reached a new agreement without a strike, without any union officials getting fired and without the deployment of armed troops.

"We got what we wanted," said SINTERCOR president Velasquez.

The UMWA, MIF and SINTERCOR continued their multi-pronged campaign strategy, which included an international conference of mineworkers from 21 countries in Las Vegas on October 12, 1993. Following the conference, Colombian, Chilean, and Australian mineworkers traveled to Illinois and lent their support to striking mineworkers. Back in Colombia, the 1994 round of negotiations came off more smoothly than in 1992. The resulting agreement provided for a 24.5 percent wage increase during the first year, and a 20 percent increase in the second year. In addition, for the first time, SINTERCOR won its demand for a democratically-elected mine health and safety committee chosen by the miners. (This committee is now engaged in a UMWA-MIF training program). Once again, SINTERCOR and Exxon were able to reach an agreement without a strike, without the use of troops and

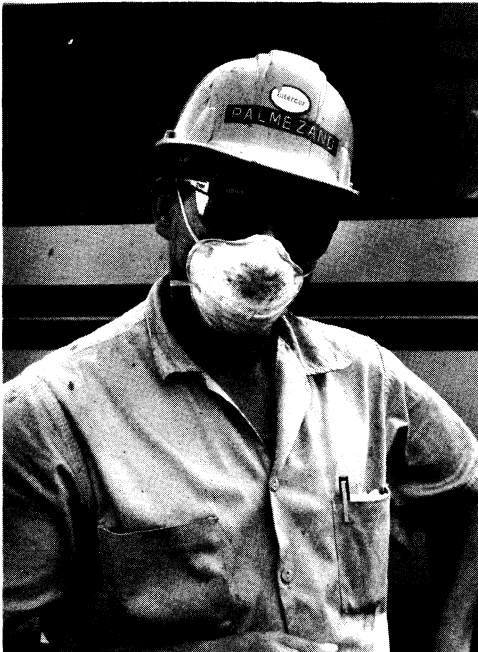
without the company firing any of the union's negotiators in what appeared to be a maturing of the collective bargaining relationship.

PLENTY OF WORK LEFT TO DO

The successes achieved during negotiations in 1992 and 1994 prove that international alliances and solidarity can be effective. It's clear that multinational corporations are vulnerable to international pressure. In just the last three rounds of bargaining at El Cerrejon, miners have increased their wages by more than 150 percent. Although Colombian miners' wages are still deplorably low – about \$3.32 per hour – these recent gains show that progress can be made and the wage gap between the North and South can be narrowed. Thus, only by maintaining an activist and global approach to labor solidarity will the labor movement be able to stop the corporate exploitation of workers in repressive, low-wage countries and resist the consequent downward pressure on living standards in the U.S.

While international solidarity efforts are clearly having an effect at the bargaining table, Exxon's labor practices still leave much to be desired. Prior to the 1994 negotiations, the company fired hundreds of

miners, including 18 union officials. During negotiations, SINTERCOR was unable to achieve a grievance procedure for dismissals or third party arbitration of disputed firings. After negotiations and to this day, Exxon continues to fire union members and officials without due process. Nonetheless, the miners and their communities steadfastly refuse to be intimidated by corporate firing, and the UMWA remains committed to supporting the Colombian workers in their struggle. ■



Kenneth S. Zinn

SINTERCOR worker on the job.