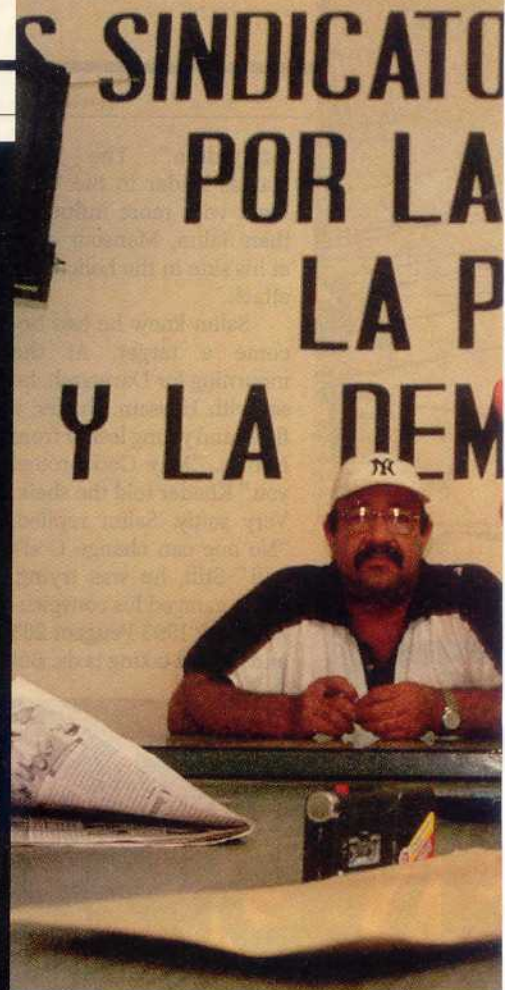


# Under The Gun

Execution-style killings have Colombia's trade-union activists running scared



GRIEVING WIDOW Luz Marina Lara



LABOR LEADER Francisco Arrieta, the new head of

By PETER KATEL

THE SUN WAS NEARING THE HORIZON last June 21 when Oscar Soto Polo, 43, local president of the National Union of Beverage Workers and an executive-committee member of the main national labor federation, stepped out of his office in the northern Colombian city of Montería, 500 km from Bogotá and went to pick up his eight-year-old daughter at her nearby school. They started walking home, past mint- and tangerine-colored cinder-block houses, a soccer field and an open-air bar where big speakers pump out ranchero music. Turning left at the neighborhood church, they took their usual shortcut down an alley between two homes. This time, though, someone was waiting. He raised a pistol to Soto's head and blasted one bullet into his temple.

Colombia's unending violence has touched every one of its people and institutions. Business people and politicians go nowhere without squads of bodyguards; ordinary citizens don't get on a highway without first checking if it's free of guerrillas or

ultraright paramilitaries. And within this landscape of violence, trade unionists have been especially hard hit. Soto was the 62nd Colombian labor activist assassinated this year. Since his still unsolved killing, 16 more labor officials and activists have been gunned down. Now, Colombia's National Food Industry Union is going to an American court in an attempt to draw international attention to the crisis—and to fix blame.

It is an extraordinary action. The union, an ally of Soto's organization—aided by the United Steelworkers of America in Pittsburgh, Pa., and the International Labor Rights Fund of Washington—has filed suit in the U.S. district court in Miami against the Coca-Cola Co., Coca-Cola de Colombia and two of its independently owned Colombian bottlers, Panamco Colombia and Bebidas y Alimentos de Uraba, on behalf of the family of a union leader gunned down in 1996 and five unionists who say they are living under threat of death. "The local managers of Panamco Colombia have openly sided with the paramilitaries," the lawsuit claims.

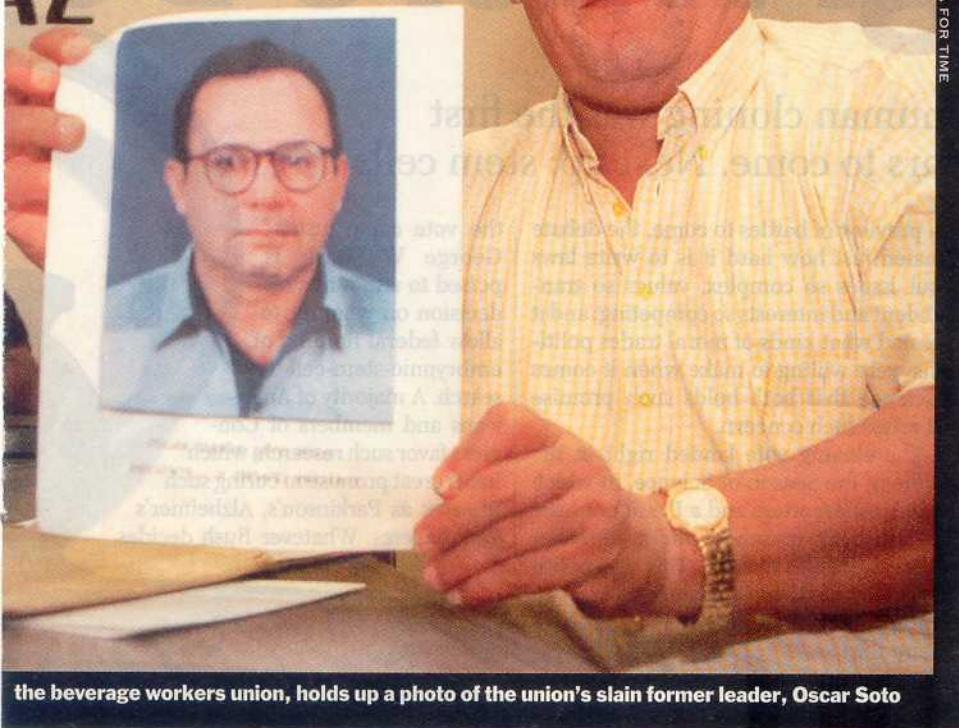
The local bottling company angrily denies this: "We emphatically reject and deny any suggestion that Panamco is in any

way linked to terrorist groups." Coca-Cola, meanwhile, stressed that it follows all laws wherever it operates, and requires its suppliers to do likewise. (Coca-Cola and its Colombian subsidiary are separate from the bottler, but the unions argue that the soft-drink firms are ultimately responsible for bottlers' actions.)

While lawyers will argue the case in court, the action draws international attention to the desperate plight of Colombia's union members and activists. During the past 10 years, 1,526 have been gunned down—making them the single most endangered group of civilians in Colombia. And the murder rate is holding steady. The 78 killings so far this year average 11 a month; last year's monthly rate was 10. The biggest single group of civilians getting government-financed protection are unionists, who account for 327 of the 977 protection requests granted so far this year. "We know we need to do more," says Rafael Bustamante, human-rights director at the Interior Ministry, who has a budget of \$4.6 million, \$1 million of it from the U.S. "But demand has increased so much."

The main labor alliance, the Central

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MARTIN E. GARCIA FOR TIME

from someone saying "Here, you s.o.b., this is what we're going to use to cut you up." Following was the sound of a chain saw.

While Colombians generally blame the paramilitaries for the long-running assassination campaign against unionists, in a message last week to TIME, Carlos Castaño, political chief of the country's leading paramilitary organization, United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, denied any action in the case of the food-industry union. "We have never acted, nor do we have anything against the aforementioned union." But he added ominously, "We respect unionism as the organization of workers, but we can't respect armed subversives hiding in some unions."

Union leaders don't deny that some of their members might harbor sympathies for the country's left-wing guerrillas. But, says Jesús González, the labor federation's human-rights director, "a labor leader can be liberal or conservative, atheist or Catholic or communist, and still be killed."

Most Colombian unionists are scared to say much of anything about why they are being singled out. But the climate of violence casts a shadow over all their activities. Soto was killed during a lull in negotiations over his union's demand for a pay raise of 17% to 22%. The company was offering 6.5%. Two weeks after his murder, negotiations resumed. The union settled for 8.5%. Francisco Arrieta, general secretary of the Montería local, said union negotiators felt "no pressure" from the assassination to downscale their demand. Still, the activists closest to Soto are clearly intimidated. "A misinterpreted comment can cost someone his life," says a fellow unionist, asking not to be identified. Soto's widow, Luz Marina Lara, 40, says simply, "I don't accuse anyone." She adds that her husband's trade-union activism "was the only problem he had." In Colombia, that is a serious problem indeed. —Reported by

Ruth Morris/Montería

the beverage workers union, holds up a photo of the union's slain former leader, Oscar Soto

Unitaria de los Trabajadores de Colombia, files some 250 new protection requests every two weeks. For now, 90 unionists are being provided with bodyguards, and 410 are getting money to install bulletproof glass or move their offices to safer locations. The federation, which represents 600,000 workers, estimates that half its 20,000 organizers have received death threats. At first glance, that number may sound inflated, except that killings of unionists proceed apace and seem to get no closer to being solved. At the attorney general's office, staff members didn't have in-

formation on how many union assassination cases are active and how many have been shelved. A spokesman refused to comment on a report in the Bogotá daily *El Espectador* that 500 cases were in "preliminary" status—meaning no suspects have been identified.

This has forced many unionists to protect themselves as best they can. Javier Correa, president of the beverage workers union, works in a two-story office with no sign outside. He doesn't let his kids play outdoors, and he doesn't discuss travel plans on the phone. In March, he says, he got a phone call

## A TRAIL OF BULLETS



PIERO POMFONI—GETTY IMAGES

APRIL 2000: Bodies of two Colombian labor union members lie in the street



REUTERS

DECEMBER 2000: Assailants fire on labor leader Wilson Borja's car, killing two



JOHN W. VIZCANO—EL TIEMPO

DECEMBER 2000: Rushed to a hospital, Borja survived the assassination attempt