

# Dispute shakes up Coke deal

Coca-Cola's alleged human rights abuses in Columbia leaves bitter aftertaste in La Chiva's mouth, the but SU has a sweet tooth for hefty scholarship funding

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Coca-Cola has been the exclusive beverage provider to the University of Alberta under a lucrative ten-year contract, signed in 1998. But the success of the contract doesn't sit well with La Chiva, a student solidarity group focused on Colombian issues resulting from decades of armed social conflict in the country. La Chiva is leading the Killer Coke campaign across campus, hoping to raise public awareness of human rights violations in Colombia that they attribute to Coca-Cola, before the exclusivity contract expires next year.

"Coca-Cola cannot deny its role," La Chiva President Michael O'Tuathail said. "Not only in the murders, but by threatening the unions and the right of people to organize."

Among other issues, La Chiva charges that the soft drink company failed to provide safe and fair working conditions to employees in its bottling plants and subsidiary factories. The company is accused of cutting jobs, reducing wages, and slashing benefits by replacing full-time employees with temporary contract workers. But, Chris Cunningham, Students' Union Vice-President (Operations and Finance) pointed to the positive contributions the company makes to the U of A, evident in the \$500 000 provided each year in scholarships.

"\$500 000—that's a lot of money and that can go a long way to helping students out. Especially considering how expensive tuition is," Cunningham said. "If they are in fact guilty of these human rights violations, I certainly don't condone that, but I haven't researched Coke so I can't say one way or the other."

But La Chiva's complaints don't end—they further allege that Coca-Cola had paramilitary squads, armed by corrupt government officials, murder several union leaders. The group cites that over the last ten years, 19 leaders have been murdered at Sinaltrainal, a food industry union



MATT FREHNER

**COLOMBIAN COKE** If I could buy the world a major international controversy ...

that includes membership of some Coca-Cola bottlers, and that over 100 of its members have been tortured, detained or displaced by the paramilitary.

Coca-Cola, however, denies such violations. The company has developed several campaigns to dispel the accusations, including a public relations tour of Canadian universities in 2005 and a website called *CokeFacts.org: the Truth about the Coca-Cola Company Around the Globe*.

The company asserts that it acted legally and professionally in Colombia—pointing to evidence that it has been cleared of responsibility in two judicial inquiries by the Colombian Court and Colombian Attorney General.

On its website, the company argues that its employees have a higher percentage of union membership than the Colombian national average, 31 per cent compared with four per cent respectively, due to the extended freedoms in company policy.

Nonetheless, the controversy has attracted international outcry. After the latest murder of a Colombian union worker in 2003, a number of universities and colleges in

North America have halted sales of Coca-Cola on their campuses. In Canada, students at McMaster University and the University of Guelph voted to end exclusivity contracts, though these decisions were made out of broader concerns than the Colombia case alone.

La Chiva hopes that the University of Alberta will follow suit—stating that postsecondary institutions play an important role in spreading public awareness, and promoting both transparency and corporate responsibility.

"We're students and we're trying to understand what is going on outside," commented O'Tuathail. "Is money our target, or is it the future of the planet, or the lives of the guys being killed?"

He added that the University must be held more accountable to the wider community, especially now that Edmonton is campaigning to become a human rights city.

"If the University wants to be a part of that human rights city, they've got to make deals with companies that respect human rights," he affirmed. "Enough with the sweet talk, we want some action."



MIKE OTTO

**THEM MOLD TIME BLUES** Students aren't the cleanest people, so they don't really need a head start on mess-making.

## Room still needed additional cleaning

I-HOUSE • CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Dima Utgoff, Director of Residence Services for the University of Alberta, agreed, and said that the state of the room was an unfortunate circumstance.

Utgoff explained that they had allowed a student to stay in the room later than usual. As a result, the cleaning crew missed the room.

"It was scheduled to be cleaned, it

should have been cleaned, and the cleaners missed it," Utgoff said. "When she moved in, she was upset, which is quite understandable."


"We learned our lesson, and we won't be doing that again," he added.

But, despite the unusual case, Utgoff was firm on where the ultimate responsibility lay.


"It really doesn't matter. It was the University providing the service.


Whether it was contract cleaners or our own staff, we should have had it clean," Utgoff said. "We never want a student to move into a new room that is in anything less than ... in perfect shape. Hopefully she's having a good experience now."


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