

Cracking a cold case

When a giant corporation like Coca-Cola comes under scrutiny, the accusations fly fast and furious—but more often than not, they're more myth than fact



ADAM GAUMONT

While the upcoming SU election will most likely revolve around the various candidates and their equally implausible suggestions for lowering tuition, the more important issue for many will be the Coke plebiscite. But the bad arguments that are sure to fly from both the Yes and No sides will make it hard for students to make an informed decision.

It's been alleged by activist groups both on and off campus that Coke has been guilty of egregious human rights abuses, most notoriously in Colombia. To this end, the Students' Union abides by an Ethical Business Partners policy, which states that "where alternatives exist in the industry the Students' Union will not conduct business of any kind with companies that ... actively undermine or fail to respect basic human rights." Clearly then, if Coke is or has been proven guilty of such abuses, our SU ought to sever any and all ties with the corporation, regardless of whatever fiscal shortfall may ensue.

That said, what little circumstantial evidence that's been levied against Coca-Cola has been sensationalized and blown out of proportion by SAKCoke, Stop Killer Coke and others in an attempt to push their real agenda of anti-corporate activism, and should therefore be taken with an industrial-sized salt-lick at best.

It should be made clear at this point that in the past few years, workers at bottling plants subcontracted by Coca-Cola in Colombia (and owned by a Colombian company called *Bebidas y Alimentos*) have been threatened, kidnapped and in some cases killed by violent paramilitary groups in an attempt to dissuade unionization. But this is nothing new: since the 1960s,

Colombia has been marred by a brutal war between government soldiers, anti-government insurgents and illegal paramilitaries that has shed blood in nearly every corner of the country.

Since the mid-1980s alone, over 35 000 people—including 2500 union workers—have been killed in this ongoing battle; to think that an American corporation that has a few bottling subsidiaries in this country is playing a major role in this decades-old conflict would be laughable if it weren't for the gravity of the situation.

And yet, in a country where only four per cent of all workers are unionized nationwide, 31 per cent of Coke workers in Colombia are unionized—the same proportion of Coke employees that are unionized worldwide.

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But I'm not going to be Coke's PR monkey—you can look this stuff up for yourself. Because let's face it: Coke is a business, and they want to make money—indeed, as a corporation, they're legally obligated to earn a return for their shareholders. As such, the head honchos in Atlanta probably wouldn't really care one way or another for the well-being of their Colombian plant workers—that is, if it weren't for the fact that happy employees are productive employees, whereas those who've been tortured and had their families kidnapped tend not to be.

Another reason it's in Coke's interest to play by the rules is that, as tempting as busting up unions and terrorizing employees for the sake of cheaper labour might seem, the burden of

legal fees, criminal investigations and having human rights groups breathe down your neck are (in that order) too great a deterrent to justify it. Instead, Coke will settle for merely very cheap unionized labour every time.

It's precisely this corporate nature that anti-Coke activists despise so much—and this is what's really at issue when they encourage campuses to ban Coke's products. Tying Coke into the very serious issues of war and corruption in Colombia is just a convenient way of tearing down an otherwise invincible corporate monolith. Thanks in part to similar smear campaigns against Coke in India and elsewhere, there's even a name for this type of behaviour now: "brandjacking."

Of course, Coke isn't blameless in all this; after all, they were slow to decry the crimes that did occur in Colombia, and have in certain cases only grudgingly co-operated in third-party reviews. Nor is their human rights record squeaky-clean: they recently reached a nine-figure settlement for a lawsuit in which it was found that workers at a Cleveland, Ohio plant were discriminated against based on their skin colour (a fact that made their recent Super Bowl half-time commercial linking themselves to a century of civil rights progress quite rich), while the company has also been under investigation for the level of pollutants found in their products in India as well.

But all the evidence in the Colombia investigations suggests that at worst, they've been guilty of negligence towards, and not active participation in, the heinous crimes in Colombia for which they stand accused.

If you want to kick Coke off campus because their products are unhealthy, because they have a monopoly, because they're a subversive corporation or even because you just like Pepsi better, then go for it. But don't believe the suggestion by labour activists like Ray Rogers that Coke is an evil paramilitary death-squad out to get the next poor sap that crosses the picket line—even if that's what you wanted to hear.

THE DOPE ON COKE

Deaths of workers in Colombia

By far the biggest weapon that's been wielded against Coke so far is its record in Colombia. But according to the results of the Florida civil court case filed against the beverage company, they're far from directly implicated in the case. The court decided that it didn't have jurisdiction to rule against them, due to the diffused nature of the corporation and its merely tangential connection to the case. That is, Coke hired a guy, who knew a guy, who worked for a guy who may or may not have paid some dudes to assault and possibly kill union workers. According to the report, "There is also a risk that vague, conclusory, and attenuated allegations will allow individuals ... and interest groups ... to engage in unwarranted international 'fishing expeditions' against corporate entities and to abuse the judicial process in order to pursue political agendas." Touché.

Water usage in India

Multiple third-party reviews in the past

five years have concluded that severe and prolonged drought conditions, coupled by overuse of irrigation—and not Coke's bottling practices—have been responsible for any depletion of water levels that has occurred there.

Coke has two main bottling stations in India: Kerala and Kaladera. At the former, irrigation was shown to account for 92.6 per cent of total water use, with industry using only 3.5 per cent; at the latter, the numbers were 81.3 per cent and 12.6 respectively.

Water quality in India

A study done on pesticide residue in Coca-Cola and Pepsi products bottled for sale in India showed that the harmful pesticide level in their soft drinks was well above what would be acceptable in the West. In fact, absolutely no pesticide residues were found in samples from USA-manufactured products.

It's shameful that Coke would sell products overseas that would instigate a massive recall in North America just because they can get away with it. But

it's also important to note that Coke is not alone in producing these filthy pops.

Health factors

Research has consistently shown that—surprise surprise—consuming a lot of sugar can lead to poor health, obesity and diabetes. Though it's not really Coca-Cola's fault that some people drink 2.5 litres of this junk per day, they certainly have an economic interest in our increased consumption. And allowing them exclusive access to campus is a bit like when your dad gave you the key to the liquor cabinet on your 18th birthday—not really illegal, but still likely to cause permanent bodily harm.

Big Cola is just as damaging to North American's health as Big Tobacco; therefore, if the campus community isn't grown up enough to decide whether they want to smoke or not, we certainly shouldn't be allowing them to shove thousands of litres of Cola down their gullets.

Matt Frehner, Editor-in-Chief

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