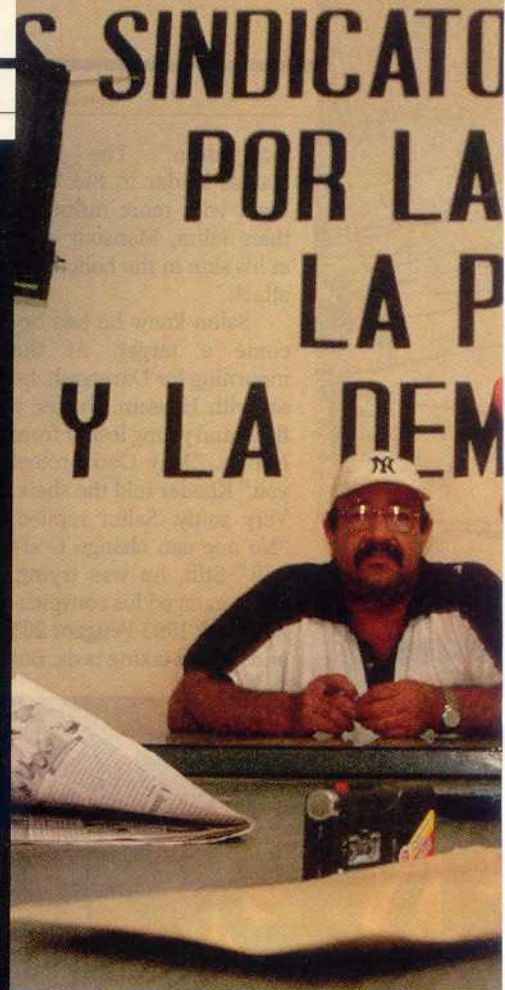


Under The Gun

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

