

# COCA-KERALA: THE REAL THING HITS KERALA, INDIA

Ram Das is a local organizer from Plachimada, a small village in the southern state of Kerala, India. A group of international and national guests – including Maude Barlow, Dr. Vandana Shiva, Jose Bové and Ward Morehouse – have all come to his home to stand in solidarity with his community in their struggle against the local Coca-Cola bottling plant.



People speaking out against Coke in Kerala, India.

In 2000, the Hindustan Coca-Cola began massive groundwater takings for their bottling plant. Coca-Cola made glittering offers when they first came to Plachimada – job opportunities, local development and economic growth. Ram Das told us the villagers waited – but the promises never materialized. Instead the majority of the jobs were given to people outside of the village. Water levels in the wells dropped sharply and the quality of the water – its odour, taste and hardness – deteriorated until it became non-potable. Ram described how villagers had to walk up to 3 kilometres for clean drinking water. Those who continued to drink the local water experienced various uncommon diseases. Farmers around the plant were forced to stop cultivation due to water shortages, and many had to migrate to distant lands or abandon their farms and seek employment. Recently, government reports indicate that hundreds of farmers unable to repay their debts

have committed suicide, a tragic consequence of the lack of water and sludge pollution. Ram gave a grim summary of the situation of his community – Drink Coke? Drink the blood of my village.

Coca-Cola's corporate track record in human rights and labour rights is bleak, and not just in India.

Employees from the Atlanta headquarters of Coca-Cola filed a lawsuit in 2000 charging the company with a pattern and practice of racial discrimination against African American employees. In the lawsuit, the Coke employees marshalled statistical and anecdotal evidence to buttress their claim of discrimination. Among the information they presented was the fact that the median salary for African Americans at Coke's headquarters is about a third less than that of whites there. After a lengthy legal battle Coca-Cola agreed to pay \$192.5 million in

order to end the litigation brought forward by Black employees.

In Colombia, the National Food and Beverage Workers Union points to Coca-Cola as working hand in glove with right-wing paramilitary groups to quell union activities in their bottling plants. In 1996, these paramilitaries entered a bottling plant that is a subsidiary of Coca-Cola, killed union leader Isidoro Segundo Gil, and forced employees, using death threats, to sign union resignation forms. In another plant in the city of Bucaramanag, union leaders were falsely accused by the plant's chief of security of planting a bomb and imprisoned for six months. This harassment followed a 120-hour strike protesting the loss of employee medical insurance.

Coca-Cola's track record in human rights and labour relations is relevant as they move aggressively to corner a major portion of the bottled water market with their re-processed tap water sold under the brand name Dasani and their distribution of Evian and Dannon bottled water products.

So it is significant that labour movements have filed lawsuits against Coca-Cola for the systematic intimidation, kidnapping, detention and murder of trade unionists, and villagers in India have protested the corporation's water takings by sitting down in protest in front of the plant gates in Kerala for two years.

Increasingly consumers, workers, students and villagers are recognizing that Coke isn't the Real Thing.

Karl Flecker is the Education Coordinator for the Polaris Institute. Check out [www.polarisinstitute.org](http://www.polarisinstitute.org) for a detailed corporate profile on Coca-Cola and watch for the report Operation Water Scam coming later this year.