



*Lavalas after the dance... a nominally left/centre government with right-wing policies. Port-au-Prince Carnival 1996. Photo by Leah Gordon*

# PROTESTS LEAVE LAVALAS SHAKING

**R**oadblocks, demonstrations and strikes - during the month of January generalised discontent was channelled into action in a wave of protests against the government's economic policy.

Towards the end of last year there were strikes by shopkeepers, taxi and bus drivers, and public sector employees, most notably health workers. Following hard on their heels, one the main teachers' unions launched a week-long nationwide strike for unpaid salaries and improved conditions in public schools.

On 9 January a section of PROP, a coalition of a large number of grassroots organisations, called for demonstrations to protest against the high cost of living, in particular the steep price rises for food staples, housing and transport. The call was heeded in Gonaïves and other towns across the Artibonite department, and, in Port-au-Prince, approximately 200 demonstrators gathered outside the National Palace. In a gross over-reaction, police officers from the newly formed, anti-riot Rapid Intervention Force attacked and dispersed the crowd. Dieuseul Civil, a member of the Collective to Mobilise against the IMF, had his hand blown off when a tear-gas/concussion grenade exploded, and two others were badly injured.

The following Monday, protestors blocked the country's main road at Cité Soleil, and dozens of other intersections in the capital, with barricades of burning tires. One of them told *Haiti Progrès*, "They (the government) are filling their pockets and only care about themselves. They used us young men from Cité Soleil as a stepping stone to get where they are...We are through with them and we demand that Préval change his prime minister now."

The Platform to Advocate for an Alternative Development de-

nounced the government for resorting "to repression in response to the legitimate protests...against reactionary and anti-popular policies", and asked the government to abandon the policy of structural adjustment.

Lavalas Senator Samuel Madistin said "Popular protest will spread. The results of the government's economic policies are tangible - extreme poverty, inflation and unemployment." This view was echoed by the Collective to Mobilise against the IMF and other grassroots organisations, whose spokesperson slammed the Lavalas government's surrender to the demands of the international financial institutions, and called a one-day general strike.

The strike, on 16 January, brought most of urban Haiti to a standstill. In three main cities, Port-au-Prince, Cap-Haitien and Gonaïves, streets were practically empty of traffic. Radio Haiti Inter reported that the strike was respected in most towns except Port-de-Paix. Strike organiser, Yves Sanon, declared, "The strike was a total success. The population has rejected the government and its economic policy."

An IMF/World Bank mission, visiting the country to check that the government is correctly following their directives, appeared unmoved by the protests. A World Bank representative told Radio Signal, "I don't think our mission will be disturbed."

The Lavalas government though, can't afford to be so blasé. With former-president Aristide's new party calling for mobilisation against the application of any neo-liberal economic programme, the future of Prime Minister Rosny Smarth's government looks decidedly shaky.

*Sources: Associated Press, Reuters and Haiti Progrès.*

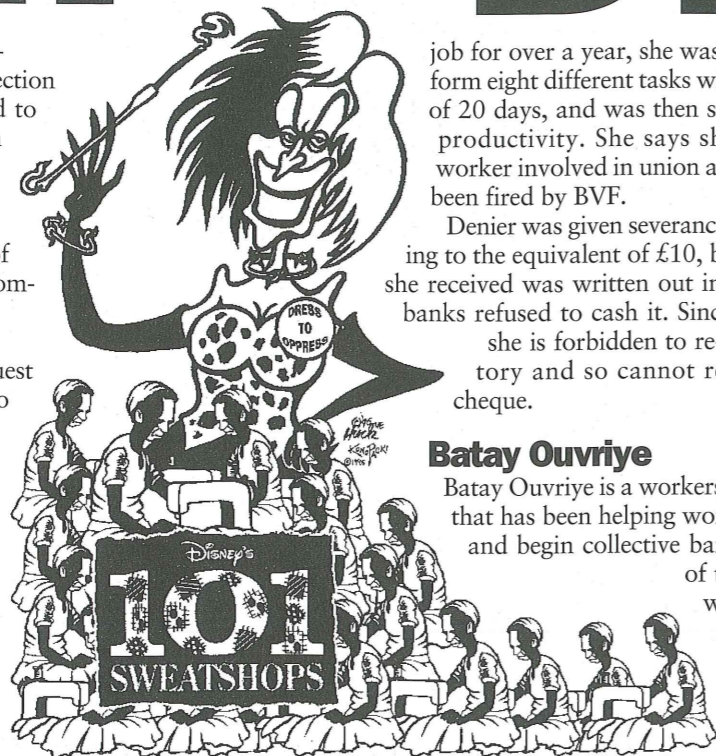
# Workers' battle with DISNEY

"Our animals were treated better than most humans...in the world" - Disney's 101 Dalmatians press kit.

Many of our supporters, including the Clothing and Textile section of the GMB union, responded to the appeal for solidarity with Haitian factory workers made by the organisation, Batay Ouvriye (Workers' Battle). The appeal asked for letters to be sent to both the factory owner, and one of the main contractors, the Walt Disney Company, specifically to protest against the sacking of a union member, and, in general, to support the unions' request for negotiations on pay and conditions. To date no replies have been received.

## Odette Denier

The sacked worker, Odette Denier, was fired on 29 November, supposedly for her poor work performance. She was employed by the BVF Apparel Manufacturing company, and produced children's clothes featuring Winne the Pooh, for a US company licensed by Disney. According to *Haiti Info*, after doing the same



job for over a year, she was asked to perform eight different tasks within the space of 20 days, and was then sacked for low productivity. She says she is the fifth worker involved in union activity to have been fired by BVF.

Denier was given severance pay amounting to the equivalent of £10, but the cheque she received was written out incorrectly and banks refused to cash it. Since her sacking she is forbidden to re-enter the factory and so cannot request a new cheque.

## Batay Ouvriye

Batay Ouvriye is a workers' rights centre that has been helping workers organise and begin collective bargaining. One of the volunteers who run Batay Ouvriye says that since the return of the de-

mocratic government in 1994 it has been possible to talk to and leaflet workers outside the factories in the free trade zones of Port-au-Prince. But, she says, even though workers have the legal right to form unions, organising within the factories remains extremely difficult. "The government ministry (of Social Affairs responsible for the implementation of labour regulations) either has no teeth or sides with the bosses."

An end to the intimidation and dismissal of union organisers, and a commitment on the part of the management to begin negotiations with the unions, are two of the primary demands made by Batay Ouvriye. Flyers distributed outside the factory gates also demand an end to the practice of sacking workers inside the three month period of employment after which they acquire statutory rights, an improvement in factory conditions, and a wage increase.

## Minimum wage increase

The minimum wage is currently set at the equivalent of 20p per hour. Workers demanding that it should now be doubled, believe that the Walt Disney Company, sub-contracting work to 13 assembly factories in Port-au-Prince, can easily afford this increase and still make a handsome profit. As the New York-based National Labor Committee points out, Haitian women sewing the 101 Dalmatians sweat-shirt receive 4p for each finished outfit that then retails in the US for the equivalent of £14. With mark-ups like these it is little wonder that the *Financial Times* found that Walt Disney Company profits hit a record US\$496 million for the first quarter of the financial year 1996/7.

In a rare Haitian government response to the issue, Foreign Minister Fritz Longchamps told *Le Nouvelliste* newspaper that, although the Préval government would like to raise workers' salaries, it can't "put in jeopardy investment that US multinationals can bring in at a time when the country has no money."

Batay Ouvriye insists that it does not want Disney to leave Haiti and take its contracts elsewhere. The organisation's spokesperson acknowledges that, with unemployment estimated at around 80%, Haitians want the work. "Actually it is not a question of getting a job, but getting a job that helps you raise yourself. The problem here is that the minimum wage becomes the maximum. We want these jobs, but not under any conditions." Batay Ouvriye, and the unions they are working with, are calling for Disney and their sub-contractors to respect their right to organise in the factories and to enter into negotiations with workers' representatives. Sources: 'Dosye pou lapres' - Batay Ouvriye, 8 December 1996; *Haiti Info*; National Labor Committee. Additional reporting from Port-au-Prince by Ian Murray.

For more details of the campaign to persuade Disney to change its working practices in Haiti, and to borrow a 15 minute video entitled 'Mickey Mouse goes to Haiti' with interviews with Haitian assembly workers at Disney factories, contact the Haiti Support Group. Letters of solidarity can be sent to Batay Ouvriye, PO 13326, Delmas, Haiti, West Indies.

# What a stitch up

A bigold Remi earns 20p an hour sewing Walt Disney T-shirts. The 32-year old barely scratches out a living stitching up pastel T-shirts with frisky Disney Dalmatian puppies for eager Americans.

"Yes I like my job, but it is not enough to get by on," Remi says. "It's not enough to eat or send my children to school. Everything I am trying to do doesn't seem to bring me any further in my life."

The day starts early in this country of seven million people, particularly if you're Remi and you have to be at the factory at 6.30am. Remi has sewn Disney's children's wear at Gilanex (factory) for the past five years, apart from when the factory closed

down during the UN embargo.

He likes his supervisors and co-workers, but not his pay cheque. Like many other Haitians in the garment industry he earns the minimum wage. Given the high cost of living he says he cannot support his pregnant wife and three children.

"We're forced to live on the little bit we have. You can see here, life is difficult," he says, gesturing around the one-room tin shack where he lives in Cité Soleil, the city's worst slum.

Like most of Haiti's working poor, Remi's home is spartan. It has a double bed where he and his wife, Gertrude, sleep. The three children share a pallet on the floor.

Rusty bicycle rims and plastic cups are stacked on the room's single set of shelves. The tin door leans crazily to one side. Remi has stuffed rags to block the baseball-sized holes in the walls.

After paying his daughter's school fees, buying food and drinking water, he often has only pennies left from each pay cheque. He walks 45 minutes to the factory to save on the bus fare which would further eat into his salary. His shack is owned by his sister, but she's asking him to leave or pay rent. He doesn't have the extra money. Extracted from *The Grand Rapids Express*, 15 December 1996.

# Whatever happened to... Jean-Bertrand Aristide?



The Lavalas Family on stage at the Congo Plage, Jacmel, 3 November 1996. Photo by Leah Gordon

A year ago Aristide handed the presidential sash to his successor, René Préval. His image had been tarnished during his last months in power when popular disgust at the inefficiency and corruption of his government led some to blame the President himself. Yet, for the majority of Haitians, Aristide's popularity seemed to survive intact. Observers remarked that the US Administration, by refusing to countenance a further three years in office to make up for those in exile, had inadvertently saved the man's reputation.

In the next few months little was heard of Aristide. In the interests of more harmonious relations between his government and the Vatican, he had given up the priesthood in 1994, and in January 1996 he had married Mildred Trouillot, one of his advisors during his time in Washington. It seemed he had retired to a quiet family life at his residence in the Port-au-Prince suburb of Tabarre.

## Foundation for Democracy

At the end of March, over a 1,000 delegates gathered for a three-day conference opposing privatisation at the Tabarre headquarters of the newly launched Aristide Foundation for Democracy. Aristide though, did not attend.

Then, in early May, he broke his public silence and told the Haitian media that he did not agree with Préval's privatisation policy. The same month he left Haiti for the first time since leaving office. The two week trip to a number of European countries was intended to raise funds for his Foundation. Visits to North America, and Europe again, followed, and on these occasions Aristide talked less about events in Haiti than his vision of democratic participation as an antidote to neo-liberalism.

In Haiti, Aristide focused on two

development projects - a radio station run by and for the capital's street-children, and the Foundation, which in early September inaugurated a cooperative to provide cheap foodstuffs and loans to its 12,000 members. Then, later that month, a complete change of tack as he issued strong criticisms of government corruption and inertia, and made several statements supporting a strategy of domestic food production and agrarian reform, and doubting the wisdom of privatisation. In reference to his own part in ushering in neo-liberal policies when president he said, "Everybody makes errors. I don't worry about making errors, it is persisting in them which is dangerous."

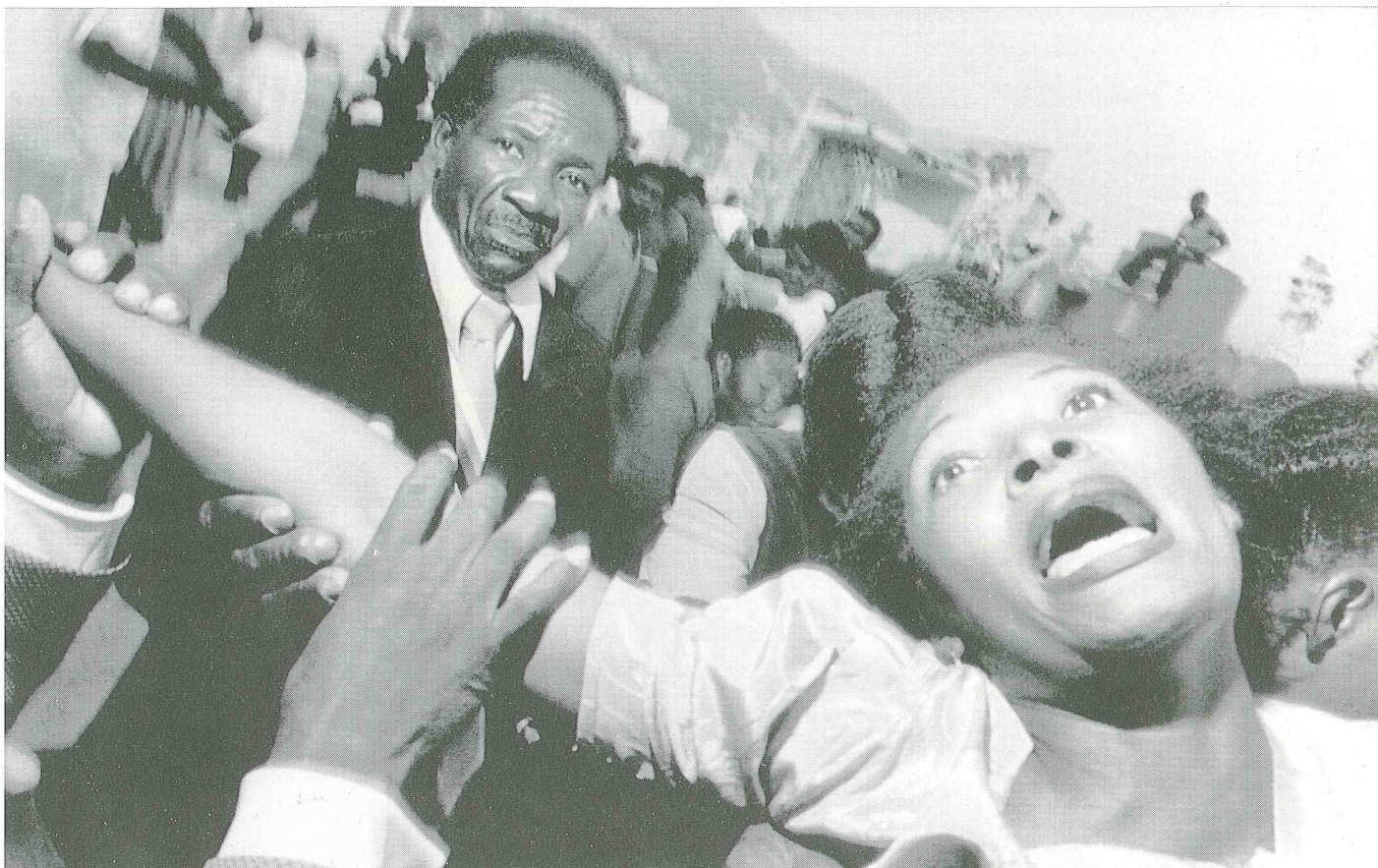
## Starting a family

On 3 November he launched a new political group, the Lavalas Family, at a rally of 2,500 supporters in the southern town of Jacmel. He told journalists it was not a new party but a tool with which to unify Lavalas supporters. Much as he tried to deny it, the Lavalas Family was widely perceived as a rival to the ruling Lavalas Political Organisation. Five days later, his wife gave birth to a daughter.

In January, founding members of the Lavalas Family, including four members of President Préval's Cabinet, applied to register the movement as a political party with a view to contesting Senate and local elections in March. For Senator Jean-Robert Martinez, "The creation of an Aristide party consummates the rupture of Aristide and Préval supporters." Asked if he planned to run for president in the year 2000, Aristide merely replied he would be obliged to accept if 'Lavalas' asked him.

■ A new biography, *The Aristide Factor*, by Leslie Griffiths will be published in March. Readers of *Haiti Briefing* can order advance copies of this hardback at a special offer price of £16.50 including post and packing from the Haiti Support Group.

# Haiti by Bruce Gilden



**Haiti**, winner of the European Publishers' Award for Photography, is published by Dewi Lewis, priced £25.

Bruce Gilden's book of black and white photographs is a chilling testimony to the grinding hardship of life in Haiti. His photos have an other-worldly quality thanks to his technique of using direct close-range flash. What comes across very strongly in the images is a feeling of claustrophobia and over-population. People crowd the pictures with no space around them.

Gilden returns repeatedly to document the grim conditions in Port-au-Prince's abattoirs. These are uncomfortable images, especially when portrayed in black and white - it is difficult to distinguish between the flesh, the blood and the dirt.

Some of his most disturbing images were taken in the country's cemeteries. Haitians have a tradition of highly impassioned mourning. Their grief manifests itself in an extreme and

*Above: Untitled, from the book Haiti, by Bruce Gilden*

physical manner, and Gilden has recorded these, almost too intimate, moments.

Although the photographs certainly portray the horror of life in Haiti, sometimes it is to the detriment of the Haitian people. As a photographer it is difficult to resist the compulsion to make strange - and there are certainly many incomprehensible sights in Haiti - but these visions seem more exploited than comprehended. The pages are crowded with blind eyes, skulking dogs and graveyard hysterics. This seems to represent the typical colonial curio mentality, obscuring Haiti by mystification. The lack of captions compounds this sensationalism.

Naturally a photographer likes to dramatise, and individually many of the images here are very powerful. Some of the strongest are the more simple, beautifully composed portraits at the beginning of the book. But, as a collection, Bruce Gilden's *Haiti* runs the risk of reinforcing the perception of the country as a dark sinister domain where change is impossible.

**Reviewed by Leah Gordon**

*An exhibition of the Bruce Gilden's Haiti photographs is on show at the Royal Photographic Society in Bath from 1 February to 31 March. Telephone 01225 462 841 for details.*

## European Union aid increase

**The European Union is to sign an aid programme with the Haitian government to provide 148 million ecu (£115m.) in grants over the next five years. This represents a 40% increase compared to the amount allocated to Haiti in the preceding period.**

Between 10 and 20% of the new aid allocation will go towards the Haitian government's general expenditure, but the lion's share has been designated for three priority areas. These are the construction of a road to connect the town of Jérémie with the rest of the country, a reform of the justice system, and the development of agricultural production.

The latter two areas are of crucial importance if Haiti is to make any significant progress in terms of democracy and economic development. Judicial reform, so far funded by the US and something of a 'dead duck', is essential to break the mould where the interpretation of the law is merely a tool to preserve the established order. The aid allocated to halt and reverse declining agricultural production recognises the need for the Haitian state to intervene in support of the 70% of the population growing food to feed the country.

European Union aid in these two areas is welcome in that it frees the Haitian government from outright dependency on IMF/World Bank/USAID funding, and so permits some room to manoeuvre in terms of developing an alternative development model. However, if this aid is to have a positive affect on the lives of ordinary Haitians, and not disappear down a bottomless pit like so many millions of dollars of aid have in the past, the programmes it will fund must be devised with the participation of the proposed beneficiaries.

The European Union clearly acknowledges the importance of popular participation in the development of foreign aid programmes. Haiti's grassroots organisations have a wealth of experience and knowledge that must be utilised.

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