



School kids blocking the main road at Saint-Marc in support of the teachers' strike - 12 May 1997. Photo by Leah Gordon

Teachers and pupils strike

School students and teachers from the state education sector took their protests into the streets in May. Almost everywhere throughout the country state schools were closed because of an unlimited strike called by the teachers' unions.

Last February the government brought a previous teachers' strike to an end by promising that unpaid salaries would be disbursed. At that time many teachers had not been paid for almost a year. By the beginning of May hardly any had received their cheques and a new strike was called. Many students supported the demand that the government resolve the issue quickly so that they would not miss the end of year exams.

Teachers accused the government of trying to resolve its cash crisis at the expense of education. Although the Constitution stipulates that "free schooling should be available for all", the state school system continues to deteriorate. Education went from 24% of the budget in 1994-5, to 18% in 1995-6, to only 9% in the just approved 1996-7 budget. Where there are state schools, the buildings are falling apart. They lack toilets and water, and, of course, electricity, and there are serious shortages of chairs and desks, not to mention books. For many parents the poor quality, or often total absence of state education means they have to try and find the money for private schooling. The prohibitive cost of the private schools means no education at all for more than half of Haiti's young people.

The May strike in defence of state education was ignored by the government during its first week. In the second week, beginning 12 May, angry school students, seeing the exam date drawing near, took to the streets protesting and building barricades. Police confronted protestors with tear gas and batons.

The most serious confrontation took place in downtown Port-au-Prince near the Cathedral. On 15 and 16 May pitched battles between police and pupils erupted. Pupils threw rocks, and set fire to several cars and a nearby courthouse, while the police responded with tear gas and live ammunition. The police shot and killed seven pupils, according to the Port-au-Prince branch of the Catholic Church-linked Justice and Peace Commission. People in the surrounding slum area of Bel Air at times cheered the pupils on. In the city centre, businesses closed up early, and the road to Petionville was jammed with the four-wheel drive cars of employees escaping the riot.

School pupils were not the only ones on the streets - provocateurs and 'lumpen' elements were reported to have joined in with the protests. Even so, the validity of the strike demands and the desperate measures taken by the pupils, eventually forced the government to act. After meetings with parents and teachers, it agreed to deliver the teachers' back pay by the end of July, and to find the money to grant an 82% wage increase by October.

Sources: Haiti Info and the Haitian Press Agency.

famine and food aid

With no significant rainfall this year, many parts of Haiti are experiencing a severe drought. Famine has already claimed scores of lives, and in the worst-hit region, the Northwest, over 350,000 people face starvation.

In order to survive, Haitians in the famine-affected areas are reported to be eating cattle that have died in the fields, as well as weeds and roots. Some have even taken to frying and eating government-provided seeds rather than planting them in the parched earth where they will shrivel and die.

The famine is also threatening lives in the Artibonite and Central Plateau departments, on the island of Gonâve, and in the Grand Anse in the south west. In April, residents of a village in the Artibonite announced they had violated a cultural taboo and eaten dog meat to survive. Elsewhere in the region several people died after stuffing themselves with unripe mangoes. In the Central Plateau people are eating clay to deaden hunger pains.

Even if the rains come, it may be too late to avert a catastrophe. In Fon Bouden, in the mountains south of Léogâne, a peasant farmer told *Haiti Briefing* that because it had only rained twice between January and May, his maize, sweet potato and bean crops were dying, and as a result he would have no seeds to plant for the anticipated second harvest later this year.

The causes of the crisis

The explanation for this looming ecological and human disaster can be found in the interlinked phenomena of deforestation, soil erosion, over-worked land, population growth and declining yields. Yet this is only half the story. For the two hundred years since independence, Haiti has been ruled by an urban based élite that has mercilessly exploited the peasant majority. This political system has bled the peasantry dry through taxation and extortion while providing nothing in return. A slow death is now gaining pace.

More recently, it's pertinent to ask how Haiti has gone from near self-sufficiency 30 years ago to a reliance on imports for a third of its food needs today. Agricultural production has declined and the population has grown. But it's also true that no Haitian government has intervened to support domestic food production, nor have the international financial institutions that have lent so many billions of dollars to Haiti prioritised the food producing sector.

The response

The Préval government has belatedly woken up to the fact that there is a life-threatening famine in the Northwest and has asked foreign relief agencies to increase their work in the region. The US-supported aid agency, CARE, is providing drought victims with 250,000 meals a day, and the UN World Food Programme has started to deliver 600 tons of food to be distributed to those who take part in road-building and other construction projects.

However, to many Haitians, US food aid, although saving lives, does not look like a humanitarian donation. Criticism of food aid, or *manje sinistre* as it is known in Haiti, exploded in the aftermath of Duvalier's fall in 1986. In *The Rainy Season*, published in 1989, Amy Wilentz explains how peasant groups perceive food aid as part of an 'American Plan' "to reduce self-sufficient farming, thereby causing peasants to migrate to Port-au-Prince, where they would provide a very cheap labour force to work in American assembly factories. Food aid would be used to lower the prices of Haitian crops, thereby providing a disincentive to further domestic production."

Food 'aid'

Today, food aid for the Northwest is again under attack. A co-ordinator of the Tet Kole peasant movement harshly denounced the government's emergency food-for-work pro-



(Above) Surplus US food to be distributed by CARE in Mare Rouge, Northwest Haiti - May 1997. Photo by Leah Gordon

gramme administered by CARE. Hungry people must work for three weeks to receive a small quantity of US-government-supplied surplus cracked wheat. He told *Haiti Info* that Tet Kole had met with the government in March and suggested that local food instead of food aid be used, and instead of road work, peasants should be paid to work on their fields to prepare them for the upcoming season.

"We are against working on roads. Why don't they work in fields instead. I think it is a plan of the US and the big countries to destroy the economy of the country... Even there (the Northwest), the government cannot put pressure on the Americans or other foreigners giving wheat to the country so that the people could do the work in their fields. The government can't even do that. That shows you clearly that you do not have a government in this country!"

According to the peasant organisations, food aid is not only merely a short-term solution to starvation that in no way resolves the problem of food insecurity, but, in many cases, it directly contributes to the demise of Haitian food production. (see right)

In their view, a sustainable and long-term solution to the problems of hunger and poverty in the Northwest, as elsewhere in rural Haiti, requires state intervention. Land reform, irrigation systems, reforestation programmes, subsidised fertilisers and credit schemes, seed storage depots, tool banks, and Creole pig repopulation programmes could, and still can, make a huge difference. Only a state responsive and accountable to the needs of the majority can provide this.

Sources: *Haiti Info* and *Haiti en Marche*

How US "aid" promotes famine

"Food is power," said Senator Hubert Humphrey of US foreign assistance in 1974, "and in a very real sense, it is our extra measure of power." Since the Second World War, the US government has used this "power" to persuade hungry nations to toe its political line while helping giant US food corporations to muscle into new markets. This dynamic is well illustrated in a new report just released by the independent aid agency Grassroots International entitled "*Feeding Dependency, Starving Democracy: USAID Policies in Haiti*" by Laurie Richardson.

"US food aid to Haiti furthers US economic interests, not Haitian development," asserts the report, which is chock full of well-annotated and well-presented research and figures to buttress its findings. Food aid is also "used by the US government to entice and/or pressure the government of Haiti to adopt neo-liberal, exportoriented economic policies" and "to help open new markets for US production" while it "drives down cereal prices, thus discouraging Haitian peasants from producing food crops for local consumption and shifting them instead to export crops."

While the destructive self-serving nature of "food aid" is not exactly news, Richardson's first-hand investigations in the Haitian countryside offer valuable new examples of how US "humanitarian" assistance and "jobs-creation programmes" have undercut Haitian farmers and Haiti's food security. Take, for example, the case of two road improvement contracts administered in 1994-1995 in Haiti's Northwest by CARE,

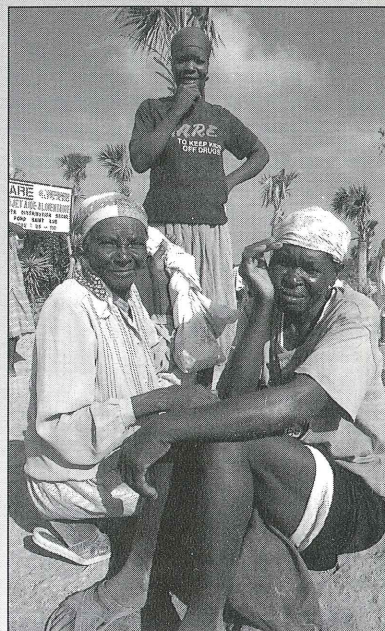
which works hand in glove with the US State Department's Agency for International Development (USAID) in Haiti and throughout the Third World. CARE scheduled road-work during the critical autumn planting season, luring people off the land to work for a little cash on a project which local residents consider non-essential. "When the US provides work at the very time when people should be planting or harvesting, it is as though they want us to lose," one peasant organizer from the region told Richardson.

"At the same time people are starving, farmers are seeing their efforts to increase food production undermined by US policies and US-funded aid projects," said Tim Wise, executive director of Grassroots International.

The report blasts the notion of "export-led development" as well as US government pressure on Haiti to reduce tariffs and implement policies which "undermine Haitian food producers and weaken the development of democratic institutions in Haiti." However, the report, by its own admission, does not critique the Haitian government which has proved to be a willing accomplice in the anti-development schemes of Washington and the international lenders.

Another weakness of the report lies not in its content, but rather in its proposed purpose. Wise wants the report to "be a wake-up call for US policy-makers," and the report's main recommendation is that "aid policies and programmes should support the goal of

enhancing Haiti's food security by supporting Haitian food producers." The call is futile. The process which is destroying Haiti's food production and transforming peasants into refugees, factory workers and slumdweller is the necessary result of the relentless prowling appetite of US capital, which no policy-maker can curb. Haiti's only escape from growing food dependency and hunger will not come from enlightenment in Washington nor scattered "self-help projects," but rather from the struggle of the Haitian people for a government which rejects foreign military occupation, embraces self-determination and offers a genuine agrarian reform.



(Copies of "*Feeding Dependency, Starving Democracy*" can be ordered from the *Haiti Support Group*, priced £7.50) [This article is adapted from *Haiti Progrès*, 21 May 1997]

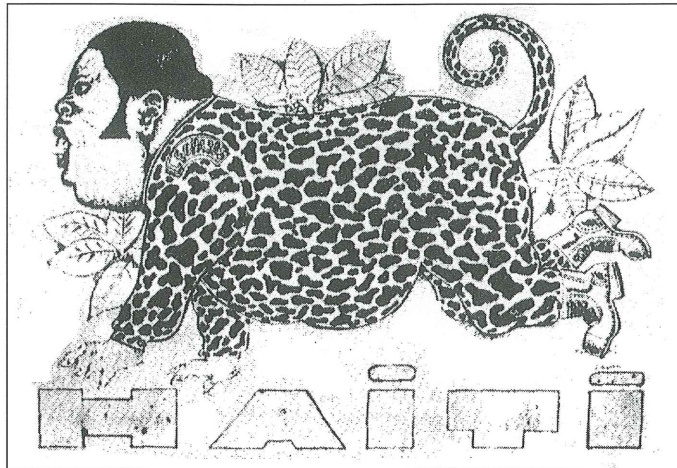
Whatever happened to... Jean-Claude Duvalier?

"It's been a long time since you heard from me. It hurts me a lot to hear how things are going for you." The voice of ousted dictator Jean-Claude 'Baby Doc' Duvalier was heard in Haiti in April for the first time since he was forced into exile eleven years ago. In a four-minute broadcast, believed to have been recorded at his home in France and transmitted by several Haitian radio stations, Duvalier said he wanted to play a role in the country's transformation.

Duvalier, his wife and their immediate entourage fled from Haiti on a US military plane on 7 February 1986. A popular uprising and the withdrawal of US support had brought an end to the repressive family dynasty started 29 years earlier by his father, François "Papa Doc" Duvalier.

In exile in the south of France, Jean-Claude rapidly lost control of an estimated US\$500 million of public money that he is accused of stealing from the Haitian state coffers. His wife, Michele, divorced him and went off with her share to live with an Arab arms dealer in Paris. So-called friends helped themselves to the fortune too. His own spending on gambling and pornography have today, unbelievably, left him almost penniless. He lives with his mother, Simone, Papa Doc's widow, and is reported to be unable even to pay the wages of his gardener.

His pathetic personal situation may be the reason for his radio address, but it seems unlikely that Duvalier himself will return to Haiti. President Préval's subsequent invitation for



The 45-year old Jean-Claude Duvalier wants to come back to Haiti.

him to come back to stand trial represents something of an empty threat given the near non-existence of judicial proceedings against the 1991-4 coup criminals. However, the likelihood of an extra-judicial response from the many Haitians who continue to revile the former dictator would seem sufficient to dissuade an attempted comeback.

There are those in Haiti who still favour a Duvalier-style dictatorship and take heart from the broadcast and the recent expiration of the 10-year long

Constitutional ban on Duvalierists seeking public office. In this context it is worrying to detect in Port-au-Prince a certain nostalgia for the Duvalier era among ordinary people dismayed by the lack of prospects, escalating cost of living and increasing crime since Lavalas resumed power in 1994. As independent Senator Jean-Robert Sabalat remarked, "The population is so disappointed by the current rulers of the country that some of them say, 'It wasn't so bad when we had a dictatorship'".

Disney news

At the L.V. Myles factory in the Port-au-Prince industrial park, workers producing garments for Walt Disney receive less than half the salary needed for survival. The workers are forced to produce at an inhuman rate, under constant verbal abuse and threats of being laid-off or fired. Since the majority of workers are women, they are also victims of constant sexual harassment from their supervisors.

On Monday May 12, a flyer protesting these abusive conditions and calling for workers to organise to defend their rights was circulated anonymously inside the L.V. Myles factory. To retaliate against this practice, management singled out a worker it suspected and arbitrarily fired her, even though this particular worker was not even involved in the distribution of the flyers.

Batay Ouvriye denounced the illegal attempt to intimidate workers to prevent them from organising a union, and reaffirmed workers' right to organise to bargain collectively for improvements in salaries and working conditions.

Bolivians back former dictator

Lavalas leaders enthusiastically applying neo-liberal structural adjustment reforms and championing privatisation 'à la Bolivienne' would do well to look at the result of Bolivia's recent election.

Since 1985, the Bolivian government has carried out a neo-liberal programme that has largely dismantled the state sector. The reforms centred on an unorthodox form of privatisation - called capitalisation - exactly the model that President Préval now endorses in Haiti. Despite fierce resistance by the left and the trade unions, the reforms were carried out, and, as a result, prices have risen beyond the means of many Bolivians.

The unpopularity of the reform programme is believed to be one of the main reasons why the impoverished Bolivian electorate has turned to former dictator, General Hugo Banzer. In the first round of voting on 1 June, Banzer and his conservative Nationalist Democratic Action party took an unassailable lead after promising populist policies to fight extreme poverty.

Banzer was the leader of a brutal military dictatorship in power from 1971-8. During this time, tens of thousands of his political opponents were imprisoned and exiled, and hundreds were killed.

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