



Meeting of the Novella Establishment Workers' Union in Cap-Haitien. Workers, peasant and neighbourhood organisations are the key to genuine democracy in Haiti.

Photo by Leah Gordon

Time for the 'politicians' to step aside

Diplomatic missions have come and gone. Eleventh hour meetings have been boycotted; others have been postponed. Shots have been fired, and stones have been thrown. Foreign development aid has been suspended, and dire warnings have been issued. Declarations have been published, threats have been made, and finally, talks have taken place. Yet, in spite of all this, a so-called 'political crisis' continues to hold all of Haiti in its grip.

At issue, the elections held in 2000, in which Jean-Bertrand Aristide's Lavalas Family won nearly all the local and national government posts. The opposition parties, which failed so dismally in those elections, now pool their resources (and their foreign back-

ing) under the umbrella of the Democratic Convergence. It wants completely new elections. Against them stands the Lavalas Family, holding all the contested posts but claiming it can do nothing unless the suspended foreign aid is released. It says that in order to appease foreign critics it is prepared to rerun a third of the Senate contests. But for the Convergence, that is not enough.

Meanwhile, the majority of Haitians are left to stew, subject to extreme economic deprivation, and a future promising yet more misery.

But perhaps there is light at the end of this very long tunnel. The naked ambition of the main protagonists is ever more exposed as the 'crisis' drags on, and activists,

organisers and intellectuals are starting to see the need to set off on an altogether different and more hopeful tack.

Even in the weekly newspaper, *Haiti En Marche* – long a stalwart defender of the social democratic current with the Lavalas movement – disgust with the deportment of the mainstream parties is now barely concealed. In the 30 June issue, the Democratic Convergence is described as "nothing but an opportunistic alliance composed of odd pieces which will crumble when confronted with the brutal political reality of personal ambitions, power struggles, elections, especially, and ultimately, the presidential one."

And the editorial continues, "It is clear that Lavalas 2001 has, in many respects, only the name in

common with Lavalas of old. And if current trends continue, Lavalas runs the risk of being reduced to a useful notion that one finds only in the attacks and critiques coming from the opposition, and in the nostalgia of the wild dreams of February 1986 and December 1990."

At the end of April, a number of experienced militants and activists from a range of progressive organisations launched the new Freedom, Identity and Socialism Collective. The group decried the current situation in Haiti as "an endless spectacle of political chicanery", and announced it was engaged in a process of discussion and reflection at the regional level.

In June, the Collective published a polemic rejecting the monopoly enjoyed by sectors and actors obsessed with power, and denouncing the relegation of civil society to the role of spectator who only reacts on the occasion of periodic elections. Calling on all those who believe in the potential of the Haitian people to unite, the Collective stressed that "Haitian democracy will be participatory or it will not be a democracy at all." ■

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Unions face employers' offensive in the north

In previous issues of *Haiti Briefing* we have highlighted the struggles of unionised workers producing orange peel for European drinks companies. Below, we summarise the current situation at the different plantations and processing plants based on recent updates sent by the Haitian workers' organisation, Batay Ouvriye.

Grand Marnier

In *Haiti Briefing* No. 40 we reported on the success of the international campaign in support of the workers at the Marnier-Lapostolle plantation where some 300 people produce oranges used to make the Grand Marnier liqueur. In July 2000, following an international campaign to press the Paris-based Marnier-Lapostolle company to respond to the workers' union's demands, the local Haitian manager, Daniel Zéphir, was instructed to increase wages and improve working conditions.

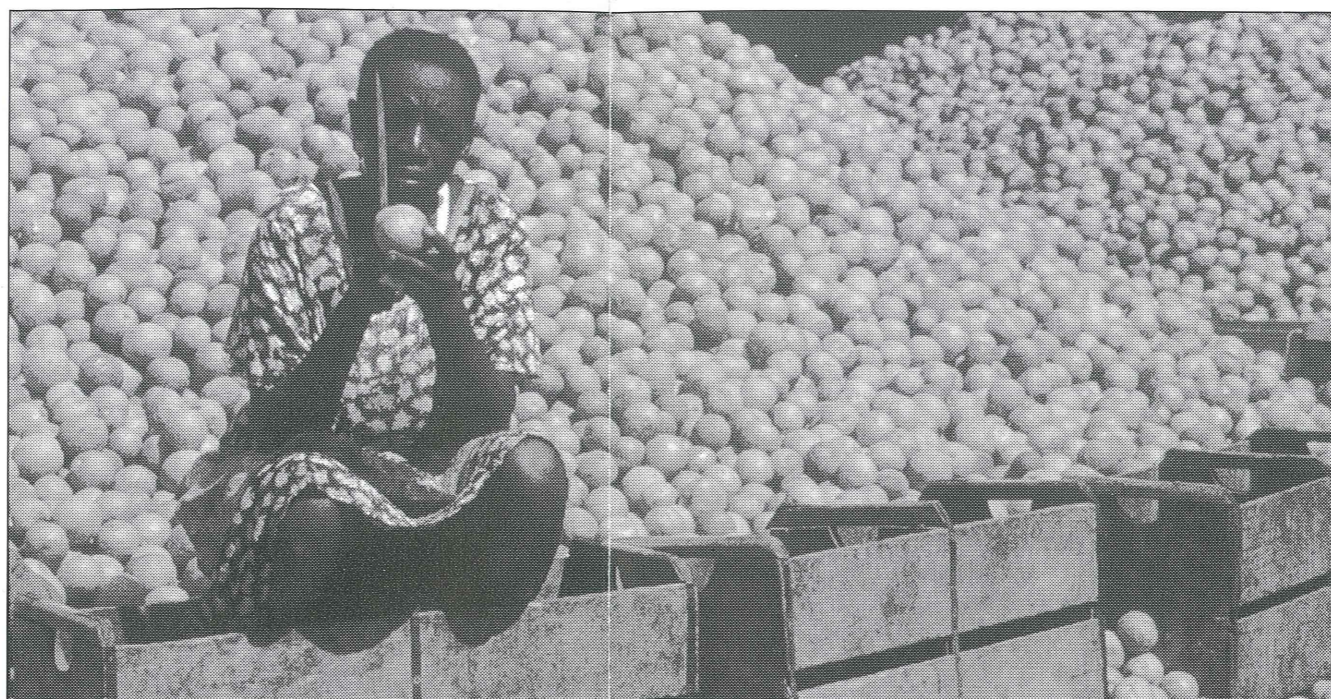
This apparent success was however mitigated, when firstly the wage increases were undercut by a massive hike in the cost of living – driven by a 25% devalua-

tion in the local currency compared to the US dollar, and secondly when the Haitian management failed to implement all the agreed measures. Promised improvements to working conditions at the plantation proved illusive – new toilets quickly blocked up, the newly-constructed health-centre has no medicines, and the promised supply of drinkable water has yet to materialise. For these reasons, the Marnier workers' union sought a new round of negotiations with Zéphir, but the French owners stalled on authorising these talks. Eventually, Marnier-Lapostolle proposed that negotiations take place in July – a time of the year when most workers are not at the plantation because the new orange season has yet to begin!

Meanwhile, Daniel Zéphir created new sources of dispute by refusing either to spray the plantation to deal with a mosquito infestation, or pay workers for the national holidays such as 26 and 27 February, the two days of annual Carnival, and 18 May, Flag Day, as he is should according to national labour legislation. In the face of these stalling tactics and unfair treatment, the Marnier workers' union began strike action at the end of May.



Hand of an orange cutter at the Guacimal plant at Madeline. Photo by Leah Gordon



Worker at the Guacimal plant at Madeline where orange extract is produced for use in the Cointreau liqueur. Photo by Leah Gordon

Cointreau

The new workers' unions at the Haitian Guacimal company, run by Nonce Zéphir, Daniel's brother, and part-owned by the French drinks giant, Rémy Cointreau, formed last year (see *Haiti Briefing* No. 41).

At Madeline, just outside Cap-Haitien in northern Haiti, workers at Guacimal's processing plant produce the orange extract used in the Cointreau liqueur. From the time the union formed, the management used intimidation and stalling tactics to avoid having to comply with Haitian labour law. Eventually negotiations took place in November, and the union requested a wage increase from 11 US cents to 80 US cents per container of oranges processed. The management's response was to grant a miserly five cents per container increase. (During the harvest period teams of two to three workers process an average of 20 containers of oranges per day). Faced with management's intransigence and the continued harassment of workers affiliated with the union, the Madeline union called a work stoppage in mid-December, but intimidation soon forced them back to work. In May, work stopped for the season. On the plus side, the management had recognised the existence of the union and met with it on numerous occasions, and promised latrines had been installed. On the other hand, none of the main issues in dispute had been resolved.

At St. Raphaël, some distance south of Cap-Haitien, where 300 workers toil on Guacimal's orange plantations, the union sent a list of grievances and demands to the management, but the latter refused to acknowledge the union's existence. In mid-December, the union went on strike. Despite attempts to break it, including one incident where a plantation guard attacked the union secretary with a machete, the strike continued. Then, in the last week of February, the Lavalas Family mayor of St. Raphaël, in collusion with Guacimal, declared the strike over. At the

end of March, the harvest season ended without any negotiations, even less any improvement in the working conditions.

To make matters worse, the Guacimal management then began a new form of anti-union discrimination that caused the dispute to spread. Each year, between April and August, there is an 'off season' when oranges are not harvested, and laid-off plantation workers and other local people grow millet and corn on small plots of plantation land between the orange trees.

This year, when the time came to allocate land plots, the plantation supervisor decreed that union members would not receive any land. In response, the union allied itself with a recently formed peasant association composed of local farmers who also work the plantation land in the 'off season', and when, at the end of April, a plantation watchman severely beat a child for having picked a couple of oranges, the two organisations occupied the Guacimal plantation. They declared they would no longer share half of their harvest with the plantation supervisors as had been the custom in the past, nor would they take orders from the present overseer or watchmen. They called on Guacimal to negotiate, but instead, in mid-June, four members of the peasant association's executive committee were arrested on the say-so of the plantation supervisor, and imprisoned on suspicion of theft of company property. The following week, legal advisers hired by Batay Ouvriye succeeded in getting the case thrown out of court for lack of an arrest warrant or any

supporting evidence, and the four detainees were immediately released. At present, Guacimal has still not begun negotiations with the agricultural workers, and the situation remains to say the least tense.

Desglereaux

At Habitation Desglereaux near the northern village of Quartier Morin, at yet another plantation run by Nonce Zéphir, 60 workers who grow oranges, cacao and coffee recently also formed a union. In response to the union's threat to strike to force negotiations, the company brought in new workers from other areas, and then, on 20 June, the order was given to dismiss all the union members.

Faced with the threat of dismissal, the workers joined with unionised workers from across the whole of the northern department, and assembled at the Novella Establishment offices in Cap-Haitien from where the two Zéphir brothers direct all their operations. The company's response was to bring in a truckload of hired thugs who attacked the workers and forced them to disperse.

Batay Ouvriye responds

At the end of June, in an attempt to get the State to intervene and restrain the bosses' offensive, Batay Ouvriye representatives demanded and got a meeting with Ministry of Social Affairs officials in Port-au-Prince. The Ministry agreed to convene a further meeting with both the Zéphir brothers and Batay Ouvriye, and also gave legal recognition to a new confederation of unions in the north – the 'May 1st Intersyndicale – Batay Ouvriye'. ■

For news updates and information on how to support the new unions in Haiti, see:

● The Haiti Support Group web site campaigns section:
http://www.gn.apc.org/haitisupport/fea_campaign_index.html

● The Batay Ouvriye web site:
<http://www.ifrance.com/syndicats-bo-haiti/index0301.htm>

GMB union vows solidarity with Haitian workers

Building on links forged in 1997 when the Haiti Support Group invited a Batay Ouvriye organiser to the UK, two representatives of the British GMB trade union joined members of the Haiti Support Group and War on Want on a visit to Haiti in March. The purpose of the trip was to demonstrate international solidarity between unions. In their report, GMB officer, Rehana Azam, and the union's young members' activist, Barry Sewell, note that, "despite overwhelming dedication to the struggle for equality, Haitian workers find that exploitation and intimidation are still the main barriers to ending the terrible working conditions they face."

The delegation received a warm welcome when it visited the orange tree plantations near Cap-Haitien owned by French company, Marnier-Lapostolle. Two hundred plantation workers greeted them, filling the road, dancing and singing songs of the workers' struggle against exploitation. When shown the sheds where the oranges are sorted and peeled, the delegation was shocked by the conditions. In the GMB report, their delegates wrote, "Unclean drinking/washing water, and toilet facilities that have no system of ridding waste products, produce a health and safety nightmare that is only overshadowed by the immediate conditions of work. Women who peel the oranges, for which Grand Marnier is famous, have no protection against cuts to their hands which are then soaked in citrus acid resulting in the tips of their fingers being burnt away. The oranges are then threshed by fatally unsafe, unguarded machines, and the peel is sorted by groups of women who work amid the dust from open fertiliser bags stored nearby." One union member told them, "We're being killed by these conditions – we may as well die trying to stop them."

On a visit to the homes of plantation workers, the delegates

met one 60-year old Marnier worker who had spent 30 years trying to save for bricks with which to build a house. Rehana Azam remarked, "His savings had bought a pile barely knee high – not even enough to build a small wall."

At meeting with Marnier-Lapostolle's Haitian manager, Daniel Zéphir, the delegation discussed the workers' staggeringly low pay and poor conditions, but Zéphir shifted all responsibility to the French headquarters in Paris. The GMB delegates warned him "they would make the French employer aware that their employees' working conditions are exploitative and contrary to Haitian legislation."

Later, the delegation met Haiti's newly appointed Minister for Social Affairs, who stated that the Aristide government is committed to developing improved relationships between unions and employers in an attempt to end the unprincipled treatment of workers. Having also met with the secretary of the National Union of Haitian Media Workers and other leaders of unions that are part of the COSYNA federation (a coordinating committee of Haitian unions), the GMB delegates viewed these promises skeptically. Their report pointed out "just how far Haiti has to go before becoming a responsible and democratic State. Journalists campaigning for freedom of speech continue in constant fear of violent recrimination, and teachers wishing to protest against low pay and conditions find themselves the target of smear campaigns by local government, resulting in attacks from pupils and their parents."

Back in the UK, in early June the Haiti Support Group accepted an invitation to address a meeting at the GMB national conference in Brighton. In response to our request for support, the GMB, the second largest union in Britain, has agreed to focus on building solidarity links with unionised workers in Haiti. ■

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Jean Dominique murder inquiry – a test case for the battle against impunity

Over one year since the murder of Jean Dominique, Haiti's best-known journalist and political analyst, the judicial inquiry is inching towards identifying the actual and intellectual killers despite death threats against the investigating judge. Jean Dominique was famed for his strident criticisms of Duvalierists and the powerful families of the Haitian bourgeoisie. Shortly before he was assassinated, the director of Radio Haiti Inter also criticised those inside Aristide's Lavalas Family Party who he suspected of seeking to "divert this movement from its principles".

At the beginning of June, just days before Judge Claudy Gassant was due to submit the conclusions of his inquiry, it was reported that a contract had been put out on his life. Gassant has been the target of threats and acts of intimidation on several occasions. He is the second judge to lead the inquiry into Dominique's assassination. His predecessor abandoned the case after coming under pressure.

It was reported that Lavalas Family Senator, Prince Pierre Sonson, was also threatened with death. Senator Sonson has regularly urged that the journalist's assassination not remain unpunished, and in January, he asked Senator Dany Toussaint to respond to the summons of a judge who wanted to call him as a witness in the case. A majority of Senators opposed the summons, citing Toussaint's parliamentary immunity. In April, unknown persons threw rocks and shot automatic rifle fire at Sonson's home – an attack that Sonson attributed to his opinions, notably concerning Dominique's assassination.

Dany Toussaint is the former Army major who remained loyal to Aristide during the 1991-94 coup and was head of the interim

police force in 1994-5. He then set up a successful security business in Port-au-Prince, and was easily elected Senator for the populous Western department in last year's elections. It is believed that Toussaint sees himself as an eventual successor to Aristide and intends to run for President in 2006. He has been summoned to give evidence to the inquiry on no less than nine occasions on the basis of his close relationship with many of those directly implicated in the assassination. According to the rumour-mill, Toussaint saw Jean Dominique as a potential rival and an impediment to his own political ambitions. Toussaint himself characterises these accusations as part of sustained plot to destroy his reputation hatched by enemies linked to former President Préval.

In mid-June, Judge Gassant left the country, claiming his security concerns were not being taken seriously by the Lavalas government. As rumours that Toussaint was about to be charged multiplied, the Senator's supporters took to the streets, blocking roads in Pétionville and Grand Goave. They threatened more violence if Toussaint was charged, and called instead for Gassant to be arrested. Although Gassant has since returned and taken up the case once more, it remains to be seen whether the Lavalas authorities will go through with the case, and make the arrests that have the potential to blow the Lavalas Family Party apart.

The outcome is seen as a litmus test of the authorities' commitment to end with the culture of impunity that has plagued Haiti since the return of constitutional government in 1994. In early July, the Peasant Union of Gros Morne issued a press release stating, "Justice for Jean Dominique is the be-

"The outcome is seen as a litmus test of the authorities' commitment to end with the culture of impunity that has plagued Haiti since the return of constitutional government in 1994"

ginning of justice for everybody killed by the criminals' bullets, and the first step in fighting impunity and permissiveness. No matter what, justice must be found for Jean Dominique's murder."

On 8 June, the Foundation to Echo the Voice of Jean Dominique published an open letter calling on Haitian citizens to maintain the pressure for a full and proper judicial inquiry into the assassination. We reprint sections of this letter below:

"Fellow citizens, Justice stands at an historic crossroads... We can chose lend a hand to do away with impunity; we can choose to cross our arms and allow impunity to continue to gain momentum. If we refuse to join together, this historical crossroads will turn into just another roundabout, like many others before it. We each have our part to play..."

Fellow citizens, Justice is a right. It is not a handout for which we must beg. Yet, for too long, the cauldron of justice in this country has been cooked on one side only. Before it is served, it is divided up between those with power and means. Today, we solemnly swear that we refuse to content ourselves with the burnt portion. We refuse the uncooked morsels. We demand that the cauldron be allowed to cook completely, and that its contents be served up in equal measure for all the nation's children..."

...Journalists have fallen, teachers have perished. Elders have fallen, children have perished. Men from the city have fallen, women from the countryside have perished. School children have fallen, workers have perished. Policemen have fallen, civilians have perished. Doctors have fallen, businessmen have perished. Priests have fallen, nuns have perished. Pastors have fallen, Voodoo worshipers have perished. And as Jean Do warned us: "The assassins are still amongst us. Who will be the next victim?" Let us rise up together massively so as to stop this train of death, so as to bury once and for all the phenomenon of impunity. Haitians, wherever you may be, brave compatriots, what could be more important than protecting life?" ■

See the Haiti Support Group web site:

www.gn.apc.org/haitisupport for all the latest news from Haiti, about the Haiti Support Group campaigns, background information about Haiti's popular organisations, articles on Haitian culture and travel, and links to all the best sites on the Internet.