



Sokowa union meeting in Ouanaminthe, north-east Haiti. Photo courtesy of the ICFTU

Union triumphs after two year struggle

The Haiti Support Group has made the struggle for workers' rights at the Ouanaminthe Free Trade Zone a special focus of our work over the last two years, and we are delighted to report that in December 2005, after months of negotiations, a collective bargaining contract was finally signed.

The agreement between the Grupo M company management and the SOKOWA workers' union (affiliated with the May First – Batay Ouvriye Union Federation) provides for a doubling of the basic salary, and further index-linked increases over the next three years.

Although the question of wages was the crux of the negotiations, many other issues relating to union recognition; labour rights; working conditions; health, hygiene and security; pregnancy and sexual harassment, were also settled.

“Representatives of organised workers had to fight tooth and nail for nearly two years to win this agreement. They are the ones who must take all the credit”

The Haiti Support Group wants to thank everyone who responded to our calls for solidarity, whether this consisted of sending emails to the main contractor, Levi Strauss & Co., demonstrating outside the Levi's store in Regent Street, London, or contributing to our Sokowa solidarity fund. We want to send special thanks and recognition to the Battersea and Wandsworth trade union council for the important financial support it has provided to Sokowa; to the No Sweat organisation for raising donations to support Batay Ouvriye; and to the LabourStart campaigning web site for the thousands of emails sent in response to Sokowa's appeals for international solidarity.

In February 2006 – apparently as a direct consequence of the Sokowa union struggle – the International Finance Corporation (the private sector lending arm of the World

Bank) agreed to adopt a new loan performance standard on labour rights and working conditions. From now on, all companies that borrow from the IFC will be required to abide by the ILO core labour standards that include recognition of freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining.

Noting that the IFC lent Grupo M US\$20m to help it open the Ouanaminthe FTZ in late 2003, but did not insist on the ILO labour standards, the HSG's Charles Arthur stated, “While I suppose we must recognise this belated move as a step forward, it is a real pity that the IFC did not use its influence to pressure Grupo M to conclude a collective bargaining agreement with the Sokowa union back in early 2004.”

Arthur continued, “As a result, representatives of organised workers had to fight tooth and nail for nearly two years to win this agreement. They are the ones who must take all the credit for this advance that will benefit workers in other countries.”

● For more details about the Sokowa struggle check the ICFTU web site: <http://www.icftu.org/>

Women victims of violence fight back

The Haiti Support Group has also been supporting the campaign to denounce violence against women in Haiti. Over the last two years, the incidence of rape of women living in poor areas of Port-au-Prince has risen. We are pleased to report on the important work of a new organisation called the Commission of Women Victims for Victims (KOFAVIV).

Founded in 2004, KOFAVIV is a group of Haitian women survivors of political rape working to help new women victims from poor neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince. It provides medical care and support for all women victims without discrimination.



One of the founders of KOFAVIV with a victims' support group. Photo by Anne Sosin (Vizyon Dwa Ayisyen)

Since March 8, 2005, KOFAVIV has met with more than 600 women victims of rape. Many of these victims have been left to raise their children alone, while other victims' houses have been burned to the ground, all of their belongings destroyed and looted leaving them and their children homeless.

The Haiti Support Group joins KOFAVIV in condemning all violence against women, and in demanding justice for all victims, regardless of their position in society.

● For more details on this issue check the Haiti Support Group web site: http://www.haitisupport.gn.apc.org/fea_campaign_index.html



Préval supporters took to the streets of Port-au-Prince to protest against alleged fraud and vote-rigging. Photo by Anne Sosin (Vizyon Dwa Ayisyen)

Election victory for the Haitian people

René Préval's victory in Presidential elections held on 7 February was acknowledged only after thousands of his supporters protested against suspected fraud aiming to deny him a first-round election victory. Election officials eventually changed the way they counted the suspiciously large number of blank ballots cast, and issued a definitive result, giving Préval 51% of the vote. His nearest rival, the Christian Democrat, Leslie Manigat, won just 12%.

The Haitian platform of non-governmental organisations, peasant groups and workers' unions,

PAPDA, hailed the people's role in the election as “a lesson in democracy to the world”. The platform remarked that despite an unfavourable context of foreign interference, a lack of transparency in the electoral process, and numerous delays and postponements, “the Haitian people continued with their tradition of resistance and, in an historic gesture, began the process of reclaiming the country's dignity and sovereignty.”

“More than two million Haitians got up before sunrise and overcame all the logistical obstacles put in their way to clearly express their desire for change, for

non-violence and for respect for the rules of representative democracy,” the post-election statement continued.

The PAPDA denounced what it described as the ‘manoeuvres orchestrated by various sectors of the Haitian elite and their foreign allies to try and steal the Haitian people's victory.’ The platform's statement continued, “The last three months have highlighted the fierce struggle for control over the corridors of power. Sections of the Haitian ruling class refused to admit the poor majority's right to exist on the political scene, and were ready to preserve a totally

“The majority of the Haitian electorate voted for the political entity emphasising its intention to end the social and political exclusion of the poor.”

out-dated, apartheid political system, which now must be buried – once and for all.”

Prior to the election, the Group of 184 – an alliance of conservative business and religious elites – campaigned aggressively for UN peacekeepers to launch full-scale military operations against gangs based in the massive Cité Soleil shanty-town. (Thankfully, the UN resisted this pressure.)

At the same time, the Group of 184 attempted to show its progressive face by touting its so-called ‘social contract’. Noting these contradictions, the PAPDA asked, “What kind of social contract can be built on the refusal to recognise the popular will as expressed at the ballot box? What kind of social contract can be built on the desire to launch massacres against districts where hundreds of thousands of our compatriots live in totally unacceptable conditions and are all stigmatized as ‘bandits’?”

With the majority of the Haitian electorate voting for the political entity emphasising its intention to end the social and political exclusion of the poor, and to implement economic initiatives to benefit the peasantry and the so-called ‘informal sector’, there is a sense of new hope for the country.

In the aftermath of the presidential election there has been much talk of the need for national reconciliation. Members of the new parliament to be elected in run-off elections in late April must play their part in the creation of a constructive and progressive government. Haiti cannot afford any more of the obstructive and negative politics seen over the last 10 years. Reconciliation not only means putting aside historical enmities, but also means the elite recognising and admitting that it is a minority. In a proper democracy, the will of the majority must be allowed to prevail.

On the Parliament:

“The President’s power is limited. The elections are not over yet. If there is not a parliament that is strong, a parliament with cohesion, then the president will not be able to meet the people’s expectations. It is the parliament that will ratify the prime minister. And it is the prime minister who will appoint all the public servants. Since the presidential election ended, I seem to notice a lack of enthusiasm on the part of voters. The Lespwa (Hope) party does not have enough candidates to enable it to have a majority in parliament. We know that there are many other deputies and senators who would be in favour of the country’s progress, and we are ready to welcome them and work together with them in the country’s interests.” (Radio Metropole, 22 February).

On government:

“The next government will have as its mission the setting up of the institutions that must serve as the foundation for a new Haiti, based on the decentralisation of decision-making and of resources, on consensus and discussion, and not – as has been traditional – on the power of one man.” (Haïti en Marche, 5 February)

“When the bottle is upside down, it cannot be stable. But when it stands on its base, it is stable. I used this illustration in my electoral campaign to explain the country’s instability. I am overwhelmed to see the passion raised by the presidential campaign, the joy of the Haitian people because a president was elected, and the hope they put in the election of this president.”

“Our first mission is to build institutions in accordance with the Constitution. That is, the communal section assemblies, the communal section administration councils, and the municipal assemblies that will appoint justices of the peace, and the departmental assemblies that will appoint judges to the Court of Appeals, and the departmental councils and assemblies. All these are extremely important to help us get the bottle to stand on its base, so that the president or the prime minister will not have to appoint judges everywhere, at the Supreme Court, or appoint an electoral council.” (Radio Metropole, 22 February).

“The second mission is to create the conditions for private investment to create jobs.” (IPS, 22 February)

On the economy:

“The State cannot create jobs for everyone. It is the private sector that will have to do it. What the State must do is create the conditions. And the people too. If car tyres burn all day long in the street, will investments be made, will tourists return?”

“The role of the State is to create the best conditions for development – encouraging micro-credit, putting in place infrastructure such as roads and electricity, levying taxes fairly but rigorously, and fighting against corruption.” (Haïti en Marche, 5 February)

“When I arrived as president (in 1996), the price of fertiliser was \$70 for a big bag. Three months after, the price lowered to \$35. We eliminated corruption in the Ministry of Agri-

Préval brings ‘Hope’ to Haiti

The new president in his own words



“If car tyres burn all day long in the street, will investments be made, will tourists return?” – Préval.

Photo by Leah Gordon



Massive queues outside a polling station in Port-au-Prince.

Thousands protested against alleged vote-counting fraud.

culture . . . and cut out intermediaries. The same bag of fertiliser today costs \$300. If you could cut the price another 50% like we did the first time, it would be a clear economic and political signal that will appease the peasantry.” (Miami Herald, 31 January)

“We are working inside and outside the country. As you know, we have already been to the Dominican Republic. This week, we are going to Brazil, Chile, and Argentina. It is the duty of the president of the Republic to get in contact with authorities overseas to find ways to create a cooperation programme with them. As long as a father stays home, he will not be able to find resources to help his family. I therefore

want the Haitian people to understand that this is not a leisure trip, but rather an opportunity for us to seek cooperation.” (Metropole, 9 March)

On security

“Disarmament goes hand-in-hand with social programmes...A military solution is not possible. Had it been possible...upon the departure of President Aristide [in 2004], you had the US Marines on the ground, you had the French, and you had the Canadians, but they did not solve the problem. Today, we have MINUSTAH with armoured vehicles and soldiers, yet they cannot solve the problem. The solution cannot be a military

one, because too many people will die, on both sides by the way. Therefore, we must think and consider, and find a formula to implement disarmament and reinsertion...I guarantee that it will be dealt with in the briefest of delays, because this [current] situation cannot go on.” (Radio Solidarite, 3 February)

“I told Ms Rice that I want to see public works projects in the areas of sanitation, infrastructure and health replace the tanks of MINUSTAH (United Nations Stabilisation Mission in Haiti).” (AFP 13 March)

On the Haitian Army

“We are not going to be at war with anybody. We are in an historic moment where the problems between nations are not solved through wars, but instead through discussions. Many countries that have armies almost do not know what to do with them at this time. So, you can have an organisation that is military in nature. I am explaining again, a body that is military in nature for the protection of borders, for the surveillance of public buildings, or other relief tasks in case of disasters, but whose name is not an army. Instead of having an army of 7,000 or

8,000 people with planes and so on, which is, by the way quite unrealistic, I prefer to invest this money in roads, education, and health. This is my position.” (Metropole, 16 March)

On Aristide and the Lavalas Family party:

“I always said to Aristide, ‘The people will suffer with you, but there can be no impression, suspicion or doubt that there is corruption’ – and there was a lot of corruption.”

When Lavalas Family party leaders urged Préval to stand as their candidate to prevent ‘the enemies of the people’ from taking power, according to witnesses, Préval said, “It is you who are the enemies of the people”. (St Petersburg Times, 7 February)

Asked about Aristide’s possible return to Haiti, Préval invoked articles 41.1 and 41.2 of the Haitian Constitution – the first states that no Haitian needs a visa to leave or return to the country, while the second states that no citizen, whether civilian or military, may be denied access to the courts according to the Constitution and the law. “It is Aristide who must decide if a return to Haiti today is in his interests. And if it is in the interests of Haiti.” (Haïti en Marche, 5 February)

What is the Lespwa platform?

René Préval was elected president as the candidate of the Lespwa platform (the word means ‘hope’ in Kreyòl). The new party also put up candidates in more than half the legislative election contests.

The Lespwa platform is an alliance of two small political parties, the Pati Louvri Barye (PLB-Open the Gate Party), and the Efò ak Solidarite pou Konstwi yon Altènativ Nasyonal Popilè/ Koordinasyon Resistans Grandans (Eskanp-Korega – Grand’Anse Resistance Coordination), and one or more peasant organisations.

The PLB was part of the Lavalas Political Platform (PPL) (together with the OPL and MOP) that contested the 1995 elections – elections that were a comprehensive victory for the PPL. Later, in 1996-7, when the PPL fell apart – notably over differences about the neo-liberal economic reforms demanded by the IMF/World Bank – some of those parliamentarians elected on a PPL ticket formed the anti-neo-liberal Eskanp/Korega coalition.

More recently, in the 2000 legislative elections, two candidates from the PLB, and one candidate from Eskanp/Korega, were elected to the Chamber of Deputies. Nearly all the other 83 seats went to Lavalas Family Party candidates.

The ghost of Jean Dominique

The peasant organisation, KOZEPEP, is also a part of the Lespwa platform. KOZEPEP is the Artibonite-based peasant organisation closely linked with Radio Haiti Inter’s Jean Dominique until his murder in April 2000. Préval and Dominique, who were close friends, are believed to have been involved in the creation of KOZEPEP. There has been speculation that it was because elements within the Lavalas Family leadership were afraid that a popular alternative to their party was growing, that they ordered the murder of Jean Dominique. This is speculation, but certainly, in the first months of 2001, KOZEPEP did suffer persecution at the hands of Lavalas Family toughs believed to have been working for newly-elected Lavalas Family Senator, Joseph Médard. The latter, like Lavalas Family Senator, Dany Toussaint, was a former Army officer. KOZEPEP leader, Charles Suffrat, went into exile in the USA, but has recently returned to Haiti.

Support from businessmen

Some well-known individuals have also been revealed as leading Lespwa supporters. These include: Pierre Léger, the successful vetiver producer from Les Cayes; Fritz Jean, a former director of the Central Bank during the first Préval presidency (1996-2001); and Frantz Large, an eye-doctor and former head of the Chamber of Commerce for the South East department, who is now standing as a Lespwa candidate for the Senate.

Other leading members of the Lespwa leadership are: Bob Manuel, Secretary of State for Public Security during the first Préval presidency who resigned in 1999 following a concerted campaign by elements within the Lavalas Family Party to take control of the police force (Dany Toussaint was prominent in this campaign); Joseph Jasmin, an Eskanp Deputy in the 1995-1999 Parliament; Fritz Longchamp, a former Foreign Minister during the first Préval presidency; and Volcy Assad, the news director for Radio Solidarité. ■