



*Carnival performer lampoons the fat cats and 'big eaters'. Jacmel, February 1997. Photo by Leah Gordon*

## Lavalas splits, violence increases

**T**he 'gran manjè' - literally the big eaters - are the 'fat cats', the corrupt politicians, government bureaucrats and other officials who are getting rich on the backs of the Haitian poor. The anti-*gran manjè* theme spontaneously erupted and dominated February's carnival. Songs and street theatre ridiculed and threatened the self-seeking functionaries, reflecting a popular perception that Lavalas politicians, and civil servants in the government ministries, are little different to their reviled predecessors. Fuelling this sense of disappointment and betrayal is an ever-worsening economic situation that is affecting the poor most acutely in the form of rising prices for basic foods.

As so often is the case in Haiti, it doesn't take long for people to see things for what they really are. One year into the presidency of René Préval, support for the new Lavalas government is fading as it fails to deliver any real improvements in the lives of ordinary people. The repercussions can already be seen as political leaders and parties from the heterogeneous Lavalas movement attempt to distance themselves from an increasingly unpopular government. The Lavalas Platform coalition that won an overwhelming victory in the 1995 parliamentary elections, and then supported Préval's candidacy, has split into three parties, and a new party, led by former president Aristide, has also formed.

While the Lavalas parties attempt to redefine themselves and jockey for position in the run-up to the Senate and council elections in April and May, the country has been plunged into the worst period of vio-

lence since the end of the coup regime. In six weeks from the middle of February, over 50 people, including eight police officers, a senator's bodyguard and the Justice Ministry's chief of security, were shot and killed. The motive for most of the attacks remains unclear, although at least 15 of the deaths occurred during gun battles between gangs believed to be fighting for control of the drugs trade in the Port-au-Prince slum, Cité Soleil.

President Préval appeared to regard concerns about renewed violence as an opportunity to frighten people into backing his government. He warned, "If you don't help out our young, poorly equipped, beleaguered police, the Tonton Macoutes on the sidelines will stage a coup d'état, the same as in 1991." Yet, in the opinion of Gerard Pierre-Charles, leader of the pro-government party, the OPL, "The Duvalierists have no leadership, no ideology and no army...As a political force, they are completely finished."

Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, leader of the Peasant Movement of Papay, who supports Préval yet bizarrely still insists he is opposed to neo-liberalism, claimed that "the insecurity had been planned. It's a struggle for power. Sectors within the Lavalas movement are directly involved." This seemed to be a reference to Aristide supporters. Aristide himself obliquely linked the violence to the economic direction taken by the government when he told a meeting of his supporters, "Insecurity is one means they are using to intimidate the population and make us accept the neo-liberal plan."



In February, Haiti Support Group (HSG) members and representatives of the GMB trade union staged demonstrations outside Walt Disney shops in London and Liverpool to protest against the exploitation of Haitian workers. The giant US corporation takes advantage of extreme poverty and high unemployment in Haiti by sub-contracting work to factories where pay is just 20p an hour.

At the protest at Disney's Regent Street store in central London, the GMB's Clothing and Textile section secretary, Des Farrell, joined HSG members, including film star, Julie Christie, to hand over a letter calling for an end to abusive working conditions in Haiti. Julie Christie told Reuters,

"These clothes and products are the result of exploitation of people in countries such as Haiti who are very vulnerable. We are talking about starvation wages."

The Reuters report was reproduced in the Haitian weekly newspaper, *Haiti en Marche*. The protest was also reported in *The Guardian*, *Morning Star* and *The Voice*.

In Liverpool, Father Gerry Proctor and other members of the HSG, together with the regional GMB, staged a large demonstration outside the Disney shop in the city centre. Thousands of leaflets exposing Disney's shady involvement in Haiti were handed out to passers-by, and the local media gave the event full coverage. The GMB organised another picket of the Disney shop in Chester on 8 March.

## Protests in the US

At the recent Oscar Academy Awards in Los Angeles, a small aircraft circled above the venue trailing a banner reading, "Disney uses sweatshops - 30 cents an hour in Haiti". And in February, shareholders at Disney's annual meeting in California, presented a proposal calling for the setting up of higher standards at contract suppliers in countries such as Haiti, but it was overwhelmingly defeated. The majority of shareholders showed where their priorities lie by rewarding Disney's chief executive, Michael Eisner, with a new 10 year contract under which he will collect an estimated \$300 million in stock and salary.

## Disney responds to criticism

In response to the continuing unfavourable publicity arising from the protests here and in the US, Disney has sent out letters claiming that their own inspections have found that its licensees in Haiti adhere to all applicable laws and policies. The letter further states that the Haitian workers receive a salary well above the minimum wage, and refers to the 'clean bill of health' issued by the US Embassy in Haiti after its staff visited the factories.

Disney's response looks good, but it in reality is wholly unconvincing. First, according to Haitian workers, Disney's inspections take place in conjunction with the factory owners and do not include separate meetings where workers can speak openly. In such circumstances the inspectors can't be expected to find the truth. In any event, does Disney really expect self-monitoring to be taken seriously? Similarly, factory visits by US Embassy staff lack all credibility - one of the main planks of US policy in Haiti has long been to encourage US business to take advantage of Haiti's assembly plant set up. Neither Disney itself nor the US Embassy can in any way be regarded as impartial monitors.

The reference to payment above the minimum wage is deceptive because Disney is basing its claim on average wages - that is, an average calculated from wages paid to all factory employees, including better paid supervisors and security staff. What is more, the issue of impossibly high quotas that shop floor workers must meet in order to earn more than the minimum wage is totally ignored.



Julie Christie leading the protest against 'Mickey Mouse wages' in Haiti at Disney's Regent Street shop. Photo by Andrew Ward

## The truth about Disney

The truth about producing for Disney in Haiti is illustrated by the case of workers at a Port-au-Prince factory called Classic Apparel. On 26 February workers stopped sewing Walt Disney *Pocohantas* dresses for two hours to protest the management's refusal to hear their grievances. The workers have formed a union to press for better wages and working conditions. Currently they make the minimum wage of 36 gourdes per day (about £1.45 at current exchange rates). Vendors outside the factory gates sell a plate of food and a glass of juice for 10 gourdes. With public transportation to the factory costing most workers four gourdes each way, that means it takes half of a worker's wages just to go to work and eat lunch while there. The union is asking for a wage of 75 gourdes (£3) per day.

After five months of stalling, factory owner Marie-Claude Bayard finally met with the employees on 5 March, but refused to consider any of their demands. Instead, Bayard hired security guards to intimidate the workers. A guard told one worker, "If you get in the way of my gun, it's your fault."

Sources: Reuters, the Christian Peacemaker Team in Haiti

● The Haiti Support Group is exploring the possibility of organising a speaking tour of Britain and other European countries by a member of Batay Ouvriye, the workers' rights centre assisting the new textile workers' unions in Port-au-Prince.

# Popular organisations face police repression and Macoute infiltration

In a recent issue of the Haitian weekly newspaper, *Libète*, the editor wrote about the current wave of insecurity and violence, and asked why the Haitian authorities failed to react. "For nearly three weeks there was no increase in the police presence in the streets...people were dying." The article goes on to explain how a grassroots coalition, the Collective to Mobilise against the IMF, attempted to respond to this situation by asking the public to form self-defence vigilance brigades. *Libète* reflected that in the absence of police protection, the organisation of defence brigades that in the past have erected barricades to keep gunmen out of slum areas, was a reasonable response to the violence.

On 13 March, in the Port-au-Prince suburb of Carrefour, when members of the Collective staged their first demonstration in support of vigilance brigades, a unit of the Haitian National Police arrested five of the organisers, including two of the group's leaders, Yves Sanon and Nemours Damas. Under popular pressure, three of the five activists were immediately released, but Sanon and Damas were detained in prison accused of illegally carrying firearms. Four days later they were released without having been charged.

The Haitian police, apparently incapable of stopping the violence and crimes that have recently terrorised the country, did however have the means to crack down on a group involved in popular organising. The Collective, whose members were attacked by police in January when they were demonstrating against the government's economic policy, saw it as part of a plan to further intimidate

left-wing activists.

In late March, there were two more one-day general strikes calling for the resignation of the Prime Minister and rejecting the government's embrace of neo-liberalism, and, in recent weeks, there have been countless other localised expressions of popular disenchantment with the Lavalas government. Another weekly newspaper, *Haiti Progrès*, that is connected to

the radical left organisation, the National Popular Assembly, concluded, "Lavalas government policies, which have fostered complete impunity for putschist (coup) criminals and a widening gulf between the rich and poor, have finally pushed Haiti to the brink of chaos."

*Progrès* warned that the unpopularity of the government presents dangers as well as opportunities for the coun-

try's popular organisations. "...demobilised soldiers, paramilitary thugs, and former Tonton Macoutes...have also sought to infiltrate the growing popular movement against foreign military occupation and the neoliberal austerity programme. Hiding behind the anti-imperialist programme of the popular organisations, the Macoutes are trying to provoke street confrontations and confusion."

## What is the Collective? Interview with Yves Sanon

Last June, members of the Haiti Support Group study tour met Yves Sanon, a leading member of the Collective to Mobilise against the IMF and Neo-liberalism. Sanon, whose political activities go back to the Duvalier years, was a founding member of FENEH (the National Federation of Haitian Students, formed in 1987), a grassroots organiser in the Neighbourhood Committees movement, and a spokesperson for the National Alliance of Popular Organisations. As a leading member of the Collective he has been a vocal critic of the U.S./U.N. occupation of Haiti

and the neo-liberal policies of the Aristide and Preval governments.

"The Collective includes peasant organisations, youth and neighbourhood organisations, and individuals. It formed in January 1995 in order to analyze the Paris Plan (the economic strategy signed by the Haitian government and the international financial institutions) and organise mobilisation against it. The main aims of the Collective are: 1) to spread information and educate the public about the Paris Plan; 2) to denounce the existing government plans; 3) to mobilise the population against

neo-liberalism; and 4) to network with other sectors, such as parliament."

"The main obstacle to organising mobilisation has been the people's belief that the Aristide and Préval governments represent them. People were not even aware that the government was acting against their interests — they didn't believe this government would take them down the wrong path and did not see the problem developing because they trusted the government."

"The Haitian government lacks autonomy and is following instructions from the international financial institutions. The

government has not allowed for any back and forth negotiations; it should open discussions with the people of Haiti and between Haiti and the funding agencies. The Paris Plan has advanced slowly over the years and the funding agencies do not expect it all to go through at once, yet the government has given in on everything. The government lacks a spirit of struggle and has lost its sense of direction, with officials just doing things to stay in power or serve their own ends."

"The government needs to invest in developing domestic production and to create tax disincentives for imported

goods to protect local production. It should also set prices on essential goods and control the profit margin on these goods."

"Organisations have felt obliged to back Aristide after the fact of his election in 1990, and many still feel linked (to Lavalas) and want to back the government out of solidarity. But now they must recognise that the current direction is wrong. There is a tendency to romanticise charismatic leaders - this is a universal problem. But organisations must stick to the right direction, not to one leader. We must back organisations and not individuals."



# CONSERVATION WORK BRIGADE

**T**he British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV), in conjunction with the Haiti Support Group, is offering a two-week working 'holiday' in Haiti this September. The BTCV has a long tradition of volunteer conservation work in the UK. During the summer it offers people the chance to participate in conservation work abroad. This is the first time that the BTCV has had the opportunity to work in Haiti.

Ten people, including a qualified BTCV leader, will work for two weeks with a small peasant group in the south of the country. The work will be to build drainage ditches along the contours of mountain slopes to help prevent soil erosion. These ditches will be reinforced with stone walls, revetments and tree breaks. This is an ideal opportunity to learn both conservation skills, and find out about the serious environmental problems facing peasants in Haiti.



*Peasant family in the mountains of southern Haiti. Photo by Leah Gordon*

The trip will also include a meeting with a local expert who will give an overall view of the environmental situation in Haiti and the grassroots initiatives to combat the problems. Once at the site, in the mountains south of the capital, Port-au-Prince, volunteers will stay at a local school. Please note, the accommodation is basic and there is a steep half hour walk to and from the work site. When not working, volunteers will be able to go on guided nature walks in the surrounding countryside, play football with local residents, and visit the port of Jacmel.

The cost, to cover accommodation, food and local transport, will be approximately £320 per person. The air fare to Haiti (approximately £650) is extra. An interpreter will be available at all times. If you are interested contact the Haiti Support Group or the BTCV - Tel: 01491 839 766.

## **The Aristide Factor** by Leslie Griffiths

**Reviewed by  
Mary Boley**

**"I**t is highly unlikely that Aristide will bow out of public life now that he's no longer President. He'll want to throw his hat in the ring again in December 2000 and be Haiti's head of state for the bicentenary of her independence in the year 2004, or I'm a Dutchman."

So concludes "The Aristide Factor", the new book by Leslie Griffiths. In it, he interprets the 43 year life span of Jean Bertrand Aristide, "once and future president" of Haiti, placing it in the context of Haitian history as a whole,

and informed by a love of Haiti that dates back to the years he lived and worked there as a Methodist minister in the early seventies.

Initially I was confused by this book - biography or autobiography? As it transpires, it is neither, but the uneasy tandem of both, especially at the beginning of the book, does not work, and the intrusive autobiographical note of the author detracts rather than adds to the narrative.

This book will interest those with more than a passing knowledge of Haiti. Although there is no definitive analysis of the Aristide 'factor', it

places centre stage the challenge that someone like Aristide represents for the status quo. The book highlights the double-speak of US foreign policy, the inadequacy of the United Nations, the vacillations of the

Vatican and the Roman Catholic Church, and the entrenched position of a powerful Haitian elite. Despite attempts at vilification by some or all of these bodies (extremely well-documented by Griffiths), at all times throughout the narrative, Aristide and the people, i.e. the poor, remain a constant. Aristide is an irritant to the Vatican and the local church hierarchy. "They prefer a priest not to be president", especially when he champions the Church's 'option for the poor' and challenges the status quo.

In one of the few glimpses of Aristide in action, Griffiths quotes him,

*"Ask yourselves the question: When are we going to wrap our faith and our commitment together to build a people's church with a people's power that will boil over and become a revolution."*

Both Aristide and the people know what they are saying. Currently, with Structural Adjustment programmes being debated on the international stage, the "Aristide Factor" challenges us to listen to what is being said by the poor, rather than hearing what we want to hear. The economic development strategies that Haitians are proposing as an alternative to the IMF/World Bank programme, if implemented, could be the millennium challenge for international development organisations that choose to listen instead of dictating how change should come about.

● Readers of Haiti Briefing can order copies of The Aristide Factor at the special price of £16.50 including post and packing. The normal retail price for this hardback, published by Lion, is £17.99. Please make cheques payable to the Haiti Support Group.

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