

Batay Ouvriye is the Haitian popular organisation that linked Grand Marnier workers with international solidarity groups.
photo by Leah Gordon

Solidarity boosts union action

After a year-long campaign, the labour union representing some 300 workers at the Marnier-Lapostolle orange plantation in northern Haiti has won wage increases and some improvements in conditions. In late July, the French company that imports the orange peel grown at the plantation to produce the famous Grand Marnier liqueur, authorised its local manager to increase wages by over 50%, and to provide the workers with toilet facilities.

Batay Ouvriye, the popular organisation that helped the workers set up their union in the summer of 1999, reported that "These results were obtained largely due to the unwavering struggle of the unionised agricultural laborers of the Marnier-Lapostolle plantation, as well as the international solidarity

campaign on their behalf."

In late 1999, first the French network, Réseau-Solidarite, and then the Haiti Support Group, responded to Batay Ouvriye's appeal for solidarity with the Marnier workers' union. Hundreds of letters and emails were sent to the Paris head office of Marnier-Lapostolle supporting the union's demands for an increase in the less than US\$2 daily wage, and for the provision of basic washing and toilet facilities at the plantation. Negotiations between the union and the plantation's Haitian manager began, but soon broke down when he offered a derisory wage increase. Thereafter, the management began to threaten and intimidate the union members.

In response, the Haiti Support Group widened its appeal for

international solidarity. The issue was featured in the Haitian-American weekly newspaper, *Haiti Progrès*; South African unions and workers' organisations sent protest emails; and members of the Campaign for Labor Rights and the other US-based lobbying organisations petitioned the Marnier-Lapostolle offices in Paris and New York. However, by the spring of 2000 when the orange season ended and the workers were laid-off, the union had only won vague promises of improved conditions.

In July, when work on the plantation began again, Batay Ouvriye relaunched the international solidarity campaign. The British NGO, War on Want, which had been introduced to the work of Batay

Ouvriye by the Haiti Support Group in 1997, invited one of the organisation's coordinators to the UK. Yanick Etienne raised the plight of the Marnier workers with British unions and the media, and Marnier-Lapostolle quickly authorised their manager to negotiate an agreement with the union leaders.

The salary increase has been welcomed by the plantation workers, but the union points out that it barely keeps check with a galloping rate of inflation, and that workers are still waiting for the tools promised at the beginning of the year. Batay Ouvriye's August press release continued, "Workers at the Marnier-Lapostolle orange plantation, while acknowledging the growing solidarity movement in support of their struggle to win basic demands from the management, will continue to count on your militant solidarity for the continuation of the campaign."

Meanwhile, in July, Batay Ouvriye drew attention to a new source of danger for those attempting to build an independent workers movement in Haiti when it reported that, in various parts of the country, its members had been attacked by supporters of the Lavalas Family party.

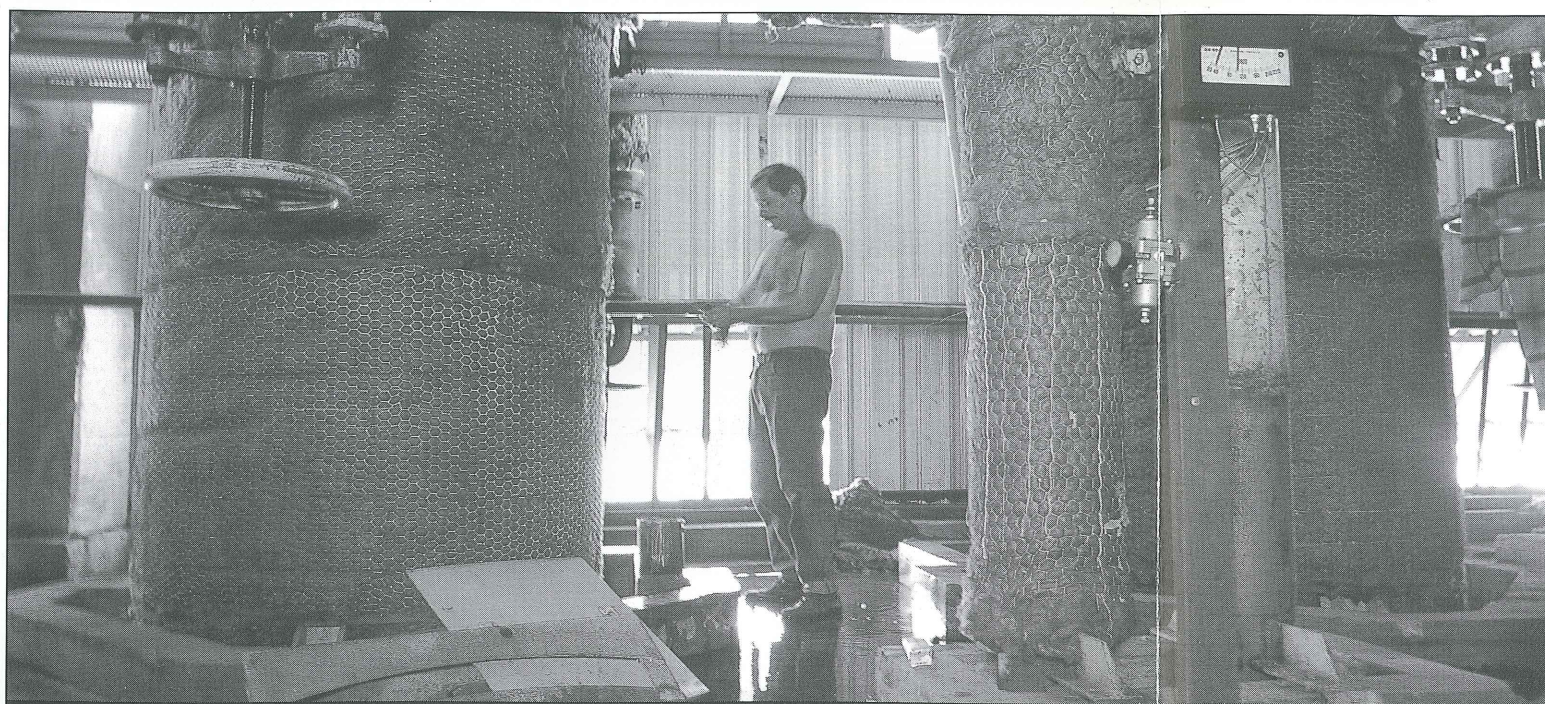
"Hundreds of letters and emails were sent supporting the union's demands for a wage increase."

Alternative development aid for Haiti

While the IMF and World Bank lends Haiti millions of dollars of aid for the implementation of mostly inappropriate structural adjustment policies, the Communist state of Cuba is providing technical assistance and expertise in the crucial spheres of agriculture, health, and literacy.

For over 30 years, the two countries had been estranged as a result of Papa Doc Duvalier's anti-Communist hostility, and it was not until February 1996 that former President Aristide renewed diplomatic relations between them. Since then, President Préval has visited Cuba, and a number of aid agreements have been signed.

One of the most symbolic Cuban interventions is the programme to repair and re-open the abandoned sugar refinery at



A Cuban technician carrying out repairs at the Darbonne sugar refinery.

Photo by Leah Gordon

government covers their transport costs and continues to pay their Cuban salary.

Dessources explained, "There are not enough Haitian doctors, and those that are trained here don't go to the countryside. They finish their residency where they are required to do a year or two here, and then they go abroad. The amount of doctors we have cannot cover all the territory."

While seeming to be a laudable intervention, the provision of the Cuban doctors is not without its critics. Paul Farmer, a member of the Partners in Health organisation which runs a free hospital in the remote Central Plateau department, and who has worked as a doctor in Haiti for over 15 years, says, "The Cuban doctors work great in a system with socialised medicine. They have great technical skills, etc. but Haiti will humble them, because it's people are poor,

and the Cubans cannot work efficiently for the destitute sick if they do not have the tools of the trade. It's pure romanticism."

It can only be hoped that the national budget for expenditure on health will be drastically increased in order to make use of another scheme in which the Cuban government has undertaken to train, in Cuba, 600 Haitian doctors by the year 2010. The first group of 120 students, the majority of them recruited from the most undeveloped parts of the country, will graduate in 2005. On their return from Cuba, these new doctors will be required to serve at least five years in hospitals in towns where they come from.

Literacy by radio

Whereas Cuba has one of the highest literacy rates in the world, Haiti has one of the worst – less than half of adults can read or

write. Specialists from the Cuban Ministry of Education are currently in Haiti advising the Haitian government on a new system aimed at teaching reading and writing via the radio.

A pilot project began in 1999 in the area of Petite Place Cazeau with daily classes being broadcast by two local Haitian radio stations between the hours of 6-7am and 6-7 pm – the hours most convenient for listeners. One programme is given in the Creole language, the other in French. A team of 18 Cuban advisors has worked together with the Haitian Secretary of State for Literacy to produce learning materials, consisting of a reader and manual, to accompany the course, and to provide training for local teachers so that they can continue and expand the project. The programme will now be extended to the country's south-east and central departments.

Cuba Lending a hand (instead of money)

Darbonne, just south of the town of Léogâne. The massive refinery was built in the early 1980s but in 1986, after two years in operation, it was closed down. In the turbulent political period following the collapse of the Jean-Claude Duvalier regime, the central government ignored the refinery, and it fell into disrepair. Other major sugar refineries in Haiti such as the HASCO plant in Port-au-Prince were also shut when the big families who monopolised the sugar industry discovered they could make greater profits by importing sugar than they could by producing it themselves. For Haitian farmers, who had traditionally grown sugar cane as an important cash crop, the collapse of the domestic sugar industry was a serious blow.

In 1999, the Haitian government decided to invest US\$2 million to renovate the Darbonne refinery, and Cuba agreed to provide some 40 technicians to

carry out the necessary repairs and installation. Haitian Minister of Planning, Anthony Dessources told *The Haitian Times* that the Cuban technicians had made the programme possible, "They have a very high level of expertise, that doesn't cost the Haitian government a lot of money. We make sure that they have a place to stay, food to eat, and some pocket money. Some of the experts from the North cost US\$10,000 a month to come here. They are people that need luxuries such as beautiful houses and air-conditioning, and they need time to acclimatise. The Cubans come in one day, the next they are working."

Aid – what is it good for?

Dessources' comments about the relative value of foreign aid should be read in the context of the shocking revelation of a few years back, when the United States Agency for International Develop-

ment boasted to the US Congress that, of every dollar of US aid money allocated to Haiti, 87 cents were spent on salaries for US consultants, on US services, and on US products such as computers and vehicles.

When *Haiti Briefing* visited Darbonne in August 2000, the Cuban engineers seemed nervous and shy of any publicity – a reaction that is understandable remembering how Cuban construction labourers helping to build the tourist airport in Grenada in 1983 were attacked when US forces invaded the island.

The Darbonne factory is due to re-open in January 2001, and, according to the head Cuban engineer, once up and running it will be able to produce over 2000 tonnes of sugar daily. Farmers on the fertile Léogâne Plaine have begun to plant the sugar cane in preparation for the factory opening. Planning Minister Dessources told *The Haitian Times*

that the re-opening of the Darbonne refinery would only be a start, "When you look at the international price of sugar, it won't be competitive. The advantage will be a certain autonomy with the rehabilitation of the factory, as well as becoming less dependent on sugar imports."

Repaying a debt

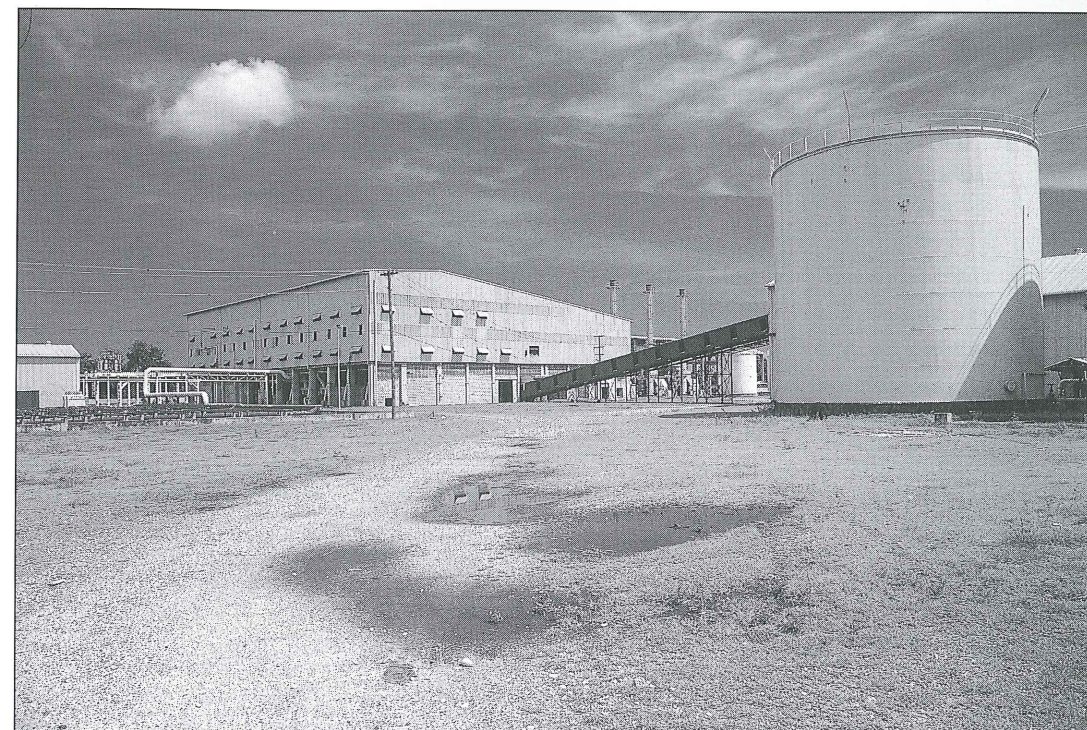
The sugar connection between Haiti and Cuba goes back a long way. At the beginning of the last century, hundreds of thousands of Haitians went to Cuba to work on the sugar cane harvest, and, according to Dienesio Molina, a Cuban diplomat in Port-au-Prince, around nine per cent of the Cuban population are Haitian or of Haitian descent. He told Inter Press Service, "Cuban cooperation with Haiti has a point. It is a debt that we are repaying. It is more than a century since the Haitians first arrived in Cuba. They have contributed to our economy by

their labours in the cane fields and coffee harvesting."

Cuba is also providing 40 technicians for support programmes for agriculture, veterinary medicine, and fishing. Four fishing boats have been lent by Cuba so that Haitian fishermen can learn to fish in deeper water using 100 new fibreglass boats that are currently under construction.

Medical brigade

Another ambitious programme saw some 500 Cuban health professionals – doctors, nurses and laboratory technicians – arrive in Haiti in December 1998. These professionals have been deployed to health centres across the country where they work alongside their Haitian counterparts. Under the terms of the agreement, the Haitian government provides the Cubans with accommodation and a monthly sum in gourdes – the Haitian currency – equivalent to US\$100. The Cuban



The Darbonne sugar refinery near Léogâne will soon be producing 2000 tonnes of sugar each day.

Photo by Leah Gordon

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'Catching the Spirit: Representations of Vodou spirits in contemporary Haitian art'

Haiti is a country renowned for its unique and compelling history, its intense religious beliefs, and its rich visual traditions. Haiti's history testifies to a people's struggle against oppression – between 1791 and 1804, for emancipation from slavery, and, during the latter years of the 20th Century, for freedom from brutal dictatorships and military regimes.

The October Gallery exhibition will examine the variety of elaborate forms used by Haitian artists to represent the vast pantheon of Vodou spirits (the lwa) that have given strength and succour to the common people of this land.

Vodou is the cardinal force that inspires the majority of painters, metalworkers and flag-makers in Haiti. The roles of the oungan (Vodou priest) and the artist are often interchangeable, since the nether world they inhabit, between the spiritual and the tangible, is a world enlightened by dreams and by the fertile powers of the imagination.

Art provides the major material expression of the Vodou faith, and the *lwa* are its constant subjects. Haitian artists have developed many different ways of depicting



Marasa 2' by Gerard

**The October
Gallery, in
conjunction
with the Haiti
Support Group,
presents an
exhibition of
Vodou-
influenced art
from 12th
October – 11th
November
2000 at
The October
Gallery
24 Old
Gloucester St,
London
WC1N 3AL
Tel: 020 7242
7367**

Vodou art exhibition

the *lwa* using media as diverse as painting, formerly used to decorate temple walls; metalwork, deriving from elaborate cemetery crosses; dazzling sequined flags, used in Vodou ceremonies; and elaborate dolls, formerly used to ornament the altars.

The representations have varied from figurative to expressionistic, and from symbolistic to purely abstract forms.

This exhibition will analyse the characteristics of some of the most popular *lwa* through their depiction in Haitian art, and explore the variety of representational strategies used by the artists. The presentation will show the beguiling nature of Vodou at the same time as it displays the imaginative gift of creativity so apparent in much of contemporary Haitian art.

Cancel the Debt campaign in Haiti

In June, the Haitian Jubilee 2000 campaign organised a week of awareness-raising activities that culminated with a free concert in the centre of Port-au-Prince featuring Boukman Eksperyans and Chandel. A delegation of activists also met with President Préval at the National Palace. After the meeting, Préval called for total and

immediate debt cancellation for Haiti. Currently, Haiti owes over US\$1.1 billion to the IMF, World Bank and European powers, nearly 45% of this debt contracted by the Duvalier dictatorships.

In July, Camille Chalmers, chair of the Haitian Jubilee 2000 campaign attended the G8 summit in Okinawa, Japan, where he joined

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others from the developing world in expressing their dismay at the G8 nations' failure to deliver debt cancellation. Chalmers said that the 1999 Cologne Debt Initiative had clearly failed, noting that Haiti had not even been included in the initiative despite the fact that it pays twice as much on debt service as on health.

Haiti Support Group web site

Check out – <http://www.gn.apc.org/haitisupport> – the Haiti Support Group web site, containing all the latest news from Haiti, features, articles, links, back issues of the Haiti Briefing, and more. The site aims:

- To introduce the work of the Haiti Support Group;
- To highlight the continuing struggle of the Haitian people for a genuine democracy, and for equitable economic development; and
- To provide some practical information for those wanting to find out more about Haiti, and for those who want to visit the country.