In the shadow of the sweatshop

Haiti is a country laid waste by decades of dictatorship, and years of economic sanctions. There is a desperate need for reconstruction and development, and millions of dollars of aid money have been promised. But will the development programme currently being initiated benefit the 85% of the people living below the margin of absolute poverty?

Two events in May suggest that plans are moving ahead to base Haiti’s economic future firmly on the exploitation of its extremely cheap labour pool. First, the Aristide government announced a new legal minimum wage that would not upset the private sector - US$2.57 or £1.65 a day.

Then, in mid-May, the Haitian government held an economic summit meeting with private investors. This revealed just what sort of ‘phoenix’ will rise from the ashes as a result of the structural adjustment programme (SAP) favoured by the World Bank, the IMF and USAID.

The government announced a series of measures and proposals to benefit the assembly plant sector. These include exemptions from paying import duties and export taxes, the elimination of export inspections, and plans for new industrial zones in Port-au-Prince and Gonaïves. The millionaire Brandt family, which allegedly supported the 1991 coup, was given the go-ahead to begin the construction of a commercial port and free trade zone in northeast Haiti.

Haitians need jobs and the sweatshop assembly plants will provide them, but to work long hours in atrocious conditions to support a family of eight or nine on £1.65 a day... The assembly plant industries won’t even produce goods for consumption in Haiti. Rather, raw materials for such items as electronic parts, racios, clothes and baseballs will be imported, processed, assembled, and then exported to the US. Tax and duty exemptions will mean the assembly plants will make next to no contribution Haiti’s economy.

The agricultural sector that ‘supports’ 70% of the population is under threat from another main part of the SAP - the removal of import tariffs. This will have the effect of opening the Haitian market to foreign food imports that will undercut foodstuffs such as rice produced by Haitian peasant farmers. Nearly all commentators, even a United Nations Development Programme spokesperson in Haiti, Paul Paryski, believe that this will have a disastrous effect.

Cheaper foreign food imports will destroy the livelihoods of peasants who produce food for the domestic market. They will have to try to produce crops for export to the US or, more likely, move to the cities to look for work in the assembly plant industries.

Some see the development of the rural economy as the key to Haiti’s future economic well-being and, in particular, to the repair of catastrophic environmental degradation. Instead what can be expected is increased concentration of land ownership, increased rural unemployment, and deepening rural poverty.
HAITI'S ELECTIONS: Farce-trap to landslide

Parliamentary and local elections are underway for elections to be held on June 24, with a second round run-off, if necessary, scheduled for July 22. Thousands of candidates are contesting all 83 seats in the Chamber of Deputies, three-thirds of the 27 seat Senate, and positions for 35 mayors and 667 township councillors. The Lavalas Political Front, which is supported by President Aristide, is expected to sweep the board. Other parties challenging the FNC, led by former Aristide ally and ex-Paul Konaté, a social democrat group, and a host of centrist parties led by traditional politicians such as Lesile Mangat and Serge Gilles.

Some 2000 candidates were jockeying for position, despite the fact that 10,000 people have been killed in elections in Haiti in recent years. There have been thousands of cases of violence, pogroms, and government actions that have resulted in the deaths of voters. The elections are a farce, a charade, a farce for which the people have no elections. The elections are a farce because the people have no elections because the government has no elections. The elections are a farce because the government has no elections because the people have no elections.

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UK releases for new Boukman and Boukan Ginen

The third album by Boukman Eksperyans, Libète - Pran Pou Pran’l! (Freedom - Let’s Take It), is now available on Mango Records. Recorded at Bob Marley’s old Tuff Gong studios in Jamaica, it’s a more melodic effort than their previous releases, with the vocals weaving in and out of a drum-heavy mix.

Since returning to Haiti last October members of the group have been protesting against the army and elements of the government they regard as holdovers from the military regime.

Singer Lolo Beaubrun told New York’s Newsday, “Things are more cool than during three years the generals were in power, but it’s dangerous. There’s a lot of killing in Port-au-Prince. We pray in the street with drums, we play some concerts and we do radio interviews to advise people to continue the struggle.”

Reflecting the confusion that the Aristide/US alliance has created among those who backed the original Lavalas project and now see it being abandoned, Lolo said, “I can’t say I’m not an Aristide supporter, and I can’t say I am.”

Boukan Ginen, tipped by many to become Haiti’s premier racines (roots) band, release their debut, Jou a Rive (The Day Has Come), on Xenophile Records. The Guardian’s Robin Denselow described it as an “entertaining, accessible and wildly energetic set.”

The band was formed by two former Boukman Eksperyans members, including the singer Eddy François whose soaring vocals power the album’s politically charged songs. Denselow writes, “Performing against a tight, rattling rhythm section, he (François) mixes African style, reggae and soul balladry in an exuberant blend of carnival dance styles and protest.”

Both releases available on CD and cassette from Stern’s African Record Centre - 0171 387 5550

Harold Pinter opens Haiti exhibition and slams US invasion

At the opening night of the exhibition, Haiti: Photos, Paintings, Ironworks, the internationally renowned playwright, Harold Pinter, condemned the US for undermining democracy in Haiti.

The exhibition at the October Gallery, staged in conjunction with the Haiti Support Group, featured the work of Haitian artists, and US and European photojournalists who have worked in Haiti in the years since the collapse of the Duvalier dictatorship.

Pinter, a member of the Haiti Support Group, formally opened the exhibition by praising the assembled works for embodying “the extraordinary spirit of the Haitian people.” He went on to criticise the United States policy in Haiti calling it “a masquerade” and claiming that “a democratic procedure, a democratic election, has been totally undermined and sabotaged...by a military coup supported in fact by the United States.”

Referring to last September’s US military intervention in Haiti, he remembered President Clinton’s contention that “a new dawn has arisen”, but remarked that all that had been restored was the status quo.

He continued, “All of Aristide’s endeavours to perform what he was actually elected for have been totally undermined, and he himself, in a sense, I must say with great regret, seems to have been strangled and emasculated.”

The opening night of the exhibition was attended by over 400 invited guests, including the Haitian painter, Edouard Duval-Carrié, and US photographer, Michelle Frankfurter, who recently won a World Press Award prize for her photo of a Port-au-Prince street demonstration.

Other artists featured in the exhibition included Stevenson Magloire, Prosper Pierrelouis, Frantz Lamaathe, and Serge Jolimeau. The photographic part of the exhibition was curated by Leah Gordon and included photographers Maggie Steber, Les Stone, Chantal Regnault and Roger Hutchings.

Eyewitness in Haiti

American socialist Ahmed Shawki will be speaking at a public meeting about Haiti as part of the Marxism 95 conference. It is at 7pm on Sunday, July 9 at University of London Union, Malet Street, London WC1.

Phone 0171 338 2707 for a free timetable of the full week and more details.