



Twenty thousand Haitians, mostly women, work in export assembly plants where they earn less than 20p an hour. Photo by Julio Etchart

Wage slavery

HAITIAN workers in the capital's assembly plants work in hot, airless, and dimly lit factories sewing gloves, underwear, sports clothes and other garments for the North American market. The legal minimum wage is just 36 gourdes (or £1.60) a day, but research by the New York-based National Labor Committee (NLC) has revealed that more than half of the approximately 50 assembly plants producing for the US market are not even paying this. For example, Haitian contractors producing 'Mickey Mouse' and 'Pocahontas' pyjamas for US companies under licence to the Walt Disney Company are in some cases paying workers as little as 15 gourdes or 67p a day, which represents 8p an hour.

The NLC investigation shows that with these wages Haitian workers struggle just to feed themselves and their families. The estimated cost of satisfying the most basic nutritional needs of a family of five is £1.10 per day. In addition, every day, workers must pay between 27p and 45p on transport, and 30p for a small lunch. Add to this the costs of the rent for a shack in a Port-au-Prince slum, and children's school fees, and even a six-day week minimum-wage salary provides less than 60% of a family's basic needs. Workers employed by the Disney sub-contractors find their salary covering less than 25% of a family's basic needs.

These pathetically inadequate wages form the centrepiece of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank free market strategy for Haiti. It is based on the notion that Haiti's main "comparative advantage" is its highly productive, but very cheap, labour force. As the World Bank's Country Assistance Strategy (CAS) points out, Haiti has the lowest labour costs in the Western Hemisphere. The CAS goes on to outline a scenario in which "a

key source of employment creation and growth would be a revitalisation of the export assembly industries."

This 'revitalisation' means attracting foreign business back to the export assembly sector (many operations closed down during the recent economic embargoes on Haiti). The inducements include tax-free industrial zones, zero trade tariffs, a guaranteed electricity supply, and improved transport infrastructure – all of which will benefit Haitian factory owners and foreign corporations, but contribute nothing to the economic development of either the state or the majority of the population.

The most important inducement of all is the continuation of low wages, so, even if more jobs are created, those in work would have next to no purchasing power, i.e. there would be no spill-over in terms of a developing market in Haiti. Moreover, the principle tool for keeping wages down is the existence of a large pool of urban unemployed – precisely the effect created by free trade policies that are destroying the viability of traditional Haitian agriculture.

Meanwhile, workers at the assembly plants live on a knife edge – wages so low they have to go into debt to survive, but with a real risk of starvation if they lose their jobs. Despite the fact that factory owners routinely sack anyone who complains or asks for better conditions, attempts are being made to build unions. One bulletin distributed to workers at a textile factory reads, "Many workers that are interested in the union are just watching and waiting. Their problem is they understand the necessity of organising, but do not want to take the risk...We in the union understand them...but friends, don't ever forget, you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs!".

ECONOMY ST UNDER UN 'REC

AS US troops landed in Port-au-Prince two years ago, the world was told that Haiti would benefit from the largesse of the international community. "This is clearly Haiti's single greatest opportunity to do something significant to improve the life of its people," opined Mark Schneider, a USAID official in charge of Haiti, echoing the boosters from the UN and the international financial institutions (IFIs), like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). To the sound of trumpets, the Lavalas government and the international community talked about jobs, roads, education, US\$1.2 billion in aid, and the Emergency Economic Recovery Program (EERP). In short, a massive "reconstruction" program.

Alas, it was all a cruel hoax. Recent trade figures from the US Department of Commerce confirm that Haiti is still reeling from what must be considered criminal US/UN economic policies. In the first eight months of this year, Haiti imported US\$315 million worth of goods from the United States, Haiti's largest trading partner. In return, Haiti exported a paltry US\$90 million worth of goods to their giant neighbour to the north.

The trade figures are only the latest sign that the international bankers and "donors" have literally wrecked what was left of Haiti. The economy, which contracted 30 percent during the coup years, grew only 2.5 percent in 1995, a dismal record given the "jumpstart" from tens of thousands of US/UN soldiers and the hundreds of millions from international banks coursing through Haiti. Inflation hovered around 30 percent in 1995, and this year it's around 20 percent, according to IMF figures.

Behind the traditional statistics of inflation and growth, the story only gets worse. The already extreme malnutrition and morbidity rates of preschool children – 1 in 2 are hungry and 1 in 8 die – remain at coup levels. The aid agencies now boast that they feed 1.4 million people a day, up from an already inflated level of 940,000 at the time of the September 1994 intervention. Rural-urban migration has accelerated, the country's debt has ballooned and the trade balance thrown wildly askew.

If the Clinton administration had this kind of record in the United States, it would

have been thrown out – if not impeached – a long time ago. But it seems with Haiti, the IFIs can do anything they want. Indeed, the IMF recently had the gall to say that, "Economic performance improved significantly under the EERP."

The IMF hype, though, can't hide reality. According to the latest figures from the US Commerce Department, exports from Haiti to the United States are running at about 1995's already anaemic levels. Last year's exports, some US\$130 million, were so bad that they did not even surpass levels set during the "international embargo" against the coup regime. In the first half of this year, Haiti exported US\$61 million worth of goods to the United States. The July figure hit US\$14 million and the August nearly US\$15 million.

These figures are important because exports are the self-proclaimed centrepiece of

the IFIs "reconstruction program." According to the logic of the IFIs "export-led" development, exports should be sharply up by now. But they are even lower today than they were during the coup regime of Lt. Gen. Raoul Cédras. In 1993, for instance, when the Organization of American States-led hemispheric embargo was in full swing, Haiti exported US\$155 million worth of goods to the United States. In the last "normal" period of economic activity in 1990, Haiti exported about US\$300 million a year.

As for imports, Haiti brought in some US\$244 million worth of goods in the first six months of the year and another US\$71 million in July and August. The pace is slightly below last year's record number, but still high. Haiti imported US\$551 million worth of goods in 1995, sharply up from US\$477 million in 1990. The imports

Grassroots organis

FOLLOWING President Rene Préval's request to the United Nations to extend its military presence in Haiti¹ until July 1997, ten 'popular', grassroots organisations issued the following press release:

"Today, 18 November 1996, 193 years since the battle of Vertières², the Haitian people are witnessing with great humiliation how the Lavalas regime of (President) Préval and (Prime Minister) Smarth, in collusion with the subservient bourgeoisie and the Macoutes, is selling the country without a backward glance. The Haitian people are living through one of the most humiliating moments in their whole history. All the country's wealth is already spread out on the table of the big countries. The country owes more than it has. All the institutions of the country are under the control of foreigners and corrupt bureaucrats who pose as experts while millions are wasted. Since 1915³ to the present day Haiti's security has been

a matter for the US military and everything bad that has happened to the country shows the marks of their long claws.

We, members of popular organisations, on the occasion of the 193rd anniversary of the battle of Vertières, declare:

- 1) to accept the presence of US/United Nations troops in Haiti in any form is to continue to mistreat the rights of this country's people. There can be no economic development in the interests of the country nor security for the majority as long as the country is occupied.
- 2) the decision of the Préval/Smarth government to ask for the occupation force to stay in the country is illegal. The Haitian people do not recognise the decision. Po-

litical group popular and already rejected has already doesn't count this arrogant Lavalas author a road to die 3) All the victims are suffering arrests of tr



US troops with boys accusing in action.

TILL REELING CONSTRUCTION'

this year generally consist of food (like rice, vegetable oil, wheat and sugar) and apparel goods destined for the lowwage assembly zones of Port-au-Prince.

The figures do point to the "failure" of the IFIs. But failure is a relative term. In this sense it presumes that the World Bank and the IMF actually want to help the people of Haiti but are just incompetent. But is this really a "failure" or intended. Examining the policies of the World Bank and IMF around the world we can see that what they're trying to do in Haiti is what they've tried to do elsewhere on the planet: expropriate farmers from their land, integrate and cheapen Haitian labour on the international market, reverse expectations of a better life, and open the country to fuller capitalist exploitation.

Reprinted from the weekly newspaper *Haiti Progrès* – 30 October 1996.



Sugar cane farmers near Léogâne. Until recently Haiti exported sugar but all the commercial cane refineries were closed by the owners who could make bigger profits from importing sugar. Now even local rum production is threatened by tariff-exempt ethanol imports.

Photo by Leah Gordon.

sations reject UN occupation

s that are battling in the democratic camp have rejected it. But René Préval said 'public opinion is not in this matter', and evidence shows that the authorities are opening up dictatorship.

violence that the people, all the insecurity, the trade unionists, all types

of threats being made in the run up to the renewal of the occupation are part of a plan to keep the country under the boot of the international community with the United States at its head.

We, members of popular organisations, denounce and reject the decision of the Préval/Smarth government to ask for a prolongation of the occupation. We denounce too the cynical manoeuvres of the Préval/Smarth government that is leaving the crisis-ridden state electricity and telephone companies, General Hospital and other institutions to rot so it can sack state employees and break the unions. At the same time it is closing its eyes to all the theft, and wastage by the Macoutes, and to the corrupt bureaucrats who

are working to sell all the country's wealth.

We stand together with the Electricity and Telephone company workers, with the plantain growers in Arcahaie, with the sugar cane planters, and with the clarin distillers in Léogâne,⁴ who are fighting against the IMF/World Bank/Preval neo-liberal project that is opening up the country to foreign produce and crushing national production. We are letting the Préval/Smarth government know that its manoeuvres can't destroy the progressive organisations or block the road to freedom in Haiti because, 77 times 7, we are not going to return to another dictatorship."

Signed by representatives of ten popular organisations, including the National Popular Assembly, Konbit Komilfo, the Collective to Mobilise against the IMF, and Tet Kole Ti Peyizan. (from *Haiti Progrès*, 20 November 1996, translated from Creole by Charles Arthur.)

Notes:

¹ The mission's current mandate ends 30 November. Some 1,200 UN troops are in the PortauPrince metropolitan area. Another 300 UN civilian police officers also are assigned to Haiti.

² On 18 November 1803 the revolutionary army commanded by Jean-Jacques Dessalines defeated the French forces at Vertières near Cap François (now Cap-Haitien). This was the final battle of the Haitian Revolution that began in 1791. On 1 January 1804 Haiti became an independent republic.

³ In 1915 US troops invaded Haiti and occupied the country until 1934.

⁴ Neo-liberal policies promoting free trade by cutting and eliminating import tariffs mean that peasants growing sugar cane (for the production of clarin – raw rum) and plantains are finding their products undercut by foreign imports that are flooding Haiti's markets.



Incident of petty theft – UN 'peace-keepers' in Port-au-Prince. Photo by Leah Gordon.

From the East End to the airport road

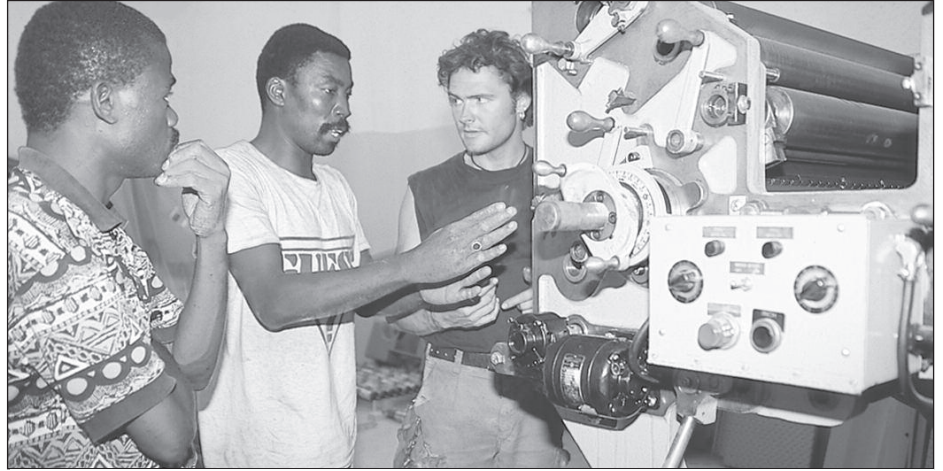
WEARING a red bandanna and riding a 200cc trail bike, Paul Ricard is becoming a familiar figure driving along the airport road in Port-au-Prince. Paul, 37, is the print technician that the Haiti Support Group sent out to help train the printers working on Libète's new press. The progress has been very slow, but during November the first copy of Libète will run off the press. Many unforeseen problems meant that Paul worked more as site foreman than print trainer for the first few weeks, but finally he was able to start training the two Haitian sheet-fed printers how to operate a continuous feed web offset.

"I came here as a volunteer partly due to a sense of adventure, but also because this work is special. I can try to impart some of my knowledge about the printing process to people who do not have the resources to learn any other way." Paul has worked for seven years at East End Offset, two of these in a training capacity on the same press that Libète now owns – the Goss Community C. "It is the perfect press for these conditions, as it is simple, strong, and there are not a lot of complicated electrics", he said.

Paul suffered culture shock when he first arrived in Port-au-Prince, but soon adapted. "When I first drove along the airport road (where the press is located) I had my head in my hands, thinking, 'What have I let myself in for.' At first everything seems quite anarchic and you can't imagine people surviving in conditions like this, but in the space of a week it all seemed quite normal."

The technical difficulties Libète has encountered means the training period will be too short, so the Haiti Support Group is hoping the European Union will provide the financial support to send another ex-printer from East End Offset. The latter, even though now studying at college, is willing to fit in some time in Haiti between his last essay and his exams next year.

Paul feels it is important to have someone with not only printing skills but also a level of commitment towards what



From left to right, Libète workers Orestel and Sanndès with Paul Ricard. Photo by Leah Gordon.

Libète is trying to achieve. "Having a press for progressive publications is very important for a country like Haiti. The situation here is developing on a weekly basis and to have a press that can respond in a language that the majority of the people can understand is a great develop-

ment," said Paul. "It's also a real boost for other organisations planning to have a progressive input into the politics of Haiti, because the press will be here for their use and they will no longer be dependent on the right wing-owned presses which have a very different agenda."

ODA/World Bank 'replies'

MANY members of the Haiti Support Group responded to our request to write to their MPs about the international financial institutions' plans for Haiti, and have received replies from the British government's Overseas Development Administration (ODA). Perhaps predictably the ODA reply, that reads as though written by the World Bank's representative in London, either ignores or sidesteps the points addressed by our original letter.

On the issue of opposition to the structural adjustment programme on the part of Haiti's popular organisations and some MPs, the letter first insinuates that the whole economic reform programme is the Haitian government's idea. (According to former Prime Minister, Claudette Werleigh, this is true if you understand the government to be Leslie Delatour and no one else. Delatour is head of the central bank and a chief proponent of structural adjustment.) Then, parliamentary opposition to the reforms is glossed over, because, by the time the reply was written, the Haitian Parliament had already passed the requisite legislation, albeit when barely quorate.

On the question of the deadlines for this legislation, the Bank claims there were none. In which case President Préval is a liar, because throughout the year he insisted on the need to meet them or lose millions of dollars in aid. I think we should be told.

Extra-parliamentary opposition is acknowledged, but, we are told, the Bank's President is "taking a close interest in developments in Haiti", and he knows "poverty alleviation is the over-arching objective of the Bank's assistance programme". Whatever the organisations representing Haitians whose poverty needs alleviating think, the Bank knows better. – i.e. job creation and growth by privatisation and private sector investment (*see the rest of this Briefing.*)

Finally, the reply commits the Bank to a growth strategy that supports sustainable agriculture. What this, in fact, amounts to are two projects, one to protect remaining tree cover at the country's principal watersheds, and the other, a vague 'Agricultural Development Project' scheduled for 1998. The buck is passed to other major donors such as the Inter-american Development Bank. For the World Bank it seems as though if Haitian agriculture can't withstand the impact of cheap foreign imports then it is obviously not 'sustainable'.

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