



Burning tyre roadblock demonstrations against the government occur almost daily

photo by Leah Gordon

Long hot summer for Aristide

The government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, which came to power with a landslide electoral victory only two years ago, is facing sliding popularity and mounting protest on all fronts. At root of the deepening disillusionment is the continued suspension of foreign development aid that has left the government unable to carry out any of the promised social or economic improvements. But this unpromising situation has been made much worse by personal rivalries within the Lavalas Family party, poor leadership and corruption at all levels of government.

During the summer months that saw almost daily street protests, there was no more dramatic illustration of the sharp decline in support among Aristide's traditional powerbase than the events in the populous city of Gonaïves. On 2 July, police arrested Amiot Métayer, a community leader with a

loyal following among the inhabitants of Gonaïves' extremely poor Raboteau neighbourhood. This surprising move against someone known as a staunch Aristide supporter appeared to be part of a government attempt to satisfy the demands of the opposition parties and the Organisation of American States for a crackdown on often violent, pro-government gangs. The reaction to it showed that the government was badly out of touch with the popular mood.

Métayer's supporters mounted an increasingly violent protest campaign demanding their leader's release, but the authorities' attempt to placate them by transferring Métayer from jail in Port-au-Prince back to Gonaïves only led to an intensification of the protests. Despite signs that the situation was spinning out of control, the government failed to send in police reinforcements. Then on 2 August, a group of heavily

armed men used a tractor to demolish a wall of the Gonaïves prison, freeing Métayer and 158 other inmates. After the jailbreak, protestors went on a rampage, burning down the courthouse and part of the town hall. Overwhelmed by superior numbers, the police withdrew from the town.

Métayer told journalists that he and other pro-Lavalas activists felt they were being sacrificed in the government's attempts to curry favour with the OAS and so secure the release of suspended aid. His public call for Aristide's resignation was taken up by crowds from Gonaïves' extensive slum neighbourhoods, and for several days

there were large street demonstrations against the President.

Significantly, the Gonaïves uprising coincided with a worsening economic situation. In late July, the gourde, having been relatively stable in recent years, fell sharply against the US dollar. As the country is heavily reliant on imports, particularly food, this led to a sharp acceleration in inflation.

At the same time, thousands face financial ruin following the collapse of many unregulated savings cooperatives. When these informal savings banks, offering interest rates of 10-12% per month, were set up across the country last year, people rushed to deposit savings and cash raised from the sale of possessions. Then, in early 2002, the cooperatives began suspending interest payments, and many subsequently closed down without repaying depositors.

Over 27,000 people have lost an estimated US\$200 million, and blame for the disaster is being pinned on President Aristide on the grounds that he had publicly endorsed the cooperative movement. Anger increased when Aristide made a hopelessly unrealistic promise to compensate all losses.

“An unpromising situation has been made much worse by personal rivalries, poor leadership, and corruption at all levels of government”

On 27 May 2002 workers belonging to the Guacimal-St. Raphael Workers' Union, supported by Batay Ouvriye union members from the region, assembled at the Guacimal company orange plantation. Their aim was to allocate parcels of plantation land for use by local peasant farmers during the summer growing season. Planting of the unused land between the orange trees has been an established practice for many years, but recently the Guacimal company managers and plantation guards had blocked union members from using the land and insisted that the other farmers hand over part of their harvest to them.

The group of around 150 people – including union members, supporters and local people – were met by a hostile gang led by Lavalas Family party officials from the local administration. This gang, some armed with machetes and clubs, others with guns, launched what appeared to be a premeditated attack on the organised workers and peasants. Those participating in the rally tried to defend themselves by throwing rocks, but were forced to flee for their lives. Two of them didn't make it.

Union members slaughtered

Francilien Exumé and Ifares Guerrier, two members of the Batay Ouvriye union organisation from the nearby town of St. Michel de l'Attalaye were discovered hiding in a house far from the plantation. They were taken outside, tied up and dragged to the plantation. There they were mutilated and cut up with knives. Finally, they were beheaded, and their bodies were buried there and then in a hole dug on the plantation land.

Eleven others were detained by the gang and imprisoned in the St. Raphael jail by police who arrived belatedly on the scene. The next day, a helicopter-load of riot police arrived from the capital and took the prisoners back to Port-au-Prince with them. Six of those detained were Batay Ouvriye union members. The others were two drivers and one fare-collector from the public transport chartered to take people to and from the rally, and two local journalists, arrested as they attempted to cover the events.

In the days that followed, the houses of union leaders in the area were burnt to the ground, and arrest warrants for some 20 people associated with the union were issued by the local judge. All those connected with the union were obliged to leave the area, and seek sanctuary in the city of Cap-Haitien.

"Terrorists" charge

While the Batay Ouvriye union federation enlisted lawyers and human rights organisations in an effort to get the detainees out of jail, government spokesmen launched a concerted propaganda offensive in order to justify the attack. First out of the blocks was the Lavalas Family mayor of St. Raphael who claimed that the local police had detained the eleven on his advice because he knew them to be "terrorists". (The mayor had been appointed by President Aristide earlier this year after the incumbent, his brother, had been shot dead during an altercation with the local Lavalas Family MP's bodyguards. At the time of his death, the mayor was well-known for his hostility to the Guacimal work-

Organised workers under attack

The Lavalas Family government nails its colours to the mast with its involvement in a violent attempt to smash a workers' campaign for union rights. CHARLES ARTHUR details the brutal attack on the orange plantation union rally, and the government's attempt to justify it.

Bataye Ouvriye members in Cap-Haitien

ers' union. In March 2001, he had even pulled a gun on members of the British GMB union when they arrived at the plantation. He was angry that they had not sought his permission to visit the area.)

Interviewed on national radio, local Lavalas Family council members described the rally as a 'land invasion' that had to be stopped by use of force. The Lavalas Family mayor of the nearby town of Milot, Moise Jean-Charles, went further, telling Radio Haiti Inter that the attack was justified on the grounds that President Aristide had recently declared his government's commitment to the defence of private property. (Jean-Charles omitted to mention that his own ascent to a position of political prominence had been due in no small part to his leadership of the Milot Peasant Movement that had itself organised land occupations in the late 1980s.)

Government line

The sense that all levels of the government were sticking to a predetermined 'line' was reinforced when the Secretary of State for Communications, Mario Dupuy, announced that the violence was caused by Batay Ouvriye and others who opposed the government's plan to create free trade zones in the border region. In total disregard for any judicial process, the gov-

ernment spokesperson declared that the arrested unionists were "armed terrorists".

Dupuy's comments cynically ignored the well-documented struggle for workers' and union rights at the Guacimal plantation. Since the formation of a workers' union in October 2000, the workers and peasants in the area had tried, without success, to use strikes and work stoppages to win respect for their rights according to the country's Labour Code, and to make the Guacimal company enact the promises made when it acquired the plantation land in 1958. Throughout the campaign, the government had turned its back on the issue of union rights, thus giving the Guacimal company and its local stooges the green light to intimidate, harrass, and threaten the organised workers.

At a press conference to counter the government's claims, Batay Ouvriye's Georges Augustin said, "If we intended to use force to take over the orange plantation, we would not have come unarmed. If we had a project to destabilise the Lavalas government, we would have been able to respond to the aggression of the armed group which violently disrupted our peaceful rally. However, the St. Raphael police found absolutely no guns at all in the possession of the people they detained."

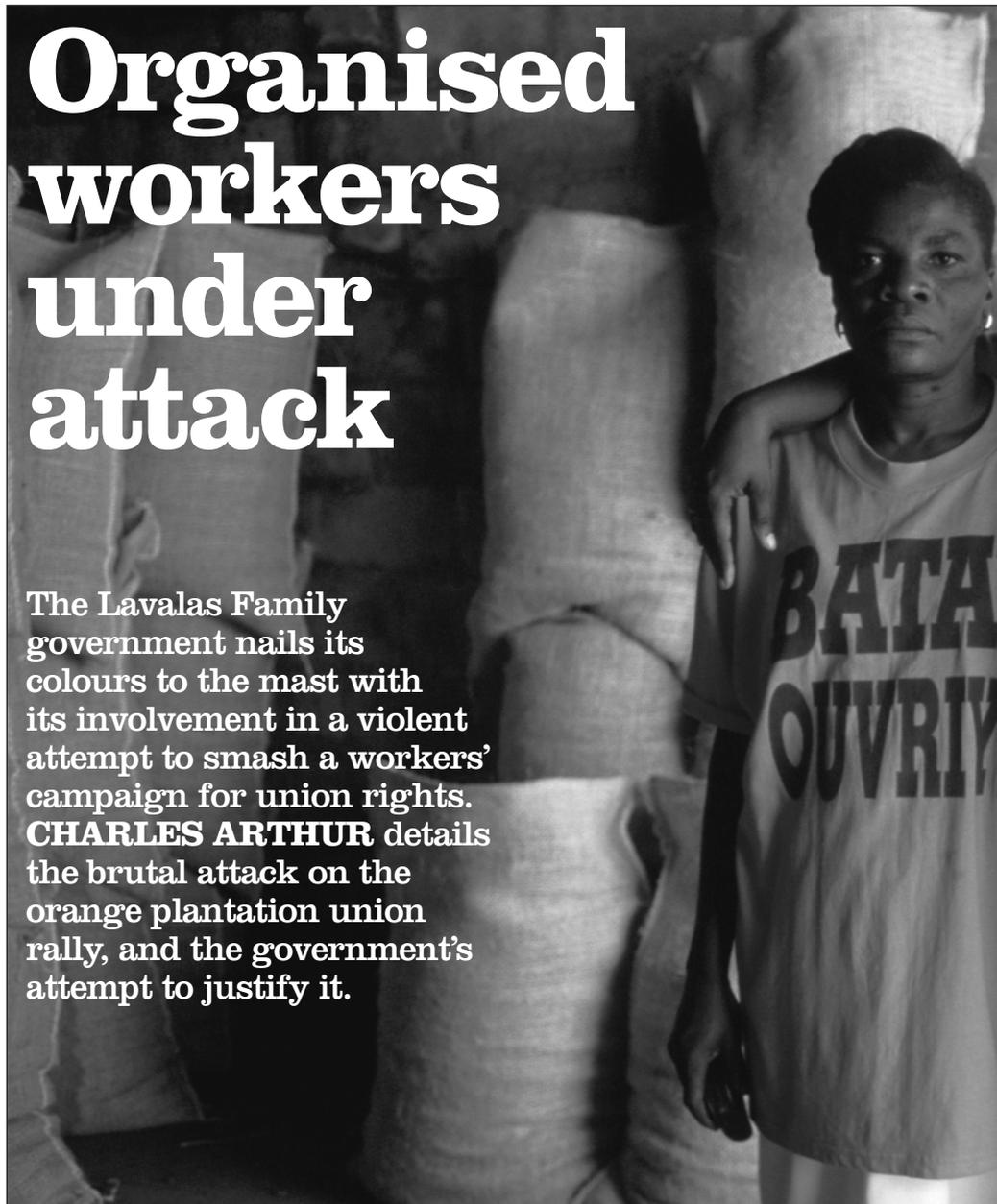




Photo by Leah Gordon

Journalists freed, others left to rot

Following some vigorous lobbying by the Association of Haitian Journalists and other media rights groups, the two journalists were released from custody on 10 June. The other nine, however, remained in prison. Two of them were refused medical attention for injuries sustained during the attack. None of them were charged with any offence.

Haitian human rights groups were supported by an unprecedented international solidarity campaign in an effort to get the prisoners freed (see the HSG press release, pictured right). Haiti's ambassador to the European Union was sent a petition calling for the prisoners' release signed by over 500 people at the Glastonbury Festival over the weekend of 29-30 June. The petition was distributed by Haiti Support Group members participating in the British trade union-sponsored Left Field event at Europe's biggest music festival.

Despite the pressure, months passed without any response from the authorities, and the prisoners were left to rot in jail. On 20 August, after nearly three months of incarceration, seven of the detainees were released without charge. As we go to press, the two remaining Batay Ouvriye prisoners are still not free, and still have not been charged with any offence.

Indifferent to either the prisoners' suffering or to international criticism of its violations of human rights, the government's message is clear – it does not intend to tolerate independent workers' organisations.

See the HSG website for the latest news, www.haitisupport.gn.apc.org



Haiti Support Group press release 20 August 2002

The Greater London Association of Trade Union Councils is the latest union organisation to write to Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide to ask for the release of the nine people detained without trial since the attack on the union rally at Guacimal, near St. Raphael, in northern Haiti, on 27 May.

In a letter dated 19 August, the Association's Secretary, Bob Tennant, wrote on behalf of 250,000 union members in the British capital to express concern about the continued detention of six Batay Ouvriye members and three local transport drivers.

The Greater London Association of Trade Union Councils' letter follows similar appeals for President Aristide to intervene from: the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions; the International Labour Organisation; the Spanish union federation - Confederación Sindical de Comisiones Obreras;

the Austrian union federation - Österreichischen Gewerkschaftsbund; the Polish Solidarnosc union; the Miami Area Local, American Postal Workers Union, AFL-CIO; the British GMB general union, northern section; the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU).

Amnesty International has also written to Haiti's Justice Minister asking for clarification about the legal position of the detainees.

Non-governmental organisations, including Réseau-Solidarité (France), the National Coalition for Haitian Rights (USA), War on Want, and the Haiti Support Group (both UK), have been joined by the Montreal-based Rights & Democracy, International Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, Development, in asking the Haitian authorities to respect international and local laws guaranteeing workers' rights.

Solidarity with the Haitian people's struggle for human rights, justice, independence and participatory democracy since 1986

The role of Rémy Cointreau

Over the last two years, the Haiti Support Group has spearheaded an international campaign to put pressure on the main foreign buyer of the orange extract produced by the St. Raphael workers. The French drinks giant, Rémy Cointreau, holding a small but significant number of shares in the Haitian Guacimal company, at first deliberately confused the issue by ignoring the existence of a union at the plantation altogether. Instead its letters to campaigners referred only to the much smaller union at the orange processing facility near the city of Cap-Haitien.

Then, when this tactic failed to shake off criticism, Cointreau tried a different approach, writing replies assuring those concerned of its determination to see that workers' rights were respected and their demands for improvements met. In a May 2001 letter to the British GMB union's Northern Region, Cointreau wrote, "We plan to finance the reconstruction of the school, located in the vicinity, while also studying solutions to implicate the workers in the management of the next harvest." The letter continued, "We have been repeatedly asking the Guacimal management to have a constructive dialogue with the unions and employees."

When, at the beginning of a new harvest season in late 2001, none of these things had happened and the situation at the plantation had only deteriorated, a representative of the First of May – Batay Ouvriye union federation to which the Guacimal-St. Raphael Workers' Union belongs, travelled to Paris to meet Cointreau's international director. At a 26 November meeting, Olivier Charriaud told the Batay Ouvriye representative that Cointreau would renew its insistence that its Haitian partner respected workers' rights.

Nothing improved and nothing was heard for several weeks, until in mid-December 2001 Cointreau suddenly announced it was no longer a Guacimal shareholder, would no longer purchase orange extract from Haiti, and therefore was unable to take any further action on the issue. Rémy Cointreau, having enjoyed the benefits of the Haitian workers' labour for many decades, had, it seemed, turned its back on them in their hour of need.

In fact, the scenario was worse than that, and it since transpires that Rémy Cointreau had quite cynically lied to Batay Ouvriye and international campaigners. In response to further inquiries by the Haiti Support Group, in June 2002, Cointreau revealed that it had divested itself of its Guacimal shares as early as 14 September 2001. This means that all the fine words about Cointreau's commitment to workers' rights and union recognition at the plantation were just a smoke-screen covering the company's plans to pull out of Haiti. Olivier Charriaud participated in the November meeting with Batay Ouvriye and French campaigners in the full knowledge that his company was no longer a shareholder in Guacimal, but didn't say a word about it.

Interviewed on New York City's WBAI radio station in July 2002, Haiti Support Group coordinator, Charles Arthur, said, "Rémy Cointreau bears a great deal of responsibility for the attack on the legitimate union at St. Raphael because it was a significant shareholder in the Guacimal company while it tried to smash the workers' organisation. The fact that it may now no longer own those shares does nothing to absolve it from its culpability. Indeed, it may well be that by divesting itself of its Guacimal shares, Cointreau removed the last form of restraint on the Haitian bosses, and created the conditions for today's blood-bath."

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Soccer kits for Soleil kids



Over 600 boys and girls learn passing, tackling, and the offside rule – and get fed – at Athletique d’Haiti

Photo by Leah Gordon

The red and white stripes of Brentford Football Club can now be seen on the backs of soccer-crazy kids at Cité Soleil’s Athletique d’Haiti club. In late 2001, photographer, Leah Gordon, on assignment in Haiti, took *Front* magazine journalist Norman Parker to visit Bobby Duval’s inspiring project.

The April 2002 edition of *Front* magazine ran Parker’s four-page article on how Duval is using football to help kids from

**“I have lit the spark. Perhaps others can fan it to flames”
Bobby Duval**

the local slums. Quoting Duval, “I feel that I am getting somewhere, but Haiti is too poor a country for charity to begin at home. However, I have lit the spark. Perhaps others can fan it to flames”, Parker issued an appeal for readers to donate their unwanted football kits to the Athletique kids.

The appeal was amplified by *Beesotted* – the independent Brentford FC supporters’ fanzine – and, before long, the shirts,

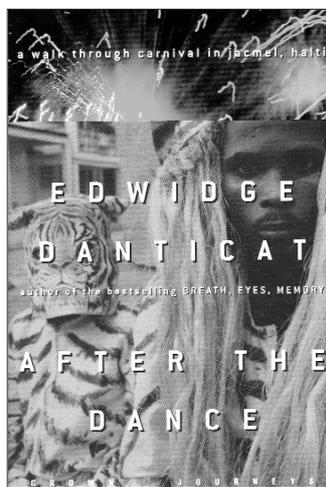
shorts and socks were arriving at the *Front* office. On her next trip to Haiti, Leah Gordon delivered 13 Brentford team strips and those of half a dozen other teams. More will be sent early next year.

● Readers of *Haiti Briefing* can send unwanted soccer kit to the Haiti Support Group to be passed on to the Athletique players. Mail to: PO Box 29623, London E9 7XU. See the HSG web site culture section for more on Bobby Duval’s soccer project.

‘A meditation on the need for carnival’

***After the Dance: A Walk Through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti*
By Edwidge Danticat
Hardcover (August 2002)
Crown Publishing Group (NY);
ISBN: 0609609084; US price \$16,
UK price £10.00**

A more accurate title would have been ‘Before the Dance’ but, alas, that lacks the handy Haitian proverb tie-in. In this slim book, Haitian-American novelist Edwidge Danticat experiences the calm before a storm as she meanders through and around Jacmel in the week leading up to the town’s annual carnival festivities. Accompanied by a variety of friends, she explores the cemetery, meets local artists, discovers an original Watt steam engine rusting in a field, and visits the pine-clad mountains above the tranquil and



picturesque port on Haiti’s south coast.

Danticat’s book is like a whispered travelogue; part journey, part reflection, part

recollection. There are carnival revellers dressed as devils on the streets, but the author brings her own demons to Jacmel – as a child, she was warned off carnival by her Baptist parents. Their stories fed fears of outlandish injuries, sexual abandon, and sinister happenings. Consequently, this was to be her first carnival in Haiti.

‘After the Dance’ is a meditation on both the personal and social needs for carnival, an event that Danticat describes as a ‘communal dream, a public wonderland shared by thousands...’. The book is a sweet memento for those who already know Jacmel, and a fine introduction, peppered with historical detail, for those yet to visit. ● **Leah Gordon**

***The Rough Guide to the Music of Haiti*
Various Artists
(January, 2002) World
Music Network £8.99**
Andy Kershaw’s neat little compilation packs a tremendously wide variety of music on to just one CD, and features delicious tasters of compas, racines, jazz and Cuban son styles. Two of the standouts are the famous twoubadou standard, ‘Ayiti Cherie’, performed live by Ti Coca, and Masters of Haiti’s fabulously modern Creole rap, ‘Ti Chans pou Ayiti’, complete with an accordion intro and refrain.