

## **“SOLIDARITY WITH HAITI”**

Thursday, February 4, 2010



There has been an overwhelming response by Canadians in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in Haiti. People from all walks of life are making donations to a number of reputable aid agencies are trying to assist those in need. But whether rebuilding will bring about a better society for the people of Haiti is an open question. Labour needs to apply a critical analysis to our solidarity work in this area.

Haiti is routinely described as the “poorest country in the western hemisphere.” This poverty is the direct legacy of colonial exploitation, compounded by decades of systematic post colonial oppression. Established in 1804, Haiti is the second-oldest republic in the Western hemisphere, The Haitian overthrow of French colonial rule was the only successful slave revolt in human history, led by national hero Toussaint L’Ouverture.

The presence of a free black republic set up a particularly antagonistic relation with the United States, with its own large black slave population. An embargo placed on Haiti by European colonial powers only ended after Haiti agreed to pay a fortune to France for the value of their lost slave “property”. The payments continued from 1825 through to 1947.

U.S. Marines occupied Haiti from 1915 to 1934, and after the war the Americans supported the brutal dictatorship of Papa Doc Duvalier and his son. Finally, mass organizing led finally to Haiti's first ever democratic elections, which in 1991 brought the liberation theologian Jean-Bertrand Aristide to power. But within months he was ousted by a military coup, and after returning to office was again taken out of power in 2004 by foreign troops. The country continues to be ruled by a small clique of obscenely wealthy families.

Structural adjustments imposed by successive governments caused the ruin of thousands of farmers after the Haitian market was flooded with cheap U.S. rice in the 1980's. International authorities demanded the privatization of many public services, while multinationals such as Canadian t-shirt manufacturer Gildan set up operations that as little as two dollars a day.

Last year president René Préval agreed to persevere with the privatization of Haiti's remaining public assets, to veto a proposal to increase minimum wages to \$5 a day, and to bar Aristide's party Lavalas from the scheduled election. This is the nature of the regime being upheld by international forces, including Canadians.

The response to the earthquake sadly reflects Haiti's tortured history. Unless prevented by renewed popular mobilization in both Haiti and beyond, the emphasis on security will continue to distort the reconstruction effort, and with it Haitian politics for some time to come. As reconstruction funds accumulate, pressure builds to expropriate what remains of Haiti's public services and collectively-owned land.

Without a commitment for democracy and social justice in Haiti influence, the poverty and suffering will continue for decades to come. Our voices must be raised to demand a different future.

The Executive Board recommends that:

1. The labour movement in Canada call for the respect of Haitian sovereignty and immediate reorientation of aid away from neo-liberal adjustment, sweatshop exploitation and non-governmental charity, and towards systematic investment in Haiti's own people and government.
2. Labour demand that reconstruction aid take the form of grants, not loans, and that Haiti's remaining foreign debt be immediately forgiven.
3. Call on the current regime in Haiti to allow free and fair elections in which all legitimate political organizations can participate.