

Haiti - a history of intervention, occupation and resistance

not only by the shift to cash crops, but also by the dumping of surplus, subsidized US rice, driving Haitian producers out of production. Chicken production was similarly destroyed by the dumping of dark chicken meat, which US consumers find unacceptable, in Haiti. Finally pig production was wrecked by US insistence on the mass slaughter of domestic Haitian pigs and their replacement with other varieties that proved much more vulnerable to disease

The World Bank recommended that private enterprise be expanded through privatisation of social services and minimizing the cost (to the state) of education. Over 80% of education for Haitian children is now private. Tens of thousands tried to flee this poverty by building rafts and setting out for the US, but unlike Cubans who were generally fleeing less extreme conditions almost none were given refugee status and thousands were deported back to lives of misery and cheap labour for US corporations. On the positive side, 1986 saw the overthrow of the 'Baby Doc' Duvalier dictatorship. When, in 1985, the people of Haiti had risen up again against the Duvalier dictatorship, one of their first acts was to pull down the Port-au-Prince statue of Christopher Columbus and throw it into the sea, demonstrating that ordinary Haitian people understand the role foreign intervention has played in their past even if few outside do.

Aristide and Lavalas

As Duvalier was taken into exile by the US Air Force, General Henri Namphy was backed by the US as a replacement. He was opposed by the populist priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide, but the 1987 elections saw the use of death squads and Aristide's church was attacked shortly afterwards, forcing him to flee after 13 had been killed and 77 injured. Aristide stood at the last minute in the 1990 elections and won 67% of the vote. The second place candidate, a World Bank official, received only 14% despite being backed by the US. No worries, Aristide was only allowed seven months between his inauguration in February 1991 and a coup backed by the old economic elite that September. In the two weeks after the coup, the army killed over 1000 people and up to 5000 were killed by death squads under the junta. They targeted radical unions and community groups in particular. The Organisation of American States voted to impose sanctions on Haiti but the US ensured these were ineffective and it later emerged that both Bush and Clinton had secretly given the OK for Texaco Oil Corporation to pass the 'blockade'. What the blockade did do was intercept some 42,000 Haitians trying to flee the murderous regime by boat and force them to return to Haiti.

After the military had a few years to repress the popular movements, the US forced the junta to step down by sending

thousands of Marines and Special Forces to Haiti, occupying it for just over six months. Under occupation the US imposed a compromise 'national unity government' when brought together Aristide (who had got 67% of the vote), the old elite who had got 1.7% of the vote and the army who had the guns. Out of this the US-preferred candidate from the elections was made Prime Minister despite the fact he'd only received 14% in the elections and his program of neoliberal restructuring was imposed. *"Aristide agreed to pay the debts accumulated under the kleptocratic Duvalier dictatorships, slash the civil service, open up Haiti to 'free trade' and cut import tariffs on rice and corn in half."* In 1996 Aristide's original Prime Minister was elected President with 88% of the vote.

In 2000, Aristide was again elected President with almost 92% of the vote but the turn out was low due to an opposition boycott of the elections. The US used this as an excuse to cut off much needed aid, much of which was funnelled instead to opposition groups over the next four years. In a 2006 interview Aristide was keen to not claim credit for the popular movements but rather said his election was an *"expression of the mobilisation of the people as a whole"*. This is also argued by activist journalist Patrick Elie who was a junior cabinet minister during Aristide's first presidency. In a 2003 Znet interview, he describes the post-Duvalier *"profound movement within the Haitian population that would turn into thousands of grassroots organizations. It was this movement that was the origin of the Haitian saga of the last 20 years. It was this movement rather than the political parties that stood up against the return of dictatorship. It was this movement that confronted the military government when it tried to control the election in 1987 and this movement that swept Aristide into power in 1990... Lavalas is a political philosophy, not a party. Lavalas and the popular movement are one in the same. It was the name coined for it by President Aristide. But he did not invent the reality of it, he just put a name on it. He doesn't own it. It owns him."* Patrick is one of the critical voices about the development of Lavalas saying at the end of 2005 that *"there was no strategy put forward by Fanmi Lavalas. They only had a slogan; 'Bring President Aristide back.' And I'd like to compare it to the situation back in the war of independence when the French came in and snatched away Toussaint Louverture. The masses then did not say 'Bring Louverture back,' they developed an alternative toward independence which had become indispensable because it was the only way to secure the abolishment of slavery."* In 2003 Aristide demanded that France repay Haiti 21 billion, the equivalent of all the money Haiti had been forced to pay France from the treaty of 1825 as 'compensation' for the abolition of slavery. On February 4th a rebel group called the National Revolutionary Front for the Liberation of Haiti seized control of Gonaïves, the fourth biggest city. This group had until September 2003 been the main gang in

that city and had been known as the Cannibal Army, the name was changed in the aftermath of the murder of their leader, a former Aristide supporter, in that month.

It's claimed that the group had been backed by the US and included former death squad members, in any case they rapidly 'took' Cap-Haïtien, the second biggest city and then advanced on the capital. In his 2006 interview Aristide said *"There was no great insurrection: there was a small group of soldiers, heavily armed, who were able to overwhelm some police stations, kill some policemen and create a certain amount of havoc. The police had run out of ammunition, and were no match for the rebels' M16s. But the city was a different story. The people were ready, and I wasn't worried."* It was later claimed by Aristide's lawyer that that at least some of the M-16s used by the rebels were those that the United States had given to the Dominican military a year previously.

Naomi Klein interviewed Aristide in 2005 and reported that, back in 1994, after the first coup, *"Washington's negotiators made one demand that Aristide could not accept: the immediate selloff of Haiti's state-owned enterprises, including phones and electricity. Aristide argued that unregulated privatization would transform state monopolies into private oligarchies, increasing the riches of Haiti's elite and stripping the poor of their national wealth."* In her article reporting this, Klein also wrote of the 2004 coup that *"Turning Haiti over to this underworld gang out of concern for Aristide's lack of 'good governance' is like escaping an annoying date by accepting a lift home from Charles Manson."*

As the rebels approached Port-au-Prince, France used its veto in the UN to block the deployment of a peace keeping force. At this point, Aristide was kidnapped from his home by US marines and bundled on a flight to the Central African Republic where the government arrested and detained him. After this, and just three days after the original UN vote, France voted for the deployment of 'peacekeepers' and then, the occupation of Haiti, which has continued to the present, began.

The proxy occupation

The occupation is called the United Nations Stabilization Mission (MINUSTAH) and it is significant for involving the militaries and police from a wide range of South and Central American countries, led by the Brazilian army. This composition has attracted less international opposition than an occupying force made for the old imperialist powers would be but in 2005, the then MINUSTAH force commander, Lieutenant-General Augusto Heleno Ribeiro Pereira testified at a congressional commission in Brazil that *"we are under extreme pressure from the international community to use violence"*, mentioning Canada, France, and the United States in particular as the source of that pressure.

The US peacekeepers declared war on neighbourhoods where the social movements were active and in particular on Cité Soleil, home to up to 300,000 people, which was originally designed to house workers for the local Export Processing Zone. A July 6th 2005 raid on the Cité Soleil shanty town probably saw at least 20 killed. 75% of the wounded who turned up at one clinic were women and children. Estimates of the number killed that day have been as high as 80. Cité Soleil has a permanent security checkpoint with armoured vehicles at its entrance and is the target of regular mass incursions by the occupying forces. In February 2007 some 700 UN troops and police took part in one such incursion, the previous month another raid had officially killed four and injured six. The UN claims this is to stop criminal activity but many see it as an attempt to crush the social movements. In any case this methodology of 'policing' would never be accepted in New York, Paris or London so why would Haitians have to accept it? An April 2007 report in *The Observer* told how after the UN had killed three children they fired tear gas and plastic bullets at a 2,000 strong demonstration against the killings, hitting one of the reporters in the back of the head and causing multiple vehicle crashes. A 2005 report from the Harvard Law Student Advocates for Human Rights claimed that the UN *"effectively provided cover for the police to wage a campaign of terror in Port-au-Prince's slums"* which are *"an unflinching bastion of support for Aristide and for Lavalas."* An earlier November 2004 investigation by the University of Miami School of Law found that *"summary executions are a police tactic."*

Haiti is the poorest country in the Americas today, and even ahead of the earthquake, most of the population live in extreme poverty, 70% living on less than 2 dollars a day. The global rise in food prices in 2008 resulted in major riots in April during which the UN occupation forces shot several people dead and injured dozens. Crowds chanting *"We are hungry! He must go!"* tried to storm the presidential palace demanding the resignation of President Rene Preval. They were driven away by Brazilian UN troops with assault rifles, tear gas and rubber bullets. According to Al Jazeera the food shortages were also caused by *"new customs procedures aimed at collecting revenues and stopping the flow of drugs"* which had *"left tons of food rotting in ports, especially in the country's north."* The senate subsequently voted to dismiss the Prime Minister and the President was forced to announce a 15% drop in the cost of rice, the staple food. In April, Fanmi Lavalas was banned from standing in the elections resulting in a boycott by most of the population with a turnout only in the region of 8%. In August, when Rene Preval refused to sign a minimum wages law for the clothing export sector, police used tear gas to disperse a demonstration of 2,000 textile workers. Preval said the workers should only receive 3 dollars a day; a UN report released ahead of the parliamentary vote had threatened that while clothing exports to the US could create hundreds of thousands of jobs *"factories' overhead costs must be kept low."*