

Aristide

friend or foe, victim or villain?



*It is unfortunate that debate around the arrival of former Haitian president Jean-Bertrand Aristide in SA was hijacked in an attempt to defend government's position in the face of DA opposition. The absence of an informed debate about Aristide (as is the case around Mugabe) is a missed opportunity not to denigrate his liberation credentials but to evaluate whether he lived up to those values he espoused. Did he condone the abuse of worker and human rights? The **Labour Bulletin** surfed the Internet in an attempt to gain some clarity on a complex situation.*

Haiti has a number of gloomy claims to fame:

- It saw the first successful revolution against slavery and has been an independent black republic for 200 years.
- Haiti is the third hungriest country in the world after Somalia and Afghanistan.
- The richest 1% of the population controls nearly half of all of Haiti's wealth.
- Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere.
- The world's fourth poorest country ranks 146 out of 173 on the United Nations Human Development Index.
- Haiti has a life expectancy of 52 years for women and 48 for men.
- Adult literacy is about 50%.
- Unemployment is 70%.

- 85% of Haitians live on less than US\$1 per day.
- Haiti ranks 38 out of 195 for under five mortality rate.

But do these statistics explain what has led to the ousting of Aristide, democratically elected in 1990? Is it a case, as documented by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and various trade union formations, that Aristide had turned his back on his founding principles, or has the media distorted facts around Aristide's rule and is his present state the result of constant US interference?

Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch

Aristide was democratically elected in 1990 and it has been claimed that his election annoyed the US, which has a

history of supporting Haitian dictators. Months later he was overthrown in a coup by Jean Claude Duvalier. This regime was in control of Haiti until it was removed by US troops sent by Clinton in 1994. Aristide was put back into power. Elections were held again in 2000 and claims were made of widespread fraud. According to Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, attempts were made to broker negotiations between the Haitian government (and the ruling Fanmi Lavalas) and its opposition – the Democratic Convergence. By mid-November 2002 the parties remained far apart. Commenting on the deadlock, Organisation of American States Assistant Secretary General Luigi Einaudi complained that political leaders were unwilling to rise above

their 'entrenched personal positions,' in order to put an end to the 'fragmentation and paralysis that [was] leading the country as a whole toward disaster.'

In 2002 the General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) passed Resolution 822. This resolution outlined steps for strengthening democracy and re-establishing political stability in Haiti. It noted, in particular, the Haitian government's promise to hold 'free, fair and technically feasible legislative and local elections' in the first half of 2003. As a necessary first step toward those elections, it called upon the authorities to establish an independent, neutral, and credible electoral body (called the Provisional Electoral Council or CEP) within two months. The deadline for the formation of the CEP passed in November 2002, however, without visible progress toward its establishment.

Much of the opposition refused to participate in the electoral preparations, claiming that the government had failed to implement other elements of Resolution 822. The failure to meet the November deadlines sparked widespread violence. The resolution also called for normalisation of relations between Haiti and international donors, who had blocked aid following disputed elections in 2000. Nonetheless, aid remained frozen.

During this period, Human Rights Watch reported: 'Freedom of the press came under serious threat in Haiti, as journalists were harassed, threatened, and attacked'. During 2001 alone, 'at least 30 journalists were attacked or threatened, allegedly by pro-government partisans, and several journalists and their family members went into exile. Radio journalist Israel

Jacky Cantave was kidnapped in July, held for a day and beaten; he fled the country in August. In May, Reporters without Borders, a Paris-based press freedom group, placed President Aristide on its blacklist of press predators.'

The OAS continued to seek a negotiated solution. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) carried out two on-site visits to Haiti in 2002. In August, the commission issued a report stating that it was 'deeply preoccupied by the weakness of human rights in Haiti, the lack of an independent judiciary, the climate of insecurity, the existence of armed groups that act with total impunity and threats to which some journalists have been subjected.' The OAS special rapporteur for freedom of expression, who also visited Haiti in August, documented an increase in acts of harassment against journalists.

2003 ICFTU report on Haiti

According to a 2003 survey of trade union violations published by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) stated: 'The situation in Haiti is more serious than ever. The constant violence and insecurity in the country remains an insurmountable obstacle to the recognition of trade union rights. Employers can act with complete impunity and groups acting on behalf of the ruling party have repeatedly attacked trade unionists. The teachers' unions appear to have been a particular target'. The report focusing on Haiti highlighted the following:

- The weak enforcement of labour legislation.
- Union rights are virtually non-existent in practice. As a result of the political chaos, employers are enjoying absolute freedom. There is almost no collective bargaining.

- Those trying to organise workers in a union are subjected to constant threats. The many unions frequently become involved in the social and political struggles in the country. The perpetrators of many violent acts enjoy impunity if they are close to those in power or if the victim is viewed as an opponent of the government.
- Where there has been union activity, the unions have complained of a slow and inefficient procedure when bringing disputes before industrial tribunals. Despite a provision in the Labour Code, the government has never fined an employer for interference in a union's internal affairs.
- There was continued and growing discontent at the failings of the corrupt undemocratic government, fuelled by further economic decline, notably the near doubling of petrol prices at the beginning of the year. There were numerous strikes and protest marches, which met with increasingly violent repression by the police and the 'chimères', a band of thugs in the pay of the ruling Fanmi Lavalas party.
- Trade unions played a leading role in the general strike of 7 January and the march of 9 January in protest at the doubling of petrol prices. Some of the protestors were arrested, including Nivrose Marius of the Workers' Confederation of Haiti (KOTA) and Jean Marie Prou of the Haitian Workers' Committee (COH).
- The authorities threatened to dismiss all public sector workers who took part in the general strike, particularly members of the teachers' federations.
- Pepe Jean Getro, the general secretary of GIEL, the high school teachers' union, was forced into

exile, in November 2002, by death threats and violence. During a severe beating by police earlier in the year, he was told it was because he was a union member and a striker.

- There were two more teachers' demonstrations in January, one of their principal grievances being the failure to honour a 32% pay rise, dating back 64 months.
- On 20 March, the teachers again took part in a demonstration. Police used tear gas to break up the crowd. Members of the 'chimères', disguised as students, provoked isolated incidents, triggering more police violence.
- On 29 July, armed men entered the home of Jean Louis Petit Frère, general secretary of the General Independent Organisation of Haitian Workers (OGITH), after he had publicly denounced corruption by the Port de Paix authorities. Mr. Petit Frère was forced to go into hiding.
- In October, the Batay Ouvryè trade union organisation reported that serious threats had been made against workers' organisations on the island of La Gonâve in the bay of Port-au-Prince. According to the Batay Ouvryè, the authorities had threatened to arrest its members and all workers who tried to organise to defend their rights. Some went underground, others had to leave.
- By the end of 2003, several trade unionists were in hiding following threats to their lives, after the trade union group CSH (Coordination Syndicale Haitienne) took part in the Group of 184 protest demonstration on 14 November, calling for a 'new social contract'. CSH general secretary Charles Fritz was among them. Martial Emerson of the SCCF, a drivers' co-operative,

which is a member of the CSH, also went into hiding following several attacks, including on his vehicle. Jean Baptiste André and Noelizaire Francky of the workers' confederation KOTA had to go into hiding after threats. At least eight workers linked to the Haitian trade union movement had to seek refuge. Another member of the SCCF, Berjuste Jean Médroit Reynold, was kidnapped and held for three days in December. Berjuste had already been shot and injured in March 2002.



The Socialist

Dave Smith, CWI (Trinidad & Tobago) and director of Communications, National Union of Government and Federated Workers (Trinidad & Tobago) presents his view on Haiti:

Haiti has suffered from long succession of regimes committed to no more than lining their own pockets through corruption and greed. In the 200 years since independence, Haiti has seen 53 leaders, of whom 20 were

overthrown and only eight survived a full term of office.

More recently, the American-supported Francois 'Papa Doc' Duvalier, and his son Jean-Claud ('Baby Doc'), ran a brutal regime. Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected to office in 1990, with popular support. People felt some hope at last that a government could change their lives. Described initially as 'a stirring orator who championed the poor and advocated democracy', Aristide was overthrown in a military coup. However, he was reinstated to power in 1994 with the help of 20 000 US troops. From then on Aristide firmly supported the interests of imperialism.

Despite Aristide's oratory, little has changed in Haiti. It retains the dubious honour of being the poorest country in the Americas.

With privatisation and the establishment of free trade zones, the country's infrastructure has all but collapsed, leaving drugs as the only major growth area. It is not surprising that Haiti is also one of the worst countries for trade union rights violations.

The deep social crisis has led to a political struggle. There should have been parliamentary elections in 2003 but they were not held. Instead, as from 12 January, 2004, Aristide ruled by decree.

Working class needs its own voice

The opposition demanded that he step down and street protests have shaken the capital. The opposition, known as the 'Group of 184', is made up of political parties, civil society, trade unions and business associations. It seems all they have in common is a desire to see the back of Aristide. A sharper criticism has come from the 'Batay Ouvryè' trade union federation, which describes the protest movement

as 'fundamentally and deeply just', but adds, 'Lavalas [Aristide's Party] and the bourgeois opposition are two rotten ass cheeks in [the] same torn trousers!'

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Socialist Worker

Another take on Aristide's Haiti by Helen Scott:

The poorest country in the Western Hemisphere is suffering through a deepening political crisis. The past month has left 50 people dead and twice as many injured.

As usual, the US government blames Aristide and his government for the crisis, while presenting the opposition as a legitimate and democratic mass movement. In reality, the 'opposition' to Aristide is guilty of beating government supporters to death, trashing the marketplace stalls of petty traders and burning the homes of members of Lavalas Family, the political party that Aristide leads. Figures from the party face the threat of assassination if Aristide does not meet opposition demands for his resignation.

Aristide has moved far from the radical he was when he was elected president of Haiti in 1990. To be restored to power by US troops after being toppled in a coup, he had to agree to a series of concessions. In recent years, his popularity has declined – even among the poor, his main base of support – as corruption in Lavalas Family was revealed, and conditions for the majority of people have grown worse.

But the opposition to Aristide is led by Haiti's rich – and propped up by the US. One of the major figures is André Apaid Jr, a sweatshop owner and one of the richest people in Haiti. He leads

the Group of 184, which is made up of the same Haitian elite that ruled the country under the Duvalier dictatorship.

The opposition is also heavily supported by the US government while the European Union, especially Haiti's former coloniser, France, is also funding the opposition. Both the US and French governments have endorsed a proposal from the Haitian Conference of Bishops to replace the country's parliament with a small, appointed body.

It is true that Aristide has been ruling by decree since the terms of members of parliament expired on 13 January. But the reason that the parliament is shut down is that the opposition refused to participate in elections. The US press reported several 'general strikes' in January. But independent reports from Haiti say that only parts of the private sector were closed down, while the public and informal sectors, transport and the provinces remained untouched.

Ben Dupuy of the left-wing National Popular Party (PPN) described the closures as top-down and orchestrated by owners, not workers. 'It's not really a strike,' Dupuy said. 'It's more like a lockout.'

Washington's hatred of Aristide is longstanding. The US backed his opponent in the 1990 election for Haiti's presidency, and the CIA provided assistance to the coup-makers who toppled him.

Though Clinton sent troops to restore him to power, Aristide has since become a target of abuse – mainly because of his support among Haiti's poor masses and his reputation for challenging Washington's meddling and its 'neoliberal' agenda of free-market 'reforms.' So it's understandable that many Haitians now defend Aristide. But Aristide does not deserve to be seen as a

radical. Ever since he signed on to US conditions for his return to power in 1994, Aristide has been managing the system, not fighting it.

He endorsed the creation of a massive free trade zone in Ouanaminth, Haiti, on the border with the Dominican Republic. The dominant company to set up in the zone is Grupo M, a garment assembly company based that recently won approval for a \$20m project sponsored by the World Bank's International Finance Corporation to build more factories. An investigation has uncovered evidence of abuse of workers and violation of labour rights by Grupo M in the free trade zone.

A broad range of accounts confirm that Aristide's popularity is declining as his promised reforms have failed to materialise, conditions for the majority of people grow worse and the record of corruption and repression in his government gets longer. At the same time, supporting the right-wing opposition – as some of Aristide's critics from the left have done – is disastrous.

This 'macouto-bourgeois alliance' will only deliver a dictatorship akin to the Duvalier regimes. The main policy goals of the opposition after getting rid of Aristide are to reinstate the army and push through a brutal structural adjustment programmes that will only plunge the country deeper into poverty.

Only an independent opposition against both the bourgeois elite and Aristide's government, along with the US-backed neoliberal agenda that both sides ultimately support, can hope to defend the rights and improve the lives of Haiti's masses. LB

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