

Fact-finding delegation reports:

## **Worsening conditions plague coup-ravaged Haiti**

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On May 18th, a 21-year-old truck driver was on a shopping trip for his mother, when the bus he was on was stopped at a police checkpoint in Portail St. Joseph in Haiti. Police let all the women off the bus and arrested all the men, without warrant and without charge.

The next day this man, who asked that his name not be revealed, saw a judge, who sent him to see a prosecutor. The prosecutor told him he would send his case to another judge to decide whether to hold trial or release him. He has not heard from anyone since, and as of Sept. 4 was still locked up in the National Penitentiary at Port-au-Prince. He says he still doesn't know why he's in prison.

This is just one of countless stories delegates on a four-day fact-finding delegation in Haiti heard about the deteriorating human rights situation in that country.

From Sept. 3-6, delegates from both coasts of the United States met with political prisoners, internal exiles, women's groups and labor leaders, who all told of a worsening of conditions since the Feb. 29 U.S. "coup-knapping" of democratically-elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

The Caribbean nation is now occupied by a United Nations "peacekeeping" force dominated by the U.S. and France.

Josué Renaud of the New England Coalition for Human Rights in Haiti, a member of the delegation, told Workers World: "We are very concerned about the situation of these political prisoners, including Sò Anne, Neptune and Evert, arrested without warrants, under false charges. The government needs to release them immediately."

Kim Ives of Haiti Progrès and the Haiti Support Network said, "Our visit helped reveal the depth and breadth of repression in Haiti today. The mainstream press, if they mention Haiti's political prisoners at all, focus just on two: constitutional Prime Minister Yvon Neptune and Lavalas activist Sò Anne. Our delegation revealed that there are scores of prisoners in the National Penitentiary alone, not to mention the other prisons around the country.

"We also uncovered that the problem of internal exile is much more prevalent than generally known. We learned that violence ranging from targeted killings to government-incited gang wars is driving thousands from their homes."

Also participating in the delegation were Haitian journalist Robert Benjamin, Catholic activist Kathy Boylan, radio program hosts Karine Jean-Pierre and Joseph Chery, former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark, Steel Workers Local 8751 President Steve Gillis, filmmaker Katherine Kean, Haitian unionist Ray Laforest and former U.S. Army Capt. Lawrence Rockwood.

### **Regime brings torture, prison, exile**

According to the Office of International Lawyers in Haiti, the period following the most recent coup has seen more beatings inside and outside of the prisons, summary executions, internal exiles and rapes--which according to one representative is "an instrument of choice for the present administration."

The past three weeks have seen an extreme intensification of violence throughout Haiti, with most of the country living in fear. Members of the Commission of New Victims 2004 told the delegation that Evans Paul,

leader of the Democratic Convergence, an opposition group funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), is financing gang wars. In the areas of Delmas 2 and Delmas 4, approximately 50 people have been killed, with another 200 families forced into hiding.

The delegation met with approximately 35 political prisoners, including Annette "Sò Anne" Auguste, well-known Haitian singer and Lavalas activist; Prime Minister Yvon Neptune; and Minister of the Interior Jocelerme Evert. While each prisoner's narrative varied, many shared similar stories of being arrested without warrants, held for months without any hearing, or of judges ordering release and the order being ignored by prison officials.

Among those interviewed were union officials, former mayors, civil engineers, and others. Many reported horrible conditions in the prisons, with beatings, burnings, and rapes occurring in some precincts. Several prisoners stated that U.S. officials were present during their arrests. Most prisoners have some affiliation with the Aristide's Fanmi Lavalas Party or live in areas known to be Lavalas strongholds.

Almost all prisoners are asked for money to bribe their way out of prison, to the tune of \$5,000 and up. While many of those arrested without warrants and without cause either refuse the bribe or cannot afford it, the few true murderers that are arrested easily bribe themselves out.

The delegation also met with representatives of the Coordination of Women Victims in Haiti, a group that provides what limited support it can to survivors of rape in the country. They told the delegation that rapes have increased since the coup, that women are now reluctant to seek justice in fear of their lives, and those who do come forward find that officials refuse to take action against the perpetrators.

Almost everyone the delegation visited noted that all these violations are accompanied by further economic hardships on those suffering them. Because of the repression and forced exile, it is hard for many to find places to sleep, or to secure money or food while on the run.

Many of the political prisoners interviewed said they were the main wage earners in their families prior to their arrest. Conversely, inside the prisons inmates are only fed once a day--meaning prisoners must rely on now-exiled families to provide food.

#### **U.S. role exposed**

The hand of the United States in the deteriorating situation of the Haitian people was evident. Former U.S. Army Capt. Lawrence Rockwood stated, "For me personally, the most distressing information we received ... was the role played by American officials. The allegations of the improper, if not criminal, conduct of American officials include detainees being transported and transferred in U.S. diplomatic vehicles, senior American officials in Haitian jails directing activities, and even the incarceration of four former [Haitian] government officials on a maritime vessel for 20 days with the U.S. Coast Guard playing a direct physical role."

Rockwood placed direct responsibility for the situation in the hands of the U.S. government.

U.S.-funded "human-rights groups" were also found to be contributors to the atrocities being committed through out Haiti, with a biased approach that ignores or reacts weakly to violations against Lavalas members and supporters--those most affected. Many of the women's groups working in Haiti won't service women associated with the Lavalas Party who have been raped.

In addition, the delegation repeatedly heard testimony from individuals stating that one of the most prominent groups--the National Coalition for Haitian Rights--has actively accused innocent people in the media, calling for their arrest, and issued a distorted report regarding the "massacre" in St. Marc that Prime Minister Neptune is accused of involvement in.

While their report stated that 50 people had been murdered on Feb. 11, several other reports, including those of the bourgeois press, stated that four or five bodies had been found.

The complicity of U.S. corporations like Disney, Wal-Mart and J.C. Penney, who have factories in Haiti, was also discussed during the delegation.

A representative of the Office of International Lawyers stated that "definitely one reason [for the struggle

against Aristide and Lavalas] was that Aristide raised the minimum wage from about \$1.00 to \$2.40 a day... The new prime minister has given corporations three years without taxes."

In addition, in the province of Ounaminthe, there are reports of the military being used to repress workers' rights at the Grupo M factory.

#### Clark: 'A new struggle'

During a news conference held by the delegation on Sept. 6, Ramsey Clark said, "We've come back to see the most sophisticated and violent effort to destroy the capacity of the people to exercise their will to choose their own leadership."

Clark discussed the current situation in the context of the 2004 bicentennial of the revolution against slavery, saying, "Haiti was able to overcome the most powerful army at the time. Freedom from slavery is the beginning of hope for all freedom, but today a new struggle has evolved."

He described lists some 20 pages long shown to the delegation by prisoners, naming Lavalas supporters to be arrested or murdered. He said, "These are the same sort of lists [previously] seen in Chile and other places."

One of the most inspirational visits the delegation had was the meeting with Sò Anne.

Around midnight on May 10, U.S. Marines arrived at her house, killed her two dogs, and handcuffed Sò Anne and her six children, aged 5 to 12, putting bags over their heads and leaving them on for two hours until they arrived at the medical school they had taken over as headquarters.

She was later brought to the Petion ville prison, where she remains and where the delegation met her. She has no hearing date set for her trial. Around the time of her arrest, activists in New York protested at the NCHR office there, denouncing their silence regarding the arrest.

Sò Anne assured the delegation that she was "still strong, and still fighting," and said that she's not scared to die, because if she did, it would be for a good cause.

She lauded the upcoming Million Worker March in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 17, as did the leader of the Confederation of Haitian Workers, who expressed interest in having a simultaneous protest on that day. October 17 marks the anniversary of the assassination of Haitian leader Jean Jacques Dessalines in 1806.

Resistance to the fierce attack on the people continues, in Haiti as well as the United States.

*LeiLani Dowell, who represented the International Action Center on the delegation, is running for Congress in California's 8th Congressional District on the Peace and Freedom Party ticket.*