

Haiti: a history of intervention, occupation and resistance

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As predictions for the death toll from the Haitian earthquakes rise over 200,000, ABC News have reported that planes carrying medical equipment and relief supplies are having to compete with soldiers for the valuable slots at Port-au-Prince airport which was taken over by the US military after the quake. Since the start of the great anti-slavery republican insurrection nearly 220 years ago, Haiti has been presented as a dangerous place incapable of running its own affairs and requiring foreign intervention. Yet the reality is its people were the first enslaved population to deliver themselves from slavery and also carried out what was only the third successful republican insurrection on the planet. The threat of this good example was rewarded with centuries of invasion, blackmail, the robbery of Haiti's natural resources and the impoverishment of its people. This article summarizes that history of intervention and the resistance to it in order to put into context what is happening in Haiti after the quake.

This is not an academic exercise. The propaganda methods that were used during the Haitian revolution to frighten off support for the rebels from radical organisations elsewhere – like the *London Corresponding Society* – continue to be used to the present day. Right after the earthquake, *Time Magazine* was writing, “As Haitian and international officials try to coordinate an effective relief response to what is probably the worst disaster to ever hit the western hemisphere’s poorest country, they’ll need to be mindful of the **human rats** that come out of the capital’s woodwork at times like these”, under the scary headline ‘*Will Criminal Gangs Take Control in Haiti’s Chaos?*’ Yet aid workers on the ground, in contrast, were reporting the stoicism and solidarity of the people in desperate conditions and even the UN Commander said the streets were safer than before the quake. An Irish doctor from *Médecins Sans Frontières* confirmed on radio that they were working in Cité Soleil were operating unguarded and unhampered in spite of the area’s reputation. This idea of Haiti as riddled with (poor, black) terror gangs waiting to pounce on naive (white) visitors goes back to the rebellion and, in the context of the earthquake, is resulting in additional deaths, as has been made clear by a *London Times*’ article titled ‘*Fear of the poor is hampering Haiti rescue.*’

Conquest, slavery and resistance

Foreign intervention goes back to the time before the Haitian revolution. Haiti is the western 1/3 of an island which Columbus came across on his first voyage to the Americas and claimed for Spain, ignoring the fact it was already populated by an estimated 4–500,000 Taino people. He called the island Hispaniola, the people who lived there called it Haiti – the name that was restored when the republic was declared. Columbus had heard there was a lot of gold on the island so he left 39 of his crew there who built a fort with Taino help called La Navidad, the crew were ordered to explore the island and gather gold. He recorded that “*I have ordered a tower and fortress to be constructed and, a large cellar, not because I believe there is any necessity on account of [the natives] .. I am certain the people I have with me could subjugate all this island ... as the population are naked and without arms and very cowardly.*” However, when he returned the following year on his second voyage he discovered the fortress destroyed with the corpses of his men on the beach as the Taino population had risen up against them in response to mistreatment, which included the kidnapping of Taino women.

His second voyage included 17 ships and 1200 settlers and with this force Columbus demanded that every Taino over the age of 14 deliver a hawk’s bell full of gold every three months. If they failed to do so they had their hands cut off and were left to bleed to death. On or before 1511 a

Taino Cacique (chief) called Hatuey left Hispaniola for Cuba with 400 others in canoes to warn the people that a Spanish expedition was under way to conquer them. Bartolomé de Las Casas the radical Spanish priest who had previously been a plantation owner in Hispaniola wrote that Hatuey showed them a basket of gold and jewels and told them *“Here is the God the Spaniards worship. For these they fight and kill; for these they persecute us and that is why we have to throw them into the sea... They tell us, these tyrants, that they adore a God of peace and equality, and yet they usurp our land and make us their slaves. They speak to us of an immortal soul and of their eternal rewards and punishments, and yet they rob our belongings, seduce our women, violate our daughters.”* Hatuey conducted a guerrilla war against the Spaniards before being captured and burned alive on February 2, 1512. In 1522 another Taino Cacique led a revolt of as many as 3000 in the Bahoruco mountains on Hispaniola itself which forced a treaty from the Spaniards.

Within 30 years so many (up to 90%) of the Taino had been worked to death in the gold mines or died of starvation or disease that the Spanish started transporting enslaved Africans to replace them. This was the pattern across the Spanish-occupied Caribbean; according to Bartolomé de Las Casas *“it was a general rule among Spaniards to be cruel, not just cruel, but extraordinarily cruel so that harsh and bitter treatment would prevent Indians from daring to think of themselves as human beings. As they saw themselves each day perishing by the cruel and inhuman treatment of the Spaniards, crushed to the earth by the horses, cut in pieces by swords, eaten and torn by dogs, many buried alive and suffering all kinds of exquisite tortures.”* The Tainos however were never completely wiped out, a couple of hundred survivors set up free settlements with escaped Africans in the mountains. The first significant insurrection of enslaved African also occurred in 1522 when Wolof people on the sugar plantation of Columbus’s son rose with many escaping to the mountains after the rebellion. These ‘Maroon’ communities continued to resist the Spanish, by the 1530s Plantation owners had to travel in large armed groups. They referred to the communities as Cimarrones or ‘wild animals’, a striking similarity to *Time Magazine’s* use of the term *“human rats”* for Haitians today.

The Spanish colony declined in particular after the conquest of the American mainland began, with many settlers leaving for the silver mines. Conditions of increased poverty resulted in a breakdown of the racial divisions and the population came to be mostly composed of people of mixed Taino, Spaniard and African descent. In 1605, Spain launched an attack on the settlements outside of Santo Domingo (now capital of the Dominican Republic), this is now known as the *devastaciones* because half the people died after been forced to move closer to the city where they could be controlled.

The division of the island took place in 1697 after France and Spain had fought an imperialist war over it. The French part was then called Saint-Domingue and had attracted 30,000 French settlers in a few decades due to the vast fortunes to be made from sugar, coffee, rum, cotton and indigo. It led the world in the production of these items and by three-fourths of the world’s sugar was produced there. The enslaved Africans who worked the plantations lived and died under the brutal Code Noir; it’s estimated that 1/3 died within the first couple of years of their transportation, in this period 29,000 Africans were being transported to Haiti every year. One man who spent half his life in slavery later wrote of what he witnessed: *“Have they not hung up men with heads downward, drowned them in sacks, crucified them on planks, buried them alive, crushed them in mortars? Have they not forced them to eat excrement? And, having flayed them with the lash, have they not cast them alive to be devoured by worms, or onto ant hills, or lashed them to stakes in the swamp to be devoured by mosquitoes? Have they not thrown them into boiling*

cauldrons of cane syrup? Have they not put men and women inside barrels studded with spikes and rolled them down mountainsides into the abyss? Have they not consigned these miserable blacks to man-eating dogs until the latter, sated by human flesh, left the mangled victims to be finished off with bayonet and poniard?"

Organised rebellion and the world's 3rd republic

The first sustained organised rebellion was in the 1750s, led by François Mackandal until he was captured and burned alive by the settlers in 1758. By 1789, there were around 40,000 white settlers and 500,000 enslaved Africans as well as a growing population of people of color ('mulattoes' as they were then known) many of whose origins were in the rape of African women by white slave owners. Unlike the plantation system of the US such offspring were 'free' and, although discriminated against in many ways, could own land and even enslave black people themselves. There were some 26,000 free people of color and a few were wealthy but even these few did not share the political rights of the white population. In the aftermath of the publication of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* during the French Revolution on 26 August 1789, one of them, Vincent Oge who had recently returned from revolutionary France, demanded the right to vote and, when this was refused, led a small rebellion. When captured, he was executed by being broken on the wheel; a method of execution where the victim is tied to a cart wheel, has their limbs smashed with hammers and is left to die. The roots of the violence that the people of Haiti suffer surely lie in the extreme brutality used to maintain slavery. Shortly after the execution of Oge, the French Revolutionary government granted citizenship to wealthy, free people of color.

The large landowners who ran the island refused to implement this law. Rumors were also circulating that slavery was to be abolished by France, these were untrue but probably based on the activity of an abolitionist society in Paris and preparation began for a rising. The largest plantations were in the northern part of the island and it was there that the enslaved people rose on 22 August, taking the northern province over the next 10 days. By 1792 1/3 of the island was in the hands of these black republicans. France, for economic and then military reasons (the republic was at war with Britain and Spain), was forced to make concessions. By 1793, these concessions had built up to the French commander, Sonthonax, freeing all the enslaved people after negotiations with the black leaders of the rebellion which included Toussaint L'Ouverture. Sonthonax who was sent to Haiti with 7,000 troops in 1792 had been a member of the abolitionist French 'Society of the Friends of the Blacks' which demanded that the ideas of the French revolution be extended to the colonies, Oge had also been a member of this society. In return they then helped the French defeat the British and Spanish. In reality, the French were just giving legal recognition to the fact the people had already liberated themselves however Sonthonax also gave citizenship to all. This meant that Haitian delegates, some of whom had been enslaved, traveled to France for the 1794 National Assembly. The Assembly not only confirmed the abolition of slavery on Haiti, it extended the abolition to the entire French empire.

An invading British army was defeated and, in 1801, an army under Toussaint invaded Santo Domingo to aid with the abolition of slavery there. In 1802, Napoleon sent a huge army to the island to attempt to re-impose slavery but, after a brutal war, it too was defeated despite receiving US backing in the form of 750,000 dollars in military aid. The US, with its large slave economy, was not keen on the idea of a free republic created by enslaved people that could serve as an example

to its own enslaved population. During that war the second French commander, Rochambeau, wrote to Napoleon saying France must “*declare the negroes slaves, and destroy at least 30,000 negroes and negresses*” in order to win. Under Rochambeau, the “*French burned alive, hanged, drowned, and tortured black prisoners, reviving such practices as burying blacks in piles of insects and boiling them in cauldrons of molasses.*” *After one battle, 500 prisoners were buried alive.*

As well as causing immense human suffering, Napoleon’s bloody attempt to re-conquer the island for French imperialism did enormous economic damage. 50,000 French soldiers died in the war, including 18 generals. Around 100 Polish troops fighting with the French changed sides to fight with the Haitians and, because of this, while the rest of the white population were slaughtered or driven out at the end of the war, Polish settlers were told they could stay and around 400 did so. Toussaint L’Ouverture never saw the declaration of independence in 1804, however. He was captured a few months into the war and sent to France where he died in prison. The resistance was led by Jean-Jacques Dessalines and François Capois. Toussaint’s last words before dying in prison were “*In overthrowing me, you have cut down in Saint-Domingue only the tree of liberty. It will spring up again by the roots for they are numerous and deep.*”

The Haitian revolution began some seven years before the first great republican revolution in Ireland in 1798 and lasted through the Emmett rebellion of 1803 as well. CLR James writes that Napoleon recalled General Humbert from his Irish liberation expedition for his war against Haiti. Yet outside of Haiti, its existence is almost unknown. The self-liberation of hundreds of thousands of enslaved people is very much less known than the later and staggered abolition of slavery in Britain and France, an abolition that was driven in part by the rebellions of enslaved people elsewhere sparked off by the Haitian example. It is clear why, in the aftermath of the revolution, it was not in the interests of the slave holders elsewhere at the time to spread the news of the liberation of the people of Haiti by their own hands. In 1816 for instance, Bussa’s rebellion engulfed Barbados. Inspired in part by news of Haiti, hundreds of enslaved people rose, a quarter of the sugar cane was burnt and almost 1000 enslaved people were either killed in the battles or executed after the rebellion was defeated. Instead they continued to economically punish Haiti. The people of Haiti escaped slavery but they could not defeat the colonial system which has continued to punish them to this day.

Aftermath of the rebellion

As with many successful revolutions, victory was followed by reaction and civil war. Toussaint L’Ouverture had restored the plantation system, invited back the planters and forced the freed people to work on the plantations, this time for a wage. After independence General Dessalines continued this policy and declared himself Emperor but was assassinated by two of his advisors in 1806. They then partitioned Haiti with one of them, Petion, establishing the ‘Republic of Haiti’ in the southern part, in which the estates were broken up and the land distributed. The northern part was under Christophe who continued something very like the old plantation system. Both parts were reunited in 1820 under Petion’s successor. The young Haitian republic of Petion provided financial and military aid as well as soldiers to Simon Bolivar between 1815 and 1817 as he fought to liberate South America from Spanish rule on the condition he would free enslaved people there. And for twenty years from 1822 the entire island was briefly unified under Haitian rule that saw the abolition of slavery in the eastern two thirds. However in 1825 France sent an invasion fleet

to the island. In order to prevent the invasion, the president had to agree to 'repay' France 150 million Francs for lost profits from the slave trade. The French abolitionist Victor Schoelcher wrote that *"Imposing an indemnity on the victorious slaves was equivalent to making them pay with money that which they had already paid with their blood."* In return, France recognised Haitian independence while the US did not; even though Haiti was forced to borrow money from the US to pay the French, money that was still being repaid by Haiti as late as 1947.

Recognition by Britain and France did not end Haiti's woes or foreign interference. There have been 32 coups, most arising from conflicts within the ruling class and the various foreign business groups. Apart from these, Haiti was not to be recognised by the US until 1862. This recognition, which only came about as the US was abolishing slavery in a bloody civil war where the Union needed Haitian ports, had little real meaning, as military interference continued. In 1888, the US Marines sponsored a coup in the island and by 1913, US Warships had entered Haitian waters on 24 occasions. Then in 1914, in response to a peasant insurrection, the US Marines invaded the island and remained in occupation for over 20 years, during which time they killed, officially, over 3000 Haitians who resisted, including over 400 who were executed. Some Haitian historians have put the real death toll at 15,000. The US occupation imposed a new constitution which allowed foreign companies to own land. In a warning for what lies in wait for the survivors of the Haitian earthquake, the US State Department justified this as being in the interests of the Haitian people, reporting that *"It was obvious that if our occupation was to be beneficial to Haiti and further her progress it was necessary that foreign capital should come to Haiti...and Americans could hardly be expected to put their money into plantations and big agricultural enterprises in Haiti if they could not themselves own the land on which their money was to be spent."* In reality, these changes saw peasant freeholders forced off the land to become labourers in the vast plantations that US corporations created as they bought up that land.

It was this invasion that Marine General Smedley Butler was referring to when he said *"I helped make Haiti and Cuba a decent place for the National City Bank boys to collect revenues in."* It was Butler who had dissolved the National Assembly when it refused to ratify the US drafted constitution. Butler had also resurrected an old French law to force peasants to work as unpaid laborers building roads to enable the US military to rapidly move around on the island. During World War II peasants were expelled from more than 100,000 hectares to make room for rubber plantations producing for the US military and, although the US had withdrawn its military forces by 1934, it retained control of Haiti's foreign finances until 1947.

In his book *Year 501: The Conquest Continues*, Noam Chomsky quoted a New York business daily from 1926, which described conditions in Haiti as *"a marvelous opportunity for American investment"*: *"The run-of-the-mill Haitian is handy, easily directed, and gives a hard day's labor for 20 cents, while in Panama the same day's work cost \$3."* As plantation agriculture displaced peasants into urban slums, these advantages for US corporations grew so that the 13 companies active in 1966 had become 154 by 1981, accounting for 40% of Haiti's exports.

The Docs and the IMF

Haiti was also a victim of the Cold War anti-'communist' backlash, having to endure the blood-thirsty Duvalier dictatorship which ran from 1957 to 1986 first under Francois Duvalier (known as Papa Doc) and then under his son Jean-Claude or Baby Doc. Francois had come to power as

a populist on the basis of a combination of black nationalism and voodoo, but his initial reforms were soon replaced by a personal dictatorship. Their rule was in part maintained through death squads, known as the Tonton Macoutes, who were kept loyal by being given land confiscated from peasants. It's estimated that over 30,000 Haitians were killed under this regime. Throughout this period the US continued military and economic aid as thousands of Haitians fled the country.

This foreign investment, counter to neoliberal orthodoxy, did not bring prosperity. In fact alongside IMF-ordered Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), poverty soared; by 1986, 60% of Haitians were earning less than 60 dollars a year. This was not helped by the USAID-World Bank development strategy begun in 1981 which had the goal of forcing the economy "*toward deeper market interdependence with the United States.*" This was achieved by shifting 30% of the arable land from food for local consumption to export cash crops. Twenty years ago Haiti produced enough rice to feed its own population, today 75% of the rice eaten is imported from the US making it the third largest importer of US rice in the world. Haitian rice production was wrecked 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 funneled 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 neighborhoods 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 armored 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.*”

Imperialism’s Humanitarian Mask

This is the actual record of foreign intervention in Haiti, an intervention that is once more escalating in the wake of the earthquake. In the modern world, imperialism almost always wears a humanitarian mask, we are told the 10,000 US Infantry now being deployed in Haiti are there to help the people despite the M4 rifles they carry, their authorization to use lethal force and the long and bloody history of the US Military in Haiti. Very quickly after the earthquake the US Heritage Foundation advocated taking advantage of the earthquake to impose neoliberal restructuring on the people of Haiti, putting a statement on their website that argued that, “*the U.S. response to the tragic earthquake in Haiti earthquake offers opportunities to re-shape Haiti’s long-dysfunctional government and economy.*” This was only up for a couple of hours before someone realised it was perhaps a little too honest and it was removed, however it had already been copied and has been put into widespread circulation by Naomi Klein among others.

Klein’s book, *The Shock Doctrine*, looks at how capitalism uses crises to impose restructuring on people that would otherwise resist. In recent years the mass of the people of Haiti have suffered greatly under occupation-imposed restructuring programs. Of course, as usual, there is also that narrow ruling layer that have done well out of acting as local agents for the occupation, or which have been able to use the occupation forces to suppress protest at the poor pay and conditions they offer to those who work from them and rent from them. Historically, as we have seen, the interests of early capitalism saw the original inhabitants worked to death for the gold that fueled the expansion of European capitalism and then saw millions of Africans enslaved for the sugar plantations that enabled the young capitalist system to expand. It will be a tragedy if the huge social needs created by this earthquake are allowed to once more create the conditions under which future generations of Haitians are enslaved by poverty and desperation.

A week after the earthquake it is becoming clear that this is what is in process. On Thursday the IMF announced a further \$100 million loan, pushing Haiti's debt to the IMF to \$265 million. By 2003 Haiti's debt service was already approaching 150% of the amount being spent on education, health care and other services. The previous IMF loan was conditional on Haiti raising prices for electricity and refusing pay increases to all public employees except for those on the minimum wage, and although the strings attached to the latest loan are not yet visible, the history of IMF policies, in Haiti and around the world, in utilising loans as a tool for the implementation of neoliberal policies.

The people of Haiti made an enormous contribution to the struggle for freedom when they rose up and overthrew slavery in the 1790's. But as we have seen the history of imperialist powers imposing economic and social policy did not end then, it carried on to the present day when it appears the earthquake will be the 'opportunity' to force the survivors to accept what they would otherwise have resisted. A popular Haitian proverb says '*Tanbou prete pa janm fè bon dans*' or '*A borrowed drum never makes good dancing*' illustrating a general awareness of what the role of outside intervention has really been and if imperialist intervention did not end in the 1790's nor did the resistance of the people of Haiti to that intervention, that also carries on to the present day. Solidarity with the people of Haiti does not start and end with this tragic earthquake but must extend to the struggles they will fight in its aftermath against the 'disaster capitalism' that is now being imposed.

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