

Haiti, Failed Solidarity: International Trade Union Organizations “Pay Lip Service” to 2004 Overthrow of President Aristide

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Failed Solidarity: The ICFTU, AFL-CIO, ILO, and ORIT in Haiti

by June 2006

On February 16, 2004, a group of foreign trade union officials arrived in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, amongst them ORIT General Secretary Victor Baez, ICFTU Assistant General Secretary Mamounata Cissé and union leaders from France, Canada, Guyana and the Global Union Federation. The purpose of the delegation was to assist eleven trade unionists of the Coordination Syndicale Haïtienne (CSH), accused by Haitian authorities as working to bring down the government. The labor delegation drew international coverage as Katia Gil, General Coordinator of Programs with ORIT explains, “We went to visit them in jail. We went with many newspapers and press, local and international agencies.”¹ Just thirteen days after their arrival on February 29, 2004, Haiti’s popularly elected Lavalas government was overthrown and its President Jean-Bertrand Aristide after being sent on a plane to Africa, declared he had been kidnapped by U.S. Marines. An interim government made up of elites drawn from the political opposition to the Aristide government was quickly put into place, supported by the United States, France, and Canada.

“Following the coup, more than 12,000 public sector employees, who had been hired under the Aristide government, were immediately fired without compensation”, writes Isabel Macdonald, a Canadian journalist conducting interviews with laid off workers in Haiti.² The Associated Press on May 12, 2004 reported that Telecommunications D’Haiti (TELECO), the 90% government owned public telephone company, had announced plans to lay off 2,000 workers, half of its workforce.

In May of 2004 an investigative report from a labor-religious delegation sent to Haiti, initiated by the San Francisco Labor Council, spoke of a witch-hunt against supporters of the former government and of receiving reports from the “FTPH (Federation of Public Transport Workers of Haiti), of criminal attacks on over 100 of the buses that they had purchased for use in the bus cooperative operated by the union.”³ Sasha Kramer, a PhD student from California traveling in Haiti took photos of the demolished public buses. With death threats and arbitrary placements on police “wanted” lists, public sector employees and trade unionists, such as teachers, port workers, and bus drivers across Haiti were targeted. With an untold number of dead victims and political prisoners from the coup and the consequent twenty-six months of an unelected interim government, numerous human rights organizations decried state sponsored violence and persecution (March 2004- May 2006).

During the weeks prior to the 2004 coup a “general strike” was called by businesses and organizations associated with the opposition to the government, in which banks, gas stations, supermarkets, and specialty shops kept their doors closed, while the marketplaces of the poor remained open.⁴ In a recent interview Duclos Benissoit, a founder of the Haiti Transportation Federation currently living in exile in New York, discussed his experience during the 2004 coup. “The people who stick their necks out, vocal resisters were targeted first. I was one of those people. I was opposed to any kind of “strike” called by the bosses. Unless called by labor, I told consumers to ignore the other ‘strikes.’ (Big business and national forces) didn’t like this.”⁵

The ICFTU delegation in February 2004, just prior to Aristide’s ouster, as Katia Gil explains, “visited many people but only those involved with the opposition to the government of course.” The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU), claiming a membership of 157 million workers in 148 countries and territories, plays a leading role in investigating and drawing attention to labor abuse around the globe; but for the two years following the coup d’état, the ICFTU did not make a single public statement or condemnation in regards to the massive labor persecution. The Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores (ORIT) as the Latin American regional affiliate of the ICFTU , currently headquartered in Brazil, also remained silent.

CSH, the “ICFTU/ORIT’s fraternal organization in Haiti” according to Victor Baez⁶, was a member of the Group of 184, supporting the installation of the interim government. CSH Secretary-general Fritz Charles, whose organization was made up primarily of anti-Lavalas unions and labor organizations, such as the Duvalier sanctioned and formerly U.S. government funded Fédération des Ouvriers Syndiqués (FOS), explained, “We adhere to the Group of 184 because it is a broad organization of the civil society which preaches a social pact where we want to play our part, where we want to also support the claims present in our trade-union agenda, ratified by our general assembly.”⁷ The Group of 184 a Haitian organization of NGOs, business elites, and foreign financed human rights groups was the principal civil society organization that agitated for the downfall of the elected government and was headed up by one of Haiti’s most notorious sweatshop owners, Andre Apaid, Jr.⁸

“Democracy Promotion” program monies through United States, Canadian, and European Union aid agencies were channeled nearly exclusively to groups and organizations that were critical of the elected government of Haiti. In some cases, this took the form of actively building the political opposition, such as many of those within the Group of 184 - in others, it was simply supporting and funding sectors and leaders who were sharp critics of the Haitian government. Fabiola Cordove, a program officer at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in Washington D.C., which funds numerous opposition affiliated groups, pointed out, “Aristide really had 70% of the popular support and then the 120 other parties had the thirty per cent split in one hundred and twenty different ways, which is basically impossible to compete [with].”⁹

While foreign governments and financial institutions heavily favored the elite opposition, the local and foreign media did as well. Similar to the media manipulation during the 2002 attempted coup in Venezuela, the Haitian media, owned overwhelmingly by opposition-affiliated elites, refused to air pro-government demonstrations. Instead they devoted large blocks of air time to coverage of the much smaller opposition marches, which one observer noted were led down the streets by “fancy BMW motorcycles and huge, square Mercedes Benz SUV’s.”¹⁰

Haiti's government by early 2004 had been weakened and its impoverished masses of supporters, as well as its opposition, felt increasingly under attack. In the months and weeks before the large ICFTU led labor delegation arrived, chaos reigned as rebels, from the disbanded military, based in the Dominican Republic had begun an invasion of Haiti, equipped with new SUVs and, reportedly, airplanes. For years the same rebels had been running violent raids, into Haiti killing police, government officials, and civilians alike - sparking violence and reprisals. Even months before the inauguration of Aristide in February 2001, Port-au-Prince had been shaken by mysterious bombings. OAS officials admit they never worked to investigate the rebels or pressure the Dominican Republic to root them out. With the economic strangulation of a Bush Administration backed government aid embargo taking effect in 2000 and a small poorly armed police force, the difficulties of the Haitian government intensified. The CSH, like many other opposition groups affiliated with the Group of 184, had something the Haitian government did not have - foreign aid.

Fritz Charles explains that the CSH received assistance, support, and computers from ORIT and the International Labor Organization (ILO), which, though viewed as a labor organization, is in fact a tri-partite body of the UN which groups together trade union bodies, employer organizations, and governments.¹¹ Katia Gil of ORIT clarifies that "Since 2000, we have had support from International Solidarity funds from the ICFTU to help in a trade union education program, organizing workers in Haiti...we helped to build the CSH, and we provided part of the support for the CSH infrastructure, in order to create a place where the Haitian workers [the CSH] could plan and manage their own process."¹² The ICFTU continues to provide an undisclosed amount of funding for CSH programs.

Charles also refers to the ILO's financing of six seminars for the CSH conducted by André Lafontant Joseph (Secretary-general of the private school teachers Union, the CNEH).¹³ André Lafontant Joseph, was the author of a major research report funded by the ILO on the Haitian labor movement¹⁴ and his union the Confédération Nationale des Educateurs d'Haiti (CNEH) took a leading role, following the coup, in working to undermine the public school teacher's in the north of Haiti.¹⁵ According to André Lafontant Joseph's ILO funded study, "ORIT" amongst others "encourage[d] more than about fifteen organizations to constitute the Trade-union Coordination Syndicale Haïtienne (CSH)."¹⁶

According to Ana Jiménez, of the ILO's San Jose office, the ILO has provided "technical cooperation....a program that has the objective of fortifying the Haitian union movement, in particular the Coordination Syndicale Haïtienne (CSH). This program is assumed within the ordinary budget of the Office...which does not surpass US \$70,000."¹⁷ The ILO currently has two other projects in Haiti, a project in Gonaives worth US \$413,00 (partially financed by the United Nations Development Program) and a Canadian government financed project working in the field of child labor with US\$ 382,374.¹⁸ The AFL-CIO works closely with the ILO, as Harry G Kamberis, Senior advisor of the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center explains, "Through our representatives at the ILO we supported what the ILO tried to do as well."¹⁹

Kevin Skerrett, a researcher at the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) who previously visited Haiti as a Canadian labor delegate argues, "There is not much evidence to suggest that the CSH actually operates as a trade union at all. I have not seen any reports that they have engaged in any collective bargaining, or even have democratic meetings of affiliated unions during which policy positions are democratically decided. A number of the trade unionists that I spoke with in Haiti and in the post-coup exile-diaspora have suggested that the CSH was only formed in the late 90s, and with significant involvement of US and foreign agencies. While it continued to operate as a sort of "advocacy" group for Haitian

workers, it is not clear that they became anything more than a small number of people that were part of the political opposition to the Preval and then Aristide governments.”²⁰ Suffice to say; led by Fritz Charles, the CSH became the main platform for organizing labor leaders towards the platform of the Group of 184.

Meanwhile, in Canada, while the Canadian Labor Congress (CLC) denounced Canada’s role in legitimizing the 2004 coup d’etat of the democratically elected government,²¹ it failed to investigate the massive layoffs and persecution of public sector workers in Haiti. An April 2004 statement from the CLC committed itself to “monitoring” the human rights and workers rights situation in the coming months in Haiti, something which never occurred.²²

From Brussels the ICFTU played a leading role in the year’s leading up to the coup, circulating reports, heavily influenced by Haitian opposition elites, within the European labor movement – and to some extent the North American labor movement, that while informing the public of some real ongoing labor disputes, also forwarded unfounded allegations. For example, attributing to the Aristide government the killings of two labor advocates that took place in the rural area of Guacimal in 2002, near the northeastern town of St. Raphael, which were in fact (according to a newspaper whose reporter lost an eye in the assault) murders carried out by employees of a local landowner, not “government partisans” as one Aristide critic recently claimed.²³ Showing the echo effect of such allegations, an employee of the AFL-CIO’s Solidarity Center recently made the unsubstantiated claim that “Aristide flew over Guacimal in a helicopter, shooting at workers.”²⁴

While labor conditions remained extremely poor and corruption persisted, as foreign backed destabilization plunged Haiti’s economy, the Aristide government took steps towards aiding labor. The minimum wage was increased from 36 Gourdes to 70 Gourdes a day in early 2003, the right to organize in the free trade zone was successfully negotiated, a provision of the labor code that sanctioned child domestic service was repealed, and legislation prohibiting human trafficking was passed. A 20-person police unit was set up to monitor cases of suspected human trafficking along the border, while steps were taken to promote access to education, offering a 70% subsidy to cover education supplies and calling on families who employ children to release them during school hours. The second Aristide administration (2000-2004) also refused to privatize public sector industries, requested by the IMF. Following the coup d’etat many of the labor reforms were suspended, with numerous employers reverting to the old minimum wage.

The ILO, ICFTU and ORIT were not the only labor organizations to support the opposition to the Aristide government and ignore the persecution of public sector workers following its overthrow. On March 1, 2004 the AFL-CIO released its sole statement in regards to the overthrow of democracy in Haiti, stating that the “current crisis in Haiti represents a failure of U.S. foreign policy.”²⁵ Only weeks later, the AFL-CIO and its offshoot the Solidarity Center (American Center for International Labor Solidarity) began talks with the Batay Ouvriye (BO), an anti-Lavalas worker’s organization that had agitated for the Aristide government to “leave the country.”²⁶

By mid-2005 the Solidarity Center had won two grants for its program with the BO.

The first grant for US \$350,000 was awarded to the Solidarity Center in May of 2005 through the U.S. State Department’s “Democracy Rights and Labor Department”, while the second grant for US \$99,965 came in September of 2005 from the NED, also receiving its funding

from the U.S. State Department.²⁷ Teresa Casertano, regional director of the Americas for the Solidarity Center, managed the grants. She explains, “We provide a service that is an educational service, to train them, to share with them our knowledge and skills on trade union organizing...Organizing members, doing new member orientation, collective bargaining, contract enforcement, shop stewards.”²⁸

As part of the grant requirements, the Solidarity Center must submit quarterly evaluation reports to its funding sources, the NED and U.S. State Department. Casertano explains, “We wrote a proposal that was submitted. A very standard format with objectives, activities and evaluation procedures...So there was a grant agreement based on that, the State Department dispersed funds for those activities described...The specific grant has a quarterly reporting requirement...We then write that up and we submit it as a quarterly report.” In this particular program with the Batay Ouvriye (BO), the U.S. State Department asked to extend the program, as Casertano explains, “They did ask us to extend it from a year long to 18 months with the same amount of funding and we agreed.”

Kamberis explains further the cooperation between the U.S. State Department and the AFL-CIO’s Solidarity Center. “The State Department has annually a labor officer conference that we are invited to come and speak at and also when they have labor officer training programs they send the officers over to speak with us. We design our own programs and run them. But we do talk with the State Department. We exchange information and we help them with information on their annual labor and human rights reports.”

Kamberis argues that there is a difference today between the activities of the Solidarity Center and its Cold War predecessors. “Since the end of the cold war the global trade union movement has become less ideological. What you see in Haiti [the support for opposition labor organizations] is just a coincidence...We are supporting the efforts of workers to organize. For example with the World-Bank, we worked to build labor rights conditionalities and that’s what we have achieved in Haiti to help workers...I would say that working with the Batay Ouvriye does advance U.S. Strategic interests, because it helps to advance freedom of association in Haiti and that is a U.S. government objective, to allow workers to freely associate.” In regards to the Solidarity Center’s predecessor, AIFLD (American Institute for Free Labor Development), and its support for unions run through Duvalier’s secret police in the 1980’s Kamberis states, “We had programs under the Duvalier government that addressed the same thing: worker exploitation whether they were or were not Anti or Pro-Duvalier. That was not for us the issue.”²⁹

As the United States, Canada, and France played integral roles in overthrowing the Aristide government; those with close ties to Haiti - CARICOM and the African Union - refused to recognize the interim government put in its place. Unions such as the Oilfield Workers’ Trade Union (OWTU) of Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean spoke out against the coup. On March 1, 2004, the day following the coup, Errol McLeod, President of OWTU condemned the foreign role in occupying Haiti, stating “It was totally wrong for the US, France and Canada to determine that President Aristide was ‘unfit to govern’.”³⁰

There are numerous trade unions and labor organizations that did not join the political opposition movement, while none have received support from any of these four bodies. These organizations continue to support political interventions through groups that espouse the undemocratic removal of governments in selected countries (i.e. Haiti, Venezuela), at the expense of workers and in collaboration with the foreign policy of the Bush Administration.

The blind eye turned towards the major transgressions of the interim government can be partially explained by the vested interests that international labor organizations had in the participants of the coup and pre-coup destabilization campaign. Political parties of Western Europe that have strong ties to their countries large and influential trade unions such as Germany's SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany) have consistently supported Haitian political parties opposed to Lavalas such as the OPL (L'Organisation de Peuple en Lutte), a backer of austerity measures forwarded by the IMF.³¹ While the majority of Haitians speak kreyòl and live at abysmal subsistence levels; the French-speaking opposition aligned elite, many with European educations, were apt to form long term relations with foreign institutions already predisposed against popular democracy - so called "radical populism". The ICFTU released a statement on November 23, 2000, over two months prior to Aristide's inauguration, titled "Return To Dictatorship?" heavily reliant on OPL sources, labeling Haiti's largest political party Lavalas as "much feared."³² Another deeply partisan ICFTU Bulletin in May of 2001 cited OPL leaders Sauveur Pierre Etienne, Gérard Pierre, and Paul Dennis, as well as a Convergence leader Evans Paul, with no mention of their heavy reliance on foreign government aid agencies.³³ In comparison to its overtly critical stance during the second Aristide Administration (2001-2004), not a single ICFTU bulletin decried coup and post-coup labor rights violations against public sector workers and trade unionist supporters of the ousted government. Dominique Esser, a New York based human rights advocate, argues that labor "persecution is a non-topic if it happens to elements of society that are not supported by those wealthy parties that are strongly intertwined with international union heavyweights."³⁴

The most prominent international labor organizations active in Haiti, the ICFTU, AFL-CIO, ILO, and ORIT, working to support and strengthen labor unions that agitated for the ousting of Haiti's democratically elected government, have simultaneously refused to condemn the massive layoffs and persecution of public sector workers and trade unionists committed by its illegally-imposed successor. In response to questions over the Solidarity Center's aloofness in regards to labor persecution resulting from the coup, Casertano states, "We make public statements. We make plenty of statements." In reference to post-coup labor persecution Katia Gil of ORIT explains, "We have not looked into that."

Jeb Sprague is a graduate student, freelance journalist, and a correspondent for Pacifica Radio's Flashpoints. This article is in part based off a talk he gave at the 32nd Annual Conference of the South-West Labor Studies Association. Visit his blog.

1 Telephone Interview on March 6, 2006.

2 http://www.haitiaction.net/News/HIP/12_17_5/12_17_5.html Also listen to an interview with Isabel McDonald at <http://www.wakeupwithcoop.org>

3

http://dominionpaper.ca/weblog/2004/05/statement_on_the_current_situation_of_workers_the_labor_movement_and_human_rights_in_haiti_.html

4 Kevin Pina, "Haiti's Large Businesses Shutter Doors as the Poor Markets Remain Open" <http://www.hatford-hwp.com/archives/43a/626.html>

5 Journeying in the struggle together: An interview with Haitian labor leader Benissoit Duclos

<http://www.sfbayview.com/030106/journeying030106.shtml>

6 <http://cioslorit.org/detalle.php?item=948&leng=es>

7 Translated from the CSH: Reporte De Actividades Por La CSH: Haiti (2002-2003). January 10, 2003. <http://cioslorit.org/detalle.php?item=616&leng=es> The ILO recorded the unions that were members within the CSH in early 2004. The ILO's Provisional Record, Ninety-second Session, Geneva, 2004 states "CSH groups together the following workers' organizations: Fédération des ouvriers syndiqués (FOS), Confédération nationale des éducateurs haïtiens (CNEH), Confédération des ouvriers et des travailleurs haïtiens (KOTA), Corps national des enseignants haïtiens (CONEH), Syndicat national des travailleurs de la presse (SNTPH), Confédération indépendante des syndicats nationaux (CISN), Réseau national des femmes (RENAFANM), Rassemblement des petits planteurs (RASPA), Confédération générale des travailleurs (CGT), Groupe d'initiative des enseignants de lycée (GIEL), Mouvement des paysans haïtiens (MOPA), Centrale autonome des travailleurs haïtiens (CATH), Syndicat des chauffeurs coopérants fédérés (SCCF). <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc/ilc92/pdf/pr-6c.pdf>

8 Choosudovsky's article "The Destabilization of Haiti" explains that Andy Apaid Jr., "owns Alpha Industries, one of Haiti's largest cheap labor export assembly lines established during the Duvalier era. His sweatshop factories produce textile products and assemble electronic products for a number of US firms including Sperry/Unisys, IBM, Remington and Honeywell. Apaid is the largest industrial employer in Haiti with a workforce of some 4000 workers. Wages paid in Andy Apaid's factories are as low as 68 cents a day. (Miami Times, 26 Feb 2004). The current minimum wage is of the order of \$1.50 a day." <http://www.globalresearch.ca/articles/CHO402D.html>

9 Anthony Fenton, Declassified Documents: National Endowment for Democracy FY2005, Narco News, <http://narcosphere.narconews.com/story/2006/2/15/205828/741>

10 Corbett List Entry 27934. See <http://www.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti/haiti.html>

11 <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/norm/sources/mne.htm>

12 March 17, 2006 E-mail

13 <http://cioslorit.org/detalle.php?item=616&leng=es>

14 "Le Mouvement Sydnical Haïtien: De ses origines aux débuts du 21ème siècle" André Lafontant Joseph (Premiere edition 2003)

15 "Proposal: Community Based Human Rights Advocacy in Haiti" <http://www.hurah.revolt.org/Hurah/Fundraising/proposal.htm>

16 "Le Mouvement Sydnical Haïtien: De ses origines aux débuts du 21ème siècle" André Lafontant Joseph (Premiere edition 2003), Pg. 53. <http://www.oit.or.cr/mdtsanjo/actrav/pdf/haiti/haiti.pdf> "53 La première est à l'actif de l'ORIT, de la Fondation Friedrich Ebert et le Centre Pétion Bolivar qui à la faveur d'un processus de dialogue et de réalisation d'activités conjointes, ont pu encourager plus d'une quinzaine d'organisations à constituer la Coordination Syndicale Haïtienne."

17 Transcript of ILO E-mails in possession of author.

18 Ibid.

19 Kamberis Interview/ February 2006. Kamberis headed the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center from 1997 to 2004, when he moved to Senior Advisor status. Barbara Shailor replaced Kamberis in 2004 as head of the Solidarity Center. For a recent analysis of the AFL-CIO's foreign policy, see Kim Scipes, "Labor Imperialism Redux? The AFL-CIO's Foreign Policy Since 1995," Monthly Review, May 2005: 23-36, and on-line at <http://www.monthlyreview.org/0505scipes.htm>

20 Discussion conducted in February of 2006.

21 See the CLC's Executive Vice President Marie Clarke Walker speech http://canadianlabour.ca/index.php/Marie_Clarke_Walker/Canadian_Peace_Alliance

22 http://canadianlabour.ca/index.php/Haiti/CLC_Statement_on_Hai

23 "Time to Support Haiti", April 25, 2006 <http://www.henryjacksonsociety.org.uk/> Also see Haiti Progres, June 6, 2002 <http://www.haitiprogres.com/2002/sm020605/eng06-05.html> which explains that "the landowner's thugs killed with machetes and buried an elderly peasant couple who had been with BO's St. Michel delegation."

24 Notes on this conversation with the Solidarity Center's In-Country Haiti Organizer in possession of author (December, 2005. San Francisco). Also see <http://www.quixote.org/hr/news/haitireport/7-12-2002.php>

25 <http://www.aflcio.org/aboutus/thisistheafcio/ecouncil/ec03112004o.cfm>

26 See my previous article "Batay Ouvriye's Smoking Gun" on Znet <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=9505> and "Supporting a Leftist Opposition to Lavalas" on MRZine <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/sprague211105.html>

27 This is acknowledged by Henry Kamberis, Teresa Casertano, and Barbara Shailor at the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center in a telephone interview conducted with this author in February of 2006. Transcript in possession of author. Also see NED grants for FY 2005 at <http://inthenameofdemocracy.org/en/node/8> . For an in-depth analysis of the relationship of the Solidarity Center with the NED, see Kim Scipes, "An Unholy Alliance: The AFL-CIO and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in Venezuela," ZNet, July 10, 2005

28 Telephone interview conducted in February of 2006.

29 Ibid. The estimates on the total amount of state sanctioned killings under the Duvalier Regimes (1957-1986) that I have found range from 30,000 to 60,000. For another account of how AFL-CIO foreign policy leaders work with the Bush Administration, see Kim Scipes, "AFL-CIO Foreign Policy Leaders Help Develop Bush's Foreign Policy, Target Foreign Unions for Political Control," Labor Notes, March 2005, <http://www.labornotes.org/archives/2005/03/articles/e.html> . Also see Tim Shorrock, "Labor's Cold War," The Nation, May 19, 2003, <http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20030519&s=shorrock>

30 "No to U.S. Intervention in Haiti", Oilfield Workers' Trade Union (OWTU), March 1, 2004 <http://www.owtu.org/owtu%20&%20haiti.htm>

31 Haiti News (haiti-news@listhost.uchicago.edu) May 13, 2006. In February 2001 as Aristide was being inaugurated after his second democratic election, the OPL hosted a “counter-inauguration” in front of a handful of opposition officials in which Gerard Gourgue, a 75-year-old lawyer, was dubbed “provisional president”. Gourgue called for the return of the disbanded military.

32 “Haiti: A Return to Dictatorship?”
<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991211921&Language=EN>

33 “Haiti: From Bad to Worse”
<http://www.icftu.org/displaydocument.asp?Index=991212264&Language=EN>

34 Haiti News (haiti-news@listhost.uchicago.edu) May 13, 2006

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