

Refusing the Coup: Looking Back at the Mobilization Against the Bicentennial Attack on Haiti

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In the days leading up to the end of February 2004 a wide-scale destabilization campaign aimed at bringing down Haiti's elected government was in full motion. In Haiti's capitol, Port-au-Prince, as many as 500,000 to a million people came out into the streets to support the president; but the elite press in Haiti many of whom fed information to the U.S. and international media reported a falsified low number, such as 20,000. When the opposition which comprised of the Convergence & the Group 184 had a demonstration of about 30,000 people, the corporate media reported that it was 200,000 propelling anti-government propaganda. The media and elite opposition's strategy held numerous similarities with the 2002 coup in Venezuela. This was made shockingly clear in the Venezuelan example by a Television crew from Ireland's Radio Telifis Eireann who filmed a coup from inside the Miraflores palace. The elite Haitian media while denouncing the government had the tendency of showing close-up shots of Lavalas demonstrations if they reported on them at all; on the other hand, they broadcast long shots of the elite opposition's protests to give the impression they had a larger crowd.

Global Solidarity

On Feb. 27 2004, there was a conference which took place at the National Press Club in Washington D.C. to repudiate the coup d'état being orchestrated against the democratically elected government of President Aristide. Among some of the individuals who participated were Haitian activists, Haiti Progres and activists of the anti-war coalition ANSWER such as Peta Lindsey.

The elite opposition via the Haiti Democracy Project (HDP), financed in large part by wealthy businessman Reginald Boulos, was also organizing demonstrations in Washington DC but to call for the departure of the elected government. One of the main organizers of the small HDP protests which took place in front of the Haitian embassy in Washington D.C. was Terry Thielen, the founding director of RAMAK, an organization that received millions in USAID grants towards indoctrinating radio stations in Haiti towards the US embassy rhetoric. RAMAK, which was disbanded in the years following the coup, was a subsidiary of the much larger Creative Associates International, Inc. which is still based out of Washington. NCHR and other elite civil society groups financed by the United States and Canadian governments were also actively lobbying in Washington DC for the departure of the elected government. But Washington wasn't the only city where Haitians & their non-Haitian allies were mobilizing. Across Haiti and North America people were organizing overwhelmingly against the destabilization campaign.

In Rhode Island, home of the monument of Jean Jacques Dessalines & Toussaint Louverture; folks there were also denouncing what was happening. On the same day the event in Washington was unfolding, so too did activists fill a meeting room to capacity in Providence to denounce the coup. Originally, ANSWER had sponsored the event for Black History Month; but instead, it changed focus to the evolving crisis in Haiti. Mary Kaye Harris of Direct Action for Rights & Equality (DARE) and Bob Trayham, a Boston school driver and former Black Panther opened the meeting. The guest speaker was Pat Chin, co-editor of the book "Haiti: A slave revolution." Pat Chin passed away last year of breast cancer. Even though she was Jamaican-born she always wore a blue and red hat symbolizing the Haitian flag as a cherished trophy of freedom.

When addressing the activists, Pat made the point that Aristide's refusal to completely buckle under to neo-liberal restructuring had made him "persona non grata" to wealthy nations. She called on the American people to support the rights of Haitians for their self-determination; and caution the activists not to be misled by the media disinformation and racist arrogance. She compared what was happening to Haiti to the U.S. supported coup in Venezuela; as well as the U.S. directed ousting of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo in 1960. Frantz Mendes, vice-president of the school bus driver's union in Boston, which is 70 percent Haitian-American told the crowd that Aristide's demand for reparations from France for the wealth it extorted from Haiti during colonial rule also made him a target for destabilization.

As we hop from city to city to demonstrate Aristide's broad support in the Diaspora, we now arrive in New York; and it is Saturday Feb. 28. One day before the coup, a large crowd of about 5,000 people assembled at Eastern Parkway & Utica in Brooklyn. They proceeded to walk to Grand Army Plaza; where they had a big rally. Among their demands was for the U.S., France & Canada to stop supporting armed & unarmed groups in Haiti. Some of the signs and banners read "CIA, IRI, Bush get your bloody hands off Haiti" "Aristide is the people's choice" and "Haiti is not for sale." On that same Saturday, there was also a demonstration in Chicago's Federal Plaza to support the president. Pacifica radio's Democracy Now! based out of New York City broadcast daily news on the situation in Haiti.

A large group of individuals came out to show the American people that they supported the growth of democracy in Haiti. One of their chants was "Aristide yes! CIA, no!" some of the other organizations which took part in this demonstration included the National Black United Front, the Chicago Coalition against war & Racism; and the International action center. On that same day, over 1,000 people protested at Government Center in Boston where they chanted "No Aristide, no peace." They also condemned the armed groups advancing on the capital as terrorists. Among the participants was a strong contingent of the USWA Local 8751; which is the Boston school bus driver's union. The ANSWER organization also put out a statement opposing the coup & defending Aristide. In California the Haiti Action Committee (HAC) and other groups from San Francisco to Los Angeles held numerous demonstrations and teach-ins. Pierre LaBossiere, a founder of the HAC, held a rousing speech in front of hundreds in downtown Oakland.

In Miami, Haitians and their non-Haitian allies did not sit by while this "coup-napping" was evolving into its final stage. Thousands of people assembled at the headquarters of "Veye Yo" (watch them); the Haitian rights organization, in the Little Haiti neighborhood of Miami which was founded by the Reverend Gerard Jean Juste. They then marched to Biscayne Blvd. to the U.S. Immigration building. The mobilization in the Diaspora continued the day after President Aristide was kidnapped. In San Francisco California, over 500 people marched

from the very busy intersection of Powell & Market past the Federal building to the steps of City Hall; to protest this U.S. orchestrated coup. On March 2, there was another big demonstration at the United Nations; and it was called by the December 12 Movement and Fanmi Lavalas. Since thousands of Haitians were killed & tens of thousands more had to go into hiding or leave the country; the reactionary forces firmly had their grip on power; one would have thought the supporters of Aristide would now have to accept their new reality. They were far from surrendering!

As we leap forward into the future; one year after the coup on Feb. 2005, we find the masses of the Haitian people continuing their resistance against this kidnapping and the ensuing repression. In spite of threats of violence by the occupying forces, the Haitian police, and the former members of the disbanded army and paramilitary death squad; thousands upon thousands from the slums of Cite Soley & Belair marched to the National Palace to commemorate the first anniversary of the coup. The Haitian National Police fired on the protesters, while the United Nations troops looked on; at least 5 marchers were killed. In the Diaspora, activists were also mobilizing to commemorate that tragic day.

At the same time the population in Haiti was trying to make their voices heard and often being shot in the back at demonstrations in Port-au-Prince, Haitians and non-Haitian activists were organizing events in as many as 50 cities. In Montreal Canada, over 800 people braved sub-zero temperatures to protest the political violence against the members of Lavalas. Some of the signs carried by the marchers included "Release all political prisoners;" "Paul Martin is swimming in Haitian blood" and "Stop summary execution by the police!" They also denounced the Canadian involvement in the coup. In spite of the cold weather, the demonstration was extremely spirited; and it was filled with music, dancing and exuberant speeches. Some described it as one of the largest Haitian mobilization in Montreal. Besides Haitians, there was another 100 non-Haitian activists who joined the demonstration.

In New York, over 1,500 people gathered in front of the United Nations to denounce the complicity of the U.N. troops; in the repression of Lavalas supporters of President Aristide; which was still taking place one year after the kidnapping. Some of the signs read "President Aristide was elected by the people" and "democracy or death!" In Los Angeles California, Women of Color in the Global Women's Strike had call for a press conference; to express their concerns at the continued violence which was taking place in Haiti. Congresswoman Maxine Waters, was joined by an Ad Hoc Group Against the Coup and Occupation to express their outrage. She denounced the continued human rights abuses; and demanded the return of democracy to Haiti. People carried signs which said "U.S. out of Haiti" "End the occupation!" and "Freedom for Haiti now." Some of the organizations which took part in this rally/press conference included ANSWER/LA, Coalition in Solidarity with Haiti; International Action Center/LA; Haiti Action Committee and the Pan African Activists Coalition. In Southern California protests spread to Santa Monica, Long Beach and Hollywood which numbered from a few dozen to fifty or sixty. Supported by the Latin America Solidarity Coalition three sessions of an international tribunal on Haiti were held in which evidence was compiled for a court case against those who participated in the coup and its violent aftermath.

A smattering of protests also occurred in Europe while grassroots organizations from across the Caribbean and activists in Africa spoke out against the coup. In Vancouver, British Columbia, there was also a demonstration to remember this date. Activists delivered a copy

of the stunning Miami University human rights report to the offices of Minister David Emerson; demanding an explanation for Canada's support to the repressive, fascistic Latortue regime. Thomas M. Griffen ESQ, the author of the study, came to Ottawa; to take part in the different activities. The solidarity movement was international due to tireless organizing and commitment. The protests also spread to South America, the next year in early 2006 forty demonstrators gathered in front of the Brazilian embassy in Caracas, Venezuela to demand that Brazil end its violent activities in Haiti's slum communities meant to strengthen the illegal interim government. Some of the largest trade unions in Chile and Brazil protested MINUSTAH's role in Haiti.

The Media

Prior to the coup, the corporate media played an important role in portraying President Aristide as being a leader without support; therefore deserving to be removed. Footage on CNN showed a chaotic Port-au-Prince. Yet in reality, the elected government was supported by a broad segment of Haitians living in Haiti as well as in the Diaspora. Furthermore, many non-Haitian activists and organizations supported the struggle of the Lavalas masses; who were asking for the return of President Aristide. Even if the president had no support, he was still democratically elected by a large majority of the Haitian population; unlike the U.S. president who was selected by a friendly supreme court.

One can surmise if the media had played its neutral role, which was basically to show both sides; those who were either for or against President Aristide, perhaps it might not have been so easy for the kidnapping and destabilization campaign to take place. But the corporate media not only has business interests that run contrary to allowing an open democratic debate involving the poor masses but they also have been historically infiltrated or manipulated by intelligence agencies. In the mid-1970's the U.S. congress released the Church Report, leaked to the Village Voice in 1976 by then-CBS correspondent Daniel Schorr. The Church Report found that the CIA's main covert activities (after election-rigging) was to influence or use the press. It stated "the CIA maintained covert relationships with some 50 U.S. journalists," but without mentioning domestic agencies it only listed one foreign press agency, Reuters. By the early twenty first century, while softer forms of influencing the press had been developed, the old techniques were still being employed. A leaked intelligence report to MINUSTAH in late 2005 by the Consultants Advisory Group (CAG) discussed placing spies disguised as journalists in the audiences of Haitian presidential candidate debates.

Living outside of Haiti, if one was relying only on the main stream media to get information; one would not have known about any of the mobilizations which were taking place in the streets of Haiti. But even with this lock on widely accessible communication, numerous protests occurred across Canada in the hundreds, in the United States in the thousands, and in Haiti in the tens and hundreds of thousands. In June 2005 a young Canadian activist Yves Engler made national headlines when he interrupted a press conference being held by then Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Pierre Pettigrew. Engler walked up to the stage and poured a bottle of cranberry juice mixed with red dye onto Pettigrew's arms, stating, "Pettigrew lies, Haitians die." This was meant to symbolize the blood on the hands of those involved in the destabilization and overthrow of Haitian democracy. Early the next year Pettigrew lost his seat in the Canadian parliament after a successful grassroots campaign to educate voters on his role in the 2004 coup and the post-coup human rights nightmare in Haiti.

1. Deirdre Griswold. "Protests Spread Across U.S." [Online] 11 March 2004. <http://www.workers.org/>
2. Yves Engler and Bianca Mugeny. "Haiti Demonstration." [Online] 7 March 2005. <http://www.zmag.org/>
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