

# The Good Imperialist?

## Canada and the New Haiti

The Canadian government has a starring role in the continued occupation of Haiti. While the mainstream media had long blockaded critical analysis of the occupation, confusion resulting from Haiti's first post-coup election has led to a surfeit of information among the activist community. Greg Albo and Peter Graham interviewed Justin Podur and Kevin Skerrett, two Haiti solidarity activists, to find out what has happened since the election. •

*Maybe we could start off with your assessment of the main reasons behind the intervention into Haiti by the U.S. and its allies against the Aristide government?*

**KS:** My view is that the 2004 intervention into Haiti must be viewed as one part of an active phase of – primarily U.S. – interference in Haitian affairs that escalated with the emergence of an authentic, mass-based popular movement of Haiti's poor majority. This movement coalesced behind Jean-Bertrand Aristide and the "Lavalas" movement in the democratic elections of 1990.

That movement, and the stark social-economic polarization that characterizes Haiti, was recognized – correctly – as a serious ongoing threat to US strategic interests. Direct CIA backing for the murderous early-90s death squad known as FRAPH shows how acutely this was felt.

The explanation for Canada, and Québec having joined the U.S. government in what would ultimately be a "régime change" operation to overthrow Aristide is explained significantly in the strengthening bonds between the governments involved, and increasingly coordinated and shared agendas for the region (NAFTA, SPP, FTAA, etc.). The stubborn unwillingness of Aristide and the movement he represented to submit sufficiently to these agendas was embarrassing. The aid embargo and the February 2004 coup certainly sent a pretty clear message to all poor "recipient" countries of the region.

Haiti's special role in our racist, colonial history is also clearly a factor. When President Aristide began in 2003 to formally express demands for economic restitution from the French government for the crushing and odious debt-service that it forced on Haiti for many decades, he was giving voice to a rising movement



in many African communities for massive restitution and reparations for the damages inflicted by colonial and slave-trading powers. Aristide is now gone, and with him went this historic and legitimate demand, to the great relief of the three colonial powers (Canada, France and the U.S.) that removed him. One of the first statements of the coup government led by Gérard Latortue was that this demand was now withdrawn.

*What has been the impact of the election of the Préval government on the occupation? How has it shifted the balance of power in Haiti between popular forces and the external interventionist forces?*

**JP:** The resistance is getting re-organized. There have been some public expressions but I think there is much more going on at a lower profile. Patrick Elie, who was in Toronto a couple of months back, has argued that there is a new generation of very courageous young people who have been disconnected from the →



older generation. The best of that generation went to jail or to ground in 2004 while many others lost a lot of credibility when they collaborated or were silent in the face of the coup. Patrick at least wants to focus his efforts on building capacity and organization among the new generation.

Meanwhile the game between the foreign forces and the elite continues, with the elite's phony organizations calling for more force in the name of the people, etc. The Préval government is very constrained in what it can do. It managed to release some high-profile prisoners. But the major institutional effect of the 2004 coup was the cleansing of the Haitian Police of any decent or public-minded element. This cleansing was extended into every aspect of the government.

Préval's safety is guaranteed by members of the Haitian Police who he cannot trust. He can't move against the police and he can't make any other major moves because of the police. In this context even calling for the foreign forces to leave becomes a difficult decision. Préval had planned for a "social appeasement fund" for the poor neighbourhoods – that would have, in Patrick's view, cooled the situation down quite a bit – but the donor countries weren't interested in delivering the money even though they'd promised it.

**KS:** The Préval government depends on the three coup-backing governments for the bulk of the "development aid" that finances some 66% of his government's expenditures. Haiti remains militarily occupied by a UN force led and directed by these same powers. In this context, "national sovereignty" loses much of its meaning.

*Washington's HOPE package for Haiti is another example of the Western powers attempting to offset their imperialist interven-*

*tions by alleged development assistance. What impact are these efforts having, if any?*

**KS:** The HOPE Act is a special kind of U.S.-Haiti "free trade" deal aimed at fostering investment, primarily U.S. and international investment, into Haiti's brutal and exploitative apparel industry. This is done through eliminating certain restrictions and tariffs on U.S. textile imports from Haiti. Touted as Haiti's best hope for job creation, many pro-coup sectors in both Haiti and the U.S. are backers of this proposal. Critics point out, I think rightly, that such deals will serve to lock-in and deepen the exploitation of Haitian workers in nightmarish working conditions. This sweatshop development model will in fact be the realization of neoliberal planning, which emphasizes what is viewed as Haiti's sole comparative advantage: cheap, unorganized, immiserated labour. While the Préval government expresses support for the HOPE framework, major trade unions such as the Confédération des Travailleurs Haitiens were not consulted on its content.

*A surprising aspect of the Préval government is that it has been participating in some of the ALBA alternative trade discussions for a social integration of Latin America with Venezuela, Cuba and others. Is there any significance to be attached to this? Is Haiti managing to develop an independent course even while foreign troops remain present?*

**JP:** Préval is engaging in very sophisticated diplomacy. Préval wants stronger relationships with Cuba and Venezuela to reduce dependence on the coup countries (USA/Canada/France) and the complicit ones (Brazil/Argentina/Chile). Cuba continued its support for Haitians quietly (taking the medical students who were thrown out of university by marines and maintaining their medical program) throughout the coup era and can now do it more openly.

Venezuela similarly wants Préval to succeed just like he wanted Aristide to make it. But they all have obvious limits on what they can do, Préval most of all.

**KS:** It seems to me that Préval's daring diplomacy is also a risky game played between Washington and Caracas, something that likely can't last. At some point, the U.S. will force Préval to choose, and it's difficult, at this point, to imagine a definitive choice for anything but U.S. (and Canadian) leadership. Of course, this is partly due to the failure of the Canadian left to restrain our government.

*Is there any indication yet of the impact of oil and other aid from Venezuela, and what distinguishes it from the aid from regional powers such as Canada and the U.S.?*

**KS:** When President Chavez visited Haiti on March 12th of this year, he was welcomed with an outpouring of support from thousands of Haitians. He pointed out to those gathered that "there have been turbulent times here and in my country as a result of imperial aggression." The visit coincided with the announcement of an incredible \$1 billion (U.S.) support fund for Haiti established by the governments of Venezuela and Cuba. This package includes the provision of medical and health care personnel and training programs, four electricity generation stations, the construction of a new oil refinery and the provision of oil at a price discount equal to that available to the countries participating in ALBA (though Haiti is not an ALBA signatory). For two countries with such challenging domestic needs to provide such a massive support package is stunning - which probably explains why it was barely reported in the Canadian media.

Canada and the U.S. continue to channel much of their "aid" programs to pro-coup NGOs and the coercive apparatus (UN military forces and the Haitian National Police) that can be used to limit the Haitian government's room to maneuver. Militarily occupying Haiti is incredibly expensive, and the costs are tabulated as Canada's "aid" program to Haiti - for which Canadian self-congratulation is endless.

*Let us turn to the Canadian side of the Haitian struggle. What role is Canada still playing in Haiti?*

**JP:** Canada is still heavily involved with the Haitian police - training, supervising, and continuing to restructure the prison and justice system. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) still funds various Haitian NGOs to coordinate Haitian "civil society": its business and media elite and those political sectors that are most contemptuous of the population. Its multinationals - Gildan and SNC-Lavalin, for example, for whom the Haitian business elite are subcontractors - still take profits from Haiti's workers and territories. Haiti under Preval is far from a sovereign country, despite the intentions of Haiti's people or even Preval's government itself. To the degree that it is an international protectorate, the political agenda is set - for the UN troops, for the media, for the police, and for much of the government - from the U.S. and Canadian Embassies.

**KS:** It is also worth noting that Canada's notorious mining sector is moving quickly to capitalize on the "special" leadership role played by these embassies in Haiti. The Canadian mining company Eurasian Minerals has been spending the last number of months buying up exploration licenses for huge gold, silver, and copper projects in the north of Haiti, noting with approval Haiti's recently re-established "environment for investment and growth."

*To wrap-up, what is the state of the Haitian solidarity movement right now internationally, and what is the current agenda for it in Canada?*

**JP:** A decent communications infrastructure remains along with some capacity to hold events. The Canadian network has been using this time to build our connections to Haitian activists, connections we had to try to scramble to build as the coup was unfolding in 2004. An example of these connections is the very successful tour of labour and women's activists Euvonie Georges-Auguste and Ginette Apollon. These are the kind of people Canadian activists should be in touch with, hearing from, and trying to support, materially and politically.

As far as mass demonstrations in solidarity with Haiti, the capacity for that was always limited, and is more limited now. The main reason is the un-elected coup regime is gone and the president is the people's choice. That makes it a less brutal instance of imperialism and less instantly appalling to people hearing about it than the coup was.

My own critique of the network is that we don't seem to understand that Preval's election was a significant victory for the Haitian people, beyond what could have been expected given the forces arrayed against them. We describe the pre-coup, the coup, and then slip right into "and things have hardly changed" without pointing out the amazing achievement that was the election and the defense of the victory against massive attempted fraud. Without that, we risk thinking of Haitians as perpetual victims of foreign policy and not as independent agents in their own right who we can think alongside. We can't think of Préval as simply a puppet (or waiting for him to do puppet things) rather than seeing the opportunities and the possibilities that well-timed actions or mobilizations in Canada could open up for Haitians.

**KS:** Justin is absolutely right here. Clearly, decades of resisting have produced an incredible sophistication within Haiti's popular movements. I think that many activists in Canada's Haiti solidarity movement (myself included) have woken up quite a bit from the mistaken view that CIDA-funded NGOs operating in countries such as Haiti can be trusted. We need to learn and popularize these lessons further, and toss this racist "Responsibility to Protect" doctrine into the dustbin of imperialist history. For many of us, the agenda now is to use strategies such as the recent tour of Haitian labour and women's movement leaders to underline how damaging Canada's role has been while simultaneously demonstrating what real relations of people-to-people solidarity might look like. **R**