

Mass protests against endemic poverty, government corruption convulse Haiti

By Richard Dufour
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Haiti's capital Port-au-Prince and several other major cities have been virtually shut down for the past three weeks in a continuation of mass anti-government protests that have erupted at regular intervals since July of last year. Impoverished youth from working-class neighborhoods have come out by the tens of thousands to denounce their hellish conditions of life.

The recent mass demonstrations have been accompanied by road blocks and clashes with police in response to their indiscriminate use of tear gas, water cannons, and live ammunition. At least seventeen people have died since the latest round of protests began in mid-September, according to a Haitian human rights organization.

Protestors are denouncing, among other things, a chronic lack of fuel that has kept schools closed for weeks, disrupted hospital services and resulted in widespread power outages; a precipitous decline of the Haitian currency (the *gourde*) in relation to the US dollar and a near 20 percent inflation rate that has put basic food items increasingly out of reach for the majority of the population; and the brazen theft of public funds by politicians in all parts of the government—including the Presidency, the various ministries, the Senate and the lower house of the legislature.

The main demand of the protestors, however, is the ousting of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse and his prosecution for extrajudicial killings of government opponents and massive corruption. According to a 600-page report issued last June by the country's Audit Court (*Cour Supérieure des Comptes*), two Moïse-controlled companies were given public road construction contracts worth over a million dollars for which no actual work was ever done. The contracts were awarded under the previous president, the *ne o-Duvalierist* Michel Martelly, who, with Washington's backing, helped rig the 2016 election to bring Moïse to power.

The money for the bogus road contracts came from the so-called PetroCaribe fund, which was built up over a ten-year period starting in 2007 from government sales of subsidized Venezuelan oil. The total amount that passed

through this fund in Haiti is estimated to have been over two billion dollars. Awarded by Venezuela to Haiti and a number of other Caribbean nations, in the face of fierce opposition by the US government, this money was meant to help finance social programs and public infrastructure projects, but was largely looted by Haiti's political elite and their business cronies.

In addition to Moïse, a number of high-profile politicians, including former President Martelly, have been accused of misappropriating PetroCaribe funds, of which very little remains.

The July 2018 protests that initiated the recurring cycle of mass anti-Moïse demonstrations were themselves triggered by an up to 50-percent increase of at-the-pump gasoline prices. That hike was made under direct orders from the IMF. With the Venezuelan government compelled to stop the assistance program due to deepening economic crisis at home, the IMF insisted Haiti must stop subsidizing the price of oil and squeeze the masses of the poorest country in the Western hemisphere still harder, so as to pay back the country's debts to the world's big banks.

The current resistance movement of the Haitian working class and oppressed masses is part of a resurgence of class struggle internationally, as seen with similar protests in every part of the world—from the mass anti-government demonstrations in Ecuador and Puerto Rico, to strikes by US, Mexican and Korean auto workers, the Yellow Vest movement in France, and the mass popular mobilizations that have led to the fall of presidents in Algeria and Sudan.

Moïse and his corrupt and repressive regime are fitting representatives of Haiti's venal ruling class. But the chief bulwark of capitalist rule in Haiti, and the principal cause of the endemic poverty, squalor and brutal social relations that characterize contemporary Haiti, is imperialism, above all US imperialism.

Beginning with the 1915-34 US Marines' occupation of Haiti, Washington has repeatedly invaded and occupied the tiny, but densely populated country, and supported and sustained in power a succession of right-wing repressive

regimes. Most notorious of these was the nearly three decades-long dictatorship of “Papa Doc” Duvalier and his son, Jean-Claude Duvalier. As in many countries, Washington long used Haiti’s army as its principal instrument for maintaining its domination, instigating repeated bloody coups.

Democratically-elected governments headed by the former liberation theology priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide were twice overthrown by “made in USA” coups, first in 1991 and then 2004, although Aristide pledged fidelity to Washington and worked with the IMF and other imperialist institutions. In 2004, the US, Canada and France connived in a rebellion led by former Haitian army officers and *Tonton Macoutes*, then sent in troops to “stabilize” the country and kidnap Aristide, who was hustled onto a plane destined for the remote Central African Republic.

Since the mid-1980s, Haiti has been subject to repeated IMF-style “neo-liberal” economic restructuring programs, aimed at increasing imperialist domination of its economy and transforming it into an ultra-cheap labour producer of garments and other low-tech manufactured goods.

The results have been ruinous. Unrestricted US rice and other food imports led to the virtual destruction of the Haitian peasantry, while a spiralling state debt was used to siphon the country’s meager resources into the coffers of Western financial institutions.

Today the Moïse government is clinging to power only thanks to the support of Washington, and its French and Canadian allies. Leaders of the so-called Core Group of countries, they have repeatedly offered to “mediate” between the government and opposition leaders, while cynically declaiming on the need to uphold the “rule of law” and “democracy,” i.e. to keep the current government in power.

On Sept. 26, the US Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan met with Moïse’s foreign minister, Bocchit Edmond.

However, given the extent of the mass opposition to Moïse it cannot be excluded that Washington, Paris and Ottawa will decide to switch horses and find a new lackey to head up Haiti’s government, whether from the entourage of Moïse and Martelly or among so-called opposition figures, who are no less corrupt or subservient to imperialism.

On Monday, US Republican Senator Marco Rubio, who successfully pressured Haiti to back the abortive US coup against Venezuela and in recent weeks has been warning Port-au-Prince not to sever diplomatic ties with Taiwan, claimed that whether Haiti’s “democratically elected leader” resigns or stays is “an internal matter for Haitians to decide.”

In countries of belated capitalist development such as

Haiti, there is no section of the national bourgeoisie that is able or willing to wage the consistent and revolutionary struggle against imperialism that is needed to secure the elementary democratic and social aspirations of the workers and toilers.

This has been tragically borne out by the recent history of Haiti. The revolutionary upsurge that toppled the hated Duvalier dictatorship in February 1986 was ultimately dissipated and broken through its channeling via the radical priest Jean-Bertrand Aristide behind a section of the Haitian bourgeoisie, and a nationalist program of piece-meal reform and accommodation with imperialism.

After the overthrow of the first Aristide government in September 1991, he was brought back to power in 1994 by an invading army of US Marines after signing a secret agreement with the IMF and World Bank pledging his future government to so-called “structural adjustment” policies.

These included opening up the Haitian market to the unrestricted influx of US goods and privatizing highly-profitable government-owned companies such as Teleco, the national telephone company. Thus Aristide presided over the further impoverishment of the Haitian peasantry and the elimination of tens of thousands of public sector jobs.

Aristide’s return as part of a US occupying force was used to provide imperialism with a new aura of legitimacy, which further served to disorient revolutionary-minded workers and youth. They have paid a heavy price for this political stab in the back.

But as the current resurgence of the class struggle internationally has shown, the lessons of past defeats can and must be learned. The Haitian working class—including workers of Haitian descent living in the US, Canada, France and elsewhere—must take its place alongside its class brothers and sisters in the US and internationally in the common struggle against world capitalism and imperialism.

To the extent that it adopts such an international orientation in opposition to all forms of Haitian nationalism, to the extent that it maintains its political independence from all factions of the national bourgeoisie, including the Lavalas Party of Aristide, the Haitian working class will be in a powerful position to lead the oppressed masses in a revolutionary struggle for socialism that will resound across the Caribbean and all the Americas.

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