

# An exchange on Haiti: Jean-Bertrand Aristide and the dead end of “left” nationalist politics

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*Below we post a letter on Haiti from a reader and a reply by WSWS correspondent Richard Dufour.*

To the Editor:

Referring to the current conflict in Haiti as a “right-wing” rebellion indicates a lack of understanding of the opposition movement calling for Aristide’s resignation. There are several distinct groups in the opposition. In addition to the business associations and “wealthy elites” the United States left has focused on, the main opposition movement, the Groupe 184, consists of a wide variety of civil society organizations, including numerous peasant organizations, syndicates [unions], women’s groups, student associations, and writers and artists, some of whom worked in earlier Lavalas administrations. These groups have traditionally been associated with the Haitian left, and the United States right-wing would most likely find their missions abhorrent.

The Groupe 184 has clearly and repeatedly distanced itself from the armed insurgents in Gonaïves, who were aligned with Aristide until their leader, Amiot Metayer, was assassinated. The Groupe 184 organizes peaceful demonstrations, which have grown ever-larger, particularly since thugs (chimères) affiliated with Aristide’s government entered the university, beat students, trashed classrooms and broke the legs of the university rector on December 5, 2003. Several of the opposition demonstrations have ended in violence, not because of the behavior of the unarmed marchers, but because chimères, and occasionally the police, have attacked them with bottles, rocks, tear gas and guns. The Groupe 184 is unarmed and unaffiliated with the armed opposition in Gonaïves, and has not called for insurrection. Winter Etienne, the spokesperson of the Gonaïves insurgents, has also clearly stated that his group is unaffiliated with the Groupe 184. He has also explicitly stated that his group acquired their weapons when they worked for Aristide against the unarmed, civil opposition.

As a Haitian whose family was persecuted, arrested, exiled and/or killed by the Duvalier government for being “radical leftists” and “communists,” I am dismayed by the knee-jerk support the United States left is expressing for Aristide. To me, it is part of the same colonialist mentality that the United States has always had towards Haiti—that foreign whites know what is best for Haiti. Rather than blindly accepting the Aristide government’s propaganda, the United States left should consider why so many of Aristide’s Haitian partisans, including many who fought hard for his return to power after the 1991 coup d’état, have turned against him. The degradation and deterioration of everything in Haiti since cannot be blamed on the lack of foreign aid alone. In 1994, Aristide once again had the opportunity to set Haiti on a new path to change and development, and many Haitians, both in Haiti and abroad, were eager to work with him. He (and Préval) squandered that chance; instead, Haiti under Aristide and Lavalas has become increasingly dangerous and unliveable, due to crime and violence perpetrated by the government-affiliated chimères who use their government-issued weapons to terrorize both the local Haitian population and visitors of Haitian ancestry. That is the reason some Haitians are calling for his resignation today.

(I am not affiliated with any organization involved in Haitian politics.)

M-H L.D.

13 February, 2004

Thank you for your letter. It raises pivotal questions regarding the current political turmoil in Haiti and what way forward for those seeking to tackle the root causes of that country’s never-ending social-political crisis—deepening mass poverty amid great wealth for a few, the outcome of decades of imperialist oppression of the Haitian people.

While the main opposition groups, the Groupe 184 and Convergence Démocratique, have sought to capitalize on the mass popular alienation generated by the Aristide government’s corruption, autocratic methods and neo-liberal policies, they do not represent any progressive alternative. Their strident denunciations of Jean-Bertrand Aristide’s human rights record notwithstanding, the opposition forces have used similar methods of intimidation and violence. After various electoral failures, they boycotted the last presidential elections in 2000 and did everything to prevent, and still oppose, new parliamentary elections—unless Aristide first resigns and they are handed state power.

The official opposition has pinned its hopes on creating so much disturbance and political instability as to render the country ungovernable and thereby provoke the US government to intervene in its favor. In numerous interviews in recent days with world media outlets, opposition spokesmen have directed their appeals not to the Haitian people but to the governments of France, Canada and above all the United States.

Nothing could more clearly expose the opposition’s profoundly anti-democratic nature than this grovelling before Haiti’s imperialist masters. After all, what are the democratic credentials of a Bush administration which came to power by stealing the 2000 US election and which has since unleashed the deadly power of the US military machine on the innocent peoples of Afghanistan and Iraq in the quest for oil and geo-strategic advantage? And what is the US record in Haiti? Throughout the last century, Washington, under Democratic and Republican administrations alike, backed a long line of Haitian dictators, including the infamous Duvalier family, all the way up to the last decade when President George Bush Sr. gave his seal of approval to the bloody 1991 military coup which overthrew the first Aristide government.

Inside Haiti, the opposition has turned to the most reactionary elements. Its response to the armed uprisings in the north, led by criminal gang leaders, drug traffickers and other dubious figures, was quite revealing. According to a *Miami Herald* report, “Although Aristide’s political opposition has tried to distance itself from the gunmen, Evans Paul, a leader of the Democratic Convergence ... told [a] news conference that their revolt is a legitimate reaction to what they see as the president’s misrule.”

Reports have since emerged that leaders of the FRAPH—the right-wing death squad which hunted down opponents of the 1991-1994 military junta—have crossed the border from the Dominican Republic, where they had taken refuge, to join the Gonaïves rebellion.

Whether the official opposition groups had a direct hand in the armed

uprisings at Gonaïves and elsewhere may be debatable. Their right-wing political affiliations are not.

André Apaid, the sweatshop owner who has emerged as the opposition's leading spokesman, opposed the ouster of the military junta and Aristide's restoration to power in 1994. He calls for the reestablishment of the Haitian army, dissolved by Aristide in 1995—no matter that this pillar of reaction, created by the United States during its 1915-34 military occupation of the country, was responsible for repeated bloody coups.

The official opposition is a loose coalition containing disparate elements—from remnants of the old Duvalier political machine such as ex-Duvalier minister Hubert De Ronceray to one-time supporters of Aristide. It draws extensive support from the middle classes (“peasant organizations, syndicates, women's groups, student associations, and writers and artists,” as you put it). But its real leadership rests in the hands of what you describe as “business associations and ‘wealthy elites’.” Your quotation marks around the latter are meant, one assumes, to convey a sense of exaggeration in the use of the term. But the fact remains that the driving force behind the dump-Aristide movement is Haiti's traditional ruling elite—a strata notorious both for its deep-rooted fear of the popular masses and readiness to support violence and authoritarian rule to protect its privileges.

To the extent that Jean-Bertrand Aristide, as a young, liberation-theology priest in a Port-au-Prince slum, emerged in the final years of the Duvalier regime as a charismatic mass leader who laced his sermons with anti-imperialist and socialist rhetoric, he earned the hatred of the ruling elite. Indeed, on several occasions he only narrowly escaped assassination by right-wing death squads.

Subsequently, I shall discuss how Aristide came to power and his political responsibility for the abortion of the mass anti-imperialist movement that convulsed Haiti between 1986 and 1991. But one thing should be made clear now: for the dominant sections of the Haitian ruling class, personified by the millionaire businessman Apaid, Aristide's populist appeals to the “dirty masses”—whether in their left-wing guise in the days of the struggle against Duvalier or in their current form of right-wing, racial appeals against the “mulatto elite”—are a dangerous promotion of “class hatred” that cannot be tolerated.

Of course, the issue is presented otherwise by the opposition leaders. Their talk of Aristide's “tyranny” is meant to downplay their own past history and present associations. In this regard, Apaid made a remarkable confession in an interview with the Montreal daily *La Presse*: “Asked about the suspected drug traffickers who run a radio station in the north and invoke freedom of expression, about the gunmen convicted for a massacre under the putschist regime [of 1991-94] at Raboteau in Gonaïves, and about two senators ex-members of Lavalas [Aristide's political party] suspected of grave crimes, who are all his allies in the struggle against Aristide, Apaid replied, ‘I haven't negotiated anything with them,’ but added: ‘I work in conviviality. I am not the justice minister.’”

Opposition leaders are deliberately cultivating ambiguity as to the policies they want to see implemented by a post-Aristide government. When asked in the same *La Presse* interview about the opposition's attempt to develop a common program, Apaid said, “The contentious points have been pushed aside, as for example: should the economy be based on the national space or on globalization and openness? Should workers or investors be protected?... This left-right battle will keep tensions up for six, eight, ten more years.”

Apaid may refrain from openly stating his own position in the “left-right battle,” but his actions as owner of the industrial glove maker, Alpha Sewing, speak for themselves. According to an August 1998 report on Alpha Sewing by Action Alert, a labor rights group: “Workers report skin and respiratory problems because of work done unprotected with heavy

chemicals. Workers work approximately 78 hours a week. 75 percent of the women do not earn the minimum wage.”

Based on the above observations, it is entirely accurate to characterize the official opposition movement and the armed rebellion in the north—whatever the exact nature of the ties between them—as a right-wing challenge to the elected government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide. To recognize this political fact and to bring out the real agenda of opposition forces in Haiti does not mean political “knee-jerk” support for Aristide as you imply in your letter.

It is true that elements in the US commonly identified as “left,” such as *Workers World* and the weekly *Haiti-Progrès*, are raising the threat of reaction as a cynical means to drum up support for an Aristide government whose popularity has plummeted because of its policies of privatizations, mass layoffs and price-subsidy cuts. The irony is that your own position, glorifying the Haitian opposition movement, is but the other side of the same coin. You share with the pro-Aristide “lefts” the view that the most one can do is support one or the other of the bankrupt bourgeois factions now at each other's throats in a deadly feud for the crumbs of power.

The *World Socialist Web Site* insists rather that working people in Haiti, the United States, and internationally should take an independent class standpoint. Principled political opposition to Aristide must be based on the recognition that he has played a crucial role in derailing a mass popular movement, which contained within it the potential for revolutionary change.

Jean-Bertrand Aristide has now been in power for 10 years, both directly and through his so-called “twin” René Préval who was Haiti's nominal president from 1996 to 2001. His failure to improve the country's social conditions—they have in fact grown far worse—and the subsequent political resurrection of the forces of reaction represent the most damning indictment of Aristide's “left” nationalist politics.

Let us now briefly review Aristide's political career since his fateful decision in late 1990 to seek the presidency. In December of that year he stood against Marc Bazin, a former World Bank economist who was then widely seen as Washington's favored candidate. This represented a 180-degree shift for a man who had until then denounced the coming elections as “US made” and advocated their boycott.

What caused this turnaround? As the day of the ballot drew closer, agitation among the popular masses increased dramatically in response to the electoral campaign mounted by the Duvalierist forces under the leadership of Roger Lafontant, the strongman of the regime in its dying days. Nearly five years after the colossal upheavals that had toppled “Baby Doc” Duvalier, the Haitian ruling class became increasingly alarmed at the prospect of another eruption of the oppressed masses into the country's political life.

It was at this point that significant sections of the Haitian bourgeoisie turned to the former radical priest Aristide as a means to contain such a movement. A necessary precondition was to divert it from the streets into electoral channels. And Aristide obliged them. He quickly set aside his past “anti-capitalist” and “anti-imperialist” rhetoric, agreed to head a coalition of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois political formations, and campaigned on a platform of “national reconciliation,” in particular for a “marriage between the people and the military.” Aristide won a landslide victory in an election for which working people and the oppressed had come out en masse.

His first government, which took office in February 1991, was marked by feeble attempts at social reforms, including a token rise in the minimum wage, coupled with preparations for the imposition of IMF-inspired austerity measures. This was under conditions where the oppressed masses who had propelled Aristide into the National Palace, in particular his supporters among the youth, were pressing hard for a meaningful redistribution of wealth to alleviate poverty. After little over

eight months in office, the dominant sections of the Haitian ruling class lost confidence in Aristide's ability to contain the revolutionary strivings of the masses and backed a military coup by the man Aristide had appointed head of the Haitian armed forces, General Raoul Cédras.

The response of Aristide, whose life was spared thanks only to an intervention by the French ambassador on the night of the coup, was to have catastrophic political consequences for the Haitian people's struggle for their social emancipation. While his supporters in the popular neighborhoods of Port-au-Prince were being machine-gunned, Aristide appealed for the coup's opponents to remain "peaceful" so as to avoid civil war. This didn't prevent a civil war, but only made it one-sided. It is estimated that over 3,000 people were killed during General Cédras' three-year rule.

But most politically damaging was Aristide's decision, after finding refuge in the United States, to base the struggle against the military junta not on appeals to the American and international working class to assist their Haitian class brothers and sisters in throwing off the yoke of military terror and capitalist exploitation, but on the very force that had played the central role throughout the twentieth century in maintaining Haiti into the most abject poverty and oppression—that is, US imperialism.

That Aristide and his inner circle basically threw themselves at Washington's knee, begging for support, flowed organically from their social nature as representatives of a petty-bourgeoisie whose class outlook is shaped by the gruesome day-to-day reality of imperialist oppression, but which lacks any genuine independence from the national bourgeoisie and from imperialism itself. In a previous historical period, when the Cold War conflict between US imperialism and the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union provided the national bourgeoisie with some room to maneuver, and existing constraints on the international mobility of capital allowed for a limited possibility of national economic development, petty-bourgeois nationalists such as Cuba's Fidel Castro or Nicaragua's Sandinistas could pose as radical anti-imperialists and even socialists. But by the time Aristide was forced into exile the Soviet Union was on the brink of formal dissolution and in response to the economic shocks of the 1970s, the advanced capitalist powers had become increasingly aggressive in their dealings with the so-called Third World, demanding the dismantling of tariff barriers and state-owned industries as a condition for credit, investments and access to advanced technology.

That Aristide's career as an "anti-imperialist" proved so short, and his transformation into a lackey of Washington such an unpleasant spectacle, was thus not fundamentally a result of personal failings. Rather it was rooted in the fact that he had come onto the scene at the very point when any objective basis for implementing his petty-bourgeois nationalist program of using the nation-state to foster indigenous industry and implement limited social reforms in an attempt to overcome the legacy of imperialist oppression had collapsed.

In any event, Aristide's pleas to US imperialism fell initially on deaf ears, as the Republican administration of George Bush Sr. all but openly welcomed the eviction of the former radical priest at the hands of its main prop in Haiti, the US-built Haitian armed forces. However, the military junta's brutal rule soon led tens of thousands of Haitians to try to cross the sea to Florida, and the influx of Haitian refugees became an issue in the 1992 US presidential election with Democratic hopeful Bill Clinton denouncing Bush's policy of systematically denying Haitian refugees the right of asylum.

Following Clinton's election to the White House, pressure built on him to solve the refugee problem. His administration finally decided in 1994 upon a military intervention to restore Aristide to power, so as to justify completely closing the US's doors to poor Haitians and dispel the growing impression that the Clinton administration was impotent before Cédras and the Haitian junta. Aristide's return, however, was made conditional on his providing a host of right-wing guarantees, most

importantly a pledge to carry out IMF-style neo-liberal policies.

Thus, when you write that "in 1994, Aristide once again had the opportunity to set Haiti on a new path to change and development," you overlook the concrete conditions of his return. As a result of his own petty-bourgeois political orientation—his preference to turn to imperialism rather than the Haitian and international working class—Aristide had his hands and feet tied from the start. He was completely beholden to the very force that has so long blocked Haiti's "path to change and development," i.e., American imperialism. In one of history's bitter ironies, Aristide, who was elected president on the basis of a campaign against a former World Bank official whom he decried as "the US candidate," was put back in power by US marines after pledging to impose a socially incendiary economic program dictated by Washington and Wall Street.

Aristide remained in office only until the beginning of 1996, since Clinton administration officials had insisted that no extension of his five-year mandate would be allowed despite the three years of Cédras's rule and Haiti's constitution barred him seeking a second consecutive term. Aristide's chosen successor and right-hand man, René Préval, therefore ran as the candidate of Aristide's party, Lavalas, and was elected president in 1996.

It was Préval's government that actually carried out the key elements of the IMF structural adjustment program, leading to mass redundancies in the public sector, the shutdown of publicly run companies such as the country's flour and cement manufacturers, and huge cuts in subsidies on food and transportation under conditions of runaway inflation. The result was deepening social misery in the poorest country in the Western hemisphere. Aristide still pulled the strings of power behind the scenes, but since he formally held no office he was somewhat shielded from the political fallout of such deeply unpopular policies.

Aristide was reelected president in December 2000, following elections boycotted by opposition forces but deemed fair by international observers. Compared to a decade before, however, the turnout was way down, well under 50 percent according to most estimates.

During the past three years, the devastating IMF-dictated policies Aristide signed onto and his "twin" carried out have torn ever deeper into the country's social fabric. And the social crisis has been further exacerbated by the withholding of hundreds of millions of dollars of promised foreign financial aid as the US, Canada and other big powers try to force Aristide to incorporate opposition representatives into his government. Unable to offer any progressive solution to the ever-widening social misery, Aristide has come to rely more and more on the dirty tricks of generations of Haitian politicians—patronage repression, racial appeals, and his own private network of armed gangs recruited from lumpen elements.

In the end, both Aristide and his foes in the opposition are defenders of bourgeois rule who lack any genuine popular basis of support. They both rely on the political backing of Washington and other imperialist forces, and on patronage and intimidation tactics at home. Neither has the slightest concern for bourgeois-democratic norms, let alone the democratic rights of the masses: they know class divisions are so deep and conditions of life so hellish for the vast majority of Haitians, that they can only be enforced through the use of naked force.

Whether Aristide or the opposition forces ultimately prevail may determine which section of the political and business elite gets to plunder the state—the most important source of wealth in a country with such a low level of economic activity and output as Haiti. For the masses, it will make no fundamental difference.

Those looking for a genuinely progressive solution, one which addresses the burning needs of the masses for peace, democratic rights, security, adequate food, housing, health care and education will find it in the struggle to mobilize Haiti's oppressed masses against the domination of the island's economy and state by a native business oligarchy, serving as

the junior partner of Wall Street and Washington.

The only social force able to lead the fight for such an alternative is the Haitian, Caribbean and international working class. But it must draw the lessons of the tragic last two decades of struggles in Haiti. It must recognize the bankruptcy of petty-bourgeois nationalist politics of the type espoused by Aristide and his supporters. Imperialist oppression cannot be overcome on a national basis, but only as part of a struggle against international capital.

Under today's conditions of globalization, whose great potential of progress for the whole of humanity remains blocked by the monopoly control of a few giant transnational corporations driven by private profit, the strivings of the broad masses can only be fulfilled by a fundamental, revolutionary shift at the very basis of society. The world economy must be run to address social needs and not the profits of a few. For this, working people in Haiti must consciously unite their struggles with those of their class brothers and sisters in the Caribbean, South and North America, and join in the building of an independent mass political movement of the international working class against imperialism.

Sincerely,

Richard Dufour, for the WSWS



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