

# The Price of Sugar: Horrifying conditions exposed—and a legal counterattack

Matt Waller  
8 May 2008

*Directed by Bill Haney, written by Haney and Peter Rhodes*

A film exposing some of the predatory practices of the US-supported sugar industry in the Dominican Republic has itself become the subject of an attack campaign by the entrenched sugar powers.

*The Price of Sugar*, a documentary by Bill Haney portraying the near-slavery conditions facing Haitian cane-cutters on Dominican sugar plantations, has prompted a defamation lawsuit by the Dominican sugar corporation highlighted in the film, accompanied by a cease-and-desist order aimed at preventing the showing of the film.

Narrated by Paul Newman and made for just \$750,000, the documentary—Haney's fourth film—is well paced and skillfully directed. It follows the efforts of a Catholic priest, Christopher Hartley, to relieve the conditions of the immigrant Haitian workers in his parish, a 600-square-mile region consisting mostly of vast plantations owned by the Vicini family, second largest of the wealthy Dominican sugar barons. In the process Hartley incurs the wrath of the Vicinis, who launch a concerted and ugly smear campaign against him.

The heart of the film is its exposure of the systematic exploitation of Haitian workers by the sugar industry. We see how the Dominican companies use promises of a better life to lure busloads of impoverished Haitians over the border in mass illegal crossings, while the government and military turn a blind eye.

Once in the Dominican Republic, the workers find themselves confined to the *bateyes* (plantation shantytowns), forced to perform the backbreaking and dangerous labor of cutting cane with machetes, while living in unspeakable squalor. Crowded into tiny metal-roofed shacks without plumbing, they have no access to proper health care and often lack even clean water. Incidences of AIDS, dengue fever and malaria in the *bateyes* are reported to be among the highest in the world.

The workers cut cane for up to 14 hours a day, and at one point we see a typical cutter who is forced to work barefoot

on the sharp stubble of the cut stalks, unable to afford shoes. The pay is less than a dollar a day, delivered not in cash but in vouchers redeemable at the company store for merchandise at highly inflated prices. According to the film most workers cannot afford adequate food, and meet their daily calorie needs only by chewing the sugarcane.

The Haitian workers are stripped of any identification papers on arrival, and so they cannot leave the plantations without risk of arrest. Thus they form a stateless, voiceless population without legal recourse in either country. The children born on the *bateyes* are neither given birth certificates nor granted Dominican citizenship, and so they share the same fate.

A 2006 State Department Human Rights report estimated that there were 650,000 such undocumented Haitians in the sugar plantations, often just inland from—and out of sight of—the tourist trade at the luxury resorts on the island's coast. According to director Haney, he wanted to “reveal the lives of some of the poorest people in the Americas—living next to some of the richest.”

*The Price of Sugar* does important work in exposing the human misery that still, in the 21st century, underlies the production of Caribbean sugar. Unfortunately, what gives the film its drama is also what marks its limitations: the reduction of that story to the person of Father Hartley.

The Spanish-born Hartley, a disciple of Mother Teresa, is in his late 40s, a stubborn, courageous priest who seems sincerely dedicated to helping the poor. In the face of mounting opposition, we watch him take a series of steps to aid the workers: he brings in US doctors, sets up church-funded centers where the children can receive a quality meal every day and eventually spearheads the construction of a compound on church land with new sanitary houses.

These efforts at philanthropy earn Hartley the Vicinis' dislike, but what really arouses their concerted opposition is his elementary attempt to start organizing the workers. And it's a credit to *The Price of Sugar* that it even portrays this attempt. Too many socially concerned movies about Westerners confronting poverty begin and end with the

philanthropy of the Westerner in question (one thinks of Zana Briski's 2005 *Born Into Brothels*).

Here, we see Hartley convincing the cane-cutters to strike for the elemental right of being told in advance what their wages are. At a stirring nighttime workers' meeting, he explains in eye-opening terms that they, the lowest of the low, are in fact the most essential and powerful component of the entire sugar empire. This is a powerful scene whose import transcends the immediate story, and it lends added weight and meaning to what follows.

The Vicinis' counterattack against Hartley is perhaps the most illuminating segment of the film, in which we see offended capitalism using not only force but tactics of division to crush a potential worker awakening.

The sugar baron family responds first with death threats against the priest and his assistant, which succeed in driving the assistant out of the country. They send armed guards to the *bateyes* to terrify the strikers; in private the guards promise that Hartley will also someday depart, leaving them unprotected.

When these tactics fail, the company deploys its extensive media holdings to conduct a television smear campaign, accusing Hartley of trying to "Haitianize" the Dominican Republic. The ludicrous charge is nevertheless skillful: it resonates on an island whose deep divisions go back to the terrors and massacres of colonial times, and the hate campaign succeeds in stirring up a section of the Dominican populace against Hartley. Expensively printed banners denouncing him are hung up over the street, and in a climactic scene we watch as paid agitators start a mob riot against his church, led by the Dominican media's equivalent of a strident right-wing television personality.

The film contains a number of powerful scenes. However, these mark the limit of Haney's agenda. Like Charles Ferguson, another liberal filmmaker (*No End in Sight*, about the Iraq disaster), Haney is a former businessman who accumulated sufficient funds to finance his cinematic activities. According to *Filmmaker* magazine, the director started his first business while a student at Harvard, "and made \$15m when he sold his stock in the company, aged just 26. He then moved on to invest in two environmental companies and then a software company, continuing his success with all three." He became involved in documentary filmmaking in the mid-1990s when he assisted Errol Morris in completing one of his films.

For all his skill as a filmmaker, and the unquestionable sincerity of his desire to alleviate the plight of the Haitians, Haney remains rooted in the perspective of social reformism. After a recent screening, he offered the following advice to those opposed to the practices depicted in the film: "Use raw sugar from Hawaii, which is great and doesn't have any of

these issues. And there's Fair Trade sugar, which is just like fair trade coffee." This will do nothing to change the situation in the Dominican Republic.

Haney's film has come under a sustained attack. Last May the Vicini family hired the Washington law firm Patton Boggs to file a defamation lawsuit and a cease-and-desist order against Haney in Massachusetts, in an attempt to prevent the release of the film. The lawsuit is ongoing and has cost Haney up to \$50,000.

This assault by powerful social interests has not widened Haney's own perspective. His response has been to turn to the US Congress to advance the cause of the Haitian workers, reportedly arranging a screening of the film for the House Human Rights Caucus. It is the US government and ruling elite, of course, which bear primary responsibility for the misery of the Dominican Republic in the 20th century, with a long history of imperial domination that dates from the Theodore Roosevelt administration and includes an eight-year military occupation of the country from 1916 to 1924. It is worth noting that this history is conspicuously absent from the film.

As for Father Hartley, though his personal courage can likewise not be questioned, his own primary allegiance was demonstrated last August when his diocese, under political pressure, transferred him to Ethiopia. He went obediently. This demonstrates that, in the long run, Christian philanthropy has no real solution to offer the impoverished workers of the Caribbean.

*The Price of Sugar* remains a worthwhile film in that it exposes an ongoing capitalist crime, in terms that allow the viewer to draw wider inferences. But its shortfalls emphasize the fact that, artistically as well as politically, the cane-cutters cannot be saved as long as the capitalist system remains untouched.



To contact the WSWWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**