

“Reconstructing Haiti” on starvation wages

Bill Van Auken
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Government ministers, international bankers and aid agencies gathered in Montreal Monday to discuss plans for reconstructing earthquake-ravaged Haiti. At the heart of their proposals is the exploitation of Haitian workers at poverty wages.

The conference offered nothing concrete in terms of new assistance, instead scheduling a donors meeting at the United Nations in March. Much of the rhetoric coming out of the gathering seemed to bear little relationship to the situation on the ground in Haiti, where 150,000 people have been confirmed dead, hundreds of thousands more are wounded and over 1.5 million are homeless.

Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive, representing what remains of the Haitian government, together with foreign ministers from Europe and the Americas spoke of respect for Haitian sovereignty, subordination of foreign military forces to humanitarian efforts, and allowing Haitians to determine and lead their own reconstruction efforts.

Some leading officials, including International Monetary Fund Director Dominique Strauss-Kahn, have gone so far as to speak in terms of a “Marshall Plan” for Haiti.

In reality, Haiti is now being run by the US military, which has deployed over 13,000 troops and unilaterally taken control of the country’s airport and port facilities. The Pentagon has dominated the provision of relief, which it has subordinated to the number one priority of deploying combat-equipped US soldiers and Marines, much to the detriment of injured and hungry Haitians waiting for life-saving medical supplies and food.

The US newsweekly *Time* gave expression to the real situation, referring to the top US military commander in the country, US Lt. Gen. Ken Keen, as “the de facto king of Haiti.” Meanwhile, the Haitian people have seen or heard nothing of Haitian President René Préval.

Behind the talk of Haitians determining their own

future and the country’s government leading the way, what is being discussed is a plan worked out in the months before the earthquake that is dictated by the profit interests of US banks and corporations, together with those of Haiti’s wealthy elite.

Speaking to reporters en route from Washington to Montreal, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton referred to this plan, while praising the work of her husband, former President Bill Clinton, in seeking to implement it in his position as United Nations envoy to Haiti.

“He had just had a conference with 500 businesspeople,” she said. “They were signing contracts, they were making investments.”

She continued: “So we have a plan. It was a legitimate plan, it was done in conjunction with other international donors, with the United Nations. And I don’t want to start from scratch, but we have to recognize the changed challenges we are now confronting.”

The plan, worked up at the behest of the UN last year, is aimed at expanding the Haitian economy through the development of free trade zones based on garment sweatshops in which Haitian workers would be paid near-starvation wages.

The initiative was based on a report prepared for the UN last year by Oxford University economics professor Paul Collier. The report perversely cast Haiti’s poverty—the deepest in the Western Hemisphere—as its number one asset in the global capitalist economy.

“Due to its poverty and relatively unregulated labor market, Haiti has labor costs that are fully competitive with China, which is the global benchmark,” Collier wrote.

This “asset” is something that both Washington and Haiti’s parasitical ruling elite have jealously guarded. Former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide was overthrown twice—in 1991 and 2004—in bloody coups

orchestrated by the CIA in conjunction with Haitian factory owners, in large measure for proposing to raise the country's minimum wage.

After his election for a second term in 2000, Aristide doubled the minimum wage and banned piece work in the garment factories, provoking fierce opposition from the owners of these enterprises. Andy Apaid, the Haitian-American owner of the largest sweatshops in Haiti and one of the Clintons' key allies in the new "development" plan, was a key figure in the 2004 coup, which saw Aristide abducted and bundled out of the country by US troops and thousands of Haitians massacred by right-wing death squads.

Last year, following mass demonstrations by students and workers in which several people were killed and wounded, President Préval was forced to accept an increase in the minimum wage that had been passed by the Haitian legislature. However, he enacted a sub-minimum wage for the garment assembly industry of \$2.98 a day—approximately one-twentieth of the minimum wage in the US.

While such a system will make super-profits for garment manufacturers and further enrich Haiti's native oligarchy, it will do nothing to alleviate the country's grinding poverty and will only deepen its pervasive social inequality, the worst in the hemisphere. Garment assembly involves importing pieces of clothing that are put together in free trade zones and then exported out again, with virtually no impact on the local economy.

While Secretary Clinton indicated that this slave labor blueprint is the one Washington is still working off of in the wake of the January 12 earthquake, she allowed that the catastrophe would require making some modifications.

Clinton praised Bellerive for talking about "decentralizing" the Haitian economy. "As part of our multilateral efforts to assist Haiti, we should look at how we decentralize economic opportunity and work with the Haitian government and people to support resettlement, which they are doing on their own as people leave Port-au-Prince and return to the countryside from which most of them came," she said.

The Haitian authorities, backed by Washington and the UN, have begun implementing a plan to move hundreds of thousands of predominantly poor people out of Port-au-Prince and into resettlement camps.

Ground has been cleared for one of these at Croix-des-Bouquets, eight miles from the capital, which would house 10,000 people. Other sites are being chosen, with the idea that those evacuated from the capital will be permanently housed there.

In a society in which social divisions are so stark, the so-called reconstruction plan for Haiti is inevitably developing along class lines. It may well emerge that the new resettlement camps will serve as captive labor for free trade zones erected in close proximity.

Meanwhile, Port-au-Prince will be reconstructed as a smaller city, geared to the interests of the country's wealthy. This was hinted at in a statement by the Haiti's ambassador to Washington, Raymond Joseph. Speaking on a C-SPAN television broadcast about the tragedy that has been inflicted upon the Haitian people, he said, "There is a silver lining. What was not politically possible was done by the earthquake. We will rebuild differently."

Such social re-engineering in the interests of a native ruling class and foreign capital, and at the expense of the broad masses of Haitian workers and poor, will inevitably provoke social upheavals and resistance. This is why Washington has placed getting "boots on the ground" ahead of saving the lives of the earthquake's victims.

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