

Strike, protests belie Haitian government's free education claims

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17 November 2012

On November 13 and 14, the UNNOH (Union Nationale des Normaliens Haïtiens), which represents graduates of Haitian teachers colleges, staged a strike featuring nine demands. The union was also protesting a new 2 percent tax on salaries planned by the government.

Notable among the strikers' demands are the establishment of a cholera vaccination program in schools and colleges. As of November 7, the cholera epidemic has killed more than 7,600 Haitians, including almost 600 children under the age of five, according to the Haitian Ministry of Public Health and Population.

The union is also demanding the creation of cafeterias serving hot meals in all schools and colleges, pointing to the importance of physical health and nutrition in the learning process.

In terms of economic demands, the strikers are fighting for a minimum monthly wage of 50,000 gourdes (approximately US \$1,200) plus benefits, the full payment of all teachers' salaries currently in arrears, the dedication of 30 percent of the national budget to K-12 education, and the commitment of 4 percent of the national budget to public higher education. According to the UNNOH's statistics, this latter category currently receives only 0.55 percent of the public budget.

At a press conference on Tuesday, the union called on teachers, professors, students, parents, administrators, and other unions to join it in order to "finally obtain from the State the total satisfaction of these demands," according to *Le Nouvelliste*.

Despite Haiti's status as the poorest country in the Caribbean, the UNNOH has learned certain tricks from its North American counterparts. One of its nine demands was the "participation of teachers' unions in the administration of social welfare insurance," a

practice which has become lucrative for union bureaucracies. Two union organizers from New York traveled to Haiti to help organize the strike.

As of Wednesday night, the number of workers participating in the strike had not been reported. However, UNNOH leader Josué Merillien told the Haiti Press Network that the strike had "borne fruit" in the form of a bargaining meeting between the government and union leaders.

The strike was originally planned for October, but postponed because of the devastation wrought by Hurricane Sandy in Haiti. Events continue to overtake the plans of the UNNOH, as street demonstrations are erupting in Port-au-Prince over the shooting death of a college student by a police cadet.

On the night of November 10, 24-year-old Damaël D'Haiti attended a party traditionally held each fall to welcome newly admitted students to the Faculty of Law and Economic Sciences at the State University of Haiti. Damaël, who was close to finishing his own education, was shot in the head by Pierre Paul Masséus, for reasons which are still "under investigation." Masséus is a member of the most recent class promoted from the police academy.

Protests erupted in Port-au-Prince the day after the murder, and continued into a fourth day on Wednesday. A video clip on the web site of *Le Nouvelliste* showed peaceful protesters chanting for justice as they ran past an army vehicle in the street. However, police fired teargas as well as live ammunition, causing 50 people—including school children—to faint, and protesters constructed barricades in some streets.

The administration of the UEH (l'Université d'Etat d'Haiti, or State University of Haiti) closed the school for 24 hours on Tuesday in protest of the murder. The university's hospital stayed open, treating many

victims of the tear gas attacks and one student shot in the arm.

Haitian President Michel Martelly, already the subject of protests because of food shortages, corruption, and abuses of power, now confronts challenges to what was supposed to be his great accomplishment: the reform of the country's education system, including the implementation of his campaign promises of free public education for all. Even after his election, Martelly promoted himself as the first Haitian President able to accomplish this historic feat.

To that end, the government established the FNE (Fonds National pour l'Education, or National Education Fund), to be paid for by a 5 cent per minute fee on all telephone calls coming into the country and a US \$1.50 transaction fee on all incoming remittances from Haitians living abroad. The FNE also receives contributions from the International Monetary Fund, the International Development Bank, and the World Bank.

Given that close to 90 percent of Haiti's K-12 education happens in private and religious schools, such a program is ripe for profit seekers.

On a web site promoting the program, the Martelly government promised that 350,000 students would benefit in the first year (2011-2012). 1.5 million students were supposed to receive funding by the end of his five-year term as president. However, an August 2012 IMF report found that only 165,500 children had benefitted in the first year, and that the amounts of support were negligible: US \$90 for children attending private schools, and only \$6 for those in public schools.

In the wake of the 2010 earthquake, food shortages, and two hurricanes this year, the country's education system is grossly underfunded. The government was forced to put off the start of classes—originally scheduled for September 3—until October 1 this year, and threatened to penalize any schools which charged parents for the month of September.



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