

Hollande, the Clintons and imperialism in Haiti

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In his book *The Black Jacobins*, a history of the Haitian revolution against France, C.L.R. James remarked that “a great empire and honest minds go ill together.” To match dishonest minds with empire in today’s Haiti, one need look no further than French President François Hollande and the representatives of Washington and Wall Street, Bill and Hillary Clinton.

Like his American counterparts, Hollande is a purveyor of “human rights” imperialism, which he brought to the Caribbean last week. His stop in Haiti, the first official visit of a French head of state since the 1804 revolution, was an exercise in cynicism.

Hollande stopped first on the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, still a French possession, for the inauguration of a museum dedicated to the history of the slave trade. This memorial, he said, will “tell the whole world that the fight for human dignity is not over.” The French president, whose government has spearheaded illegal wars in Libya and Syria while selling fighter jets to the murderous al-Sisi government in Egypt, is not in a position to lecture anyone about human dignity.

There were expectations that on his visit to Haiti, Hollande would address questions about French reparations for huge debt payments it imposed on Haiti after the 1804 revolution and for slavery itself—which he shrugged off in 2013 by saying that France’s “baneful role” cannot be the “subject of a transaction.” Giving lip service to the right of Haitians to democracy, however, Hollande made it obvious that the purpose of his trip was to promote French business interests.

“Development is indispensable for democracy,” he declared, after announcing the establishment of a committee that will discuss opportunities for French companies to make profits from the super-exploited workers of the poorest country in the western hemisphere. “Nothing will be ignored in this drive,” he threatened.

The US and France see in Haiti not just cheap labor, but

mineral wealth (despite the current lack of a functional mining law), a chance to wean the country off of Venezuelan petroleum, and an opportunity for cruise lines and resort operators to make profits. Before he was forced to resign in December, the government of Haitian Prime Minister Laurent Lamothe was involved in plans for a resort with its own golf course and airport (thus ideal for jet-setting multi-millionaires who would never see the rest of the country). The 60 percent of Haitians living on \$2 or less per day would be kept away from the rich by private security, UN troops, or the Haitian National Police.

In her book *Hard Choices*, Hillary Clinton uses the same language as Hollande to describe the US government’s approach to Haiti when she was secretary of state: “It made sense to refocus our approach to development so we can better harness market forces.”

The Caracol Industrial park, built in the north of Haiti with USAID funds after the 2010 earthquake, is portrayed by Clinton as a monument to “sustainable economic growth.” She boasts of its “modern waste water treatment facility, a new electric grid providing reliable power to surrounding towns for the first time, as well as new housing, schools, and health clinics.”

In reality, the industrial park is being built on fertile farmland from which the government evicted local farmers, and it threatens to pollute nearby mangrove stands relied on by local fishermen.

On May 8, the *Guardian* reported on protests caused by “anger that power from Caracol’s 10-megawatt power plant has not been extended to some nearby towns.” Two freight containers belonging to the Korean clothing manufacturer Sae-A Trading Co Ltd, “were hijacked,” and “a Chilean UN peacekeeper was shot dead,” the newspaper reported.

Sae-A, the only corporate tenant in the industrial park so far, employs slightly less than 5,500 Haitians. Some 60,000 jobs were promised by the Clintons and the

Haitian government at the beginning of the project. Jonathan Katz, a reporter who was instrumental in tracing the 2010 cholera outbreak to UN soldiers from Nepal, notes that the construction of Caracol has cost about \$55,000 per job created so far, “about 30 times more per job than the average Sae-A worker makes per year.” Sae-A moved its operation to Haiti from Guatemala because of a union dispute there, but was also promised “tax exemptions, duty-free access to the United States, abundant cheap labor, factory sheds, a power plant, a new port,” according to the *New York Times*.

The *Times* reported that Hillary Clinton and her chief of staff, Cheryl Mills, “summoned” Sae-A executives to the American Embassy in Seoul during an official visit in the spring of 2010. Woong-ki Kim, Sae-A’s chairman, had been considering a factory in Haiti for years, but balked because of a planned increase in the country’s minimum wage from \$3.75 to \$5 per day.

Although Caracol was touted as a means of recovery from the 2010 earthquake—its location was chosen in part to move workers away from the center of devastation in the south of the country—the exploitation of cheap Haitian labor for textile manufacturing is not new. The US Haitian Hemispheric Opportunity through Partnership Encouragement Act (HOPE I) and its extension under HOPE II—both passed while Hillary Clinton was in the Senate—allowed for duty-free imports from Haiti.

After Clinton became secretary of state, an April 2009 cable from the US Embassy preparing her for a visit stressed that “another key message will be to underscore the importance of ensuring that industrial space and infrastructure for investors be made available and that the overall business and investment climate improve so that more investors will take advantage of the opportunity of HOPE 2.”

Clinton, of course, was not alone in this effort. A February 2010 State Department cable leaked by WikiLeaks reported on a post-earthquake visit by 12 US senators and representatives, all but one of whom were Democrats. Then-Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi disguised her meaning, but in a threat worthy of the mafia, told Haitian President René Préval that “we would like to hear that Haiti is going toward a different place. If so, you would receive even more support, and we see this as an opportunity to be even more helpful.”

A trusteeship for foreign donations was discussed on this same trip, and not long afterward Bill Clinton was appointed as co-chair of the Interim Haiti Recovery Commission.

At the beginning of this month, Jonathan Katz wrote a long account in *Politico* of the complexity and secretiveness of the Clintons’ involvement in Haiti. He wrote: “there’s the Clinton Foundation, which has directed \$36 million to Haiti since 2010, but also the \$55 million spent through the Clinton-Bush Haiti Fund, and the \$500 million in commitments made through the Clinton Global Initiative’s Haiti Action Network. On Hillary’s side, there’s her own diplomacy, the State Department’s Office of the Haiti Special Coordinator, and the U.S. Embassy in Port-au-Prince, as well as the U.S. Agency for International Development, whose administrator reported to her.”

Some of the Clintons’ activities have been purely venal, such as Bill’s involvement in a luxury Marriott in Port-au-Prince, for which he recruited Digicel CEO Denis O’Brien as an investor.

There has been plenty of reactionary political maneuvering. Katz summarizes Hillary’s role in aiding Michel Martelly—a former supporter of the brutal Duvalier dictatorship who is now ruling by decree because of his refusal to agree on an elections law with the Haitian Senate—in the 2010 presidential race. In the first round of voting Martelly had placed third and did not qualify for the runoff. Katz describes how Secretary of State Clinton met with the three top candidates and then “confronted a recalcitrant Préval.” Second place candidate Jude Celestin then dropped out of the race, and Martelly won the second round of an election with only 23 percent participation.

In his essay Katz notes that “for the past century, it’s been the Americans, not the French, who repeatedly reshaped the political landscape” of Haiti. Hollande’s intervention marks a turning point in that history, with the French ruling elite returning to the scene of some of their foulest crimes. In *Hard Choices*, Clinton writes of Hollande’s predecessor, Nicolas Sarkozy, that he “was intent on reasserting France’s place as a top world power and eager to shoulder more of an international burden, which I saw in action in Libya.”

While US and French imperialism may well have conflicting interests and agendas in Haiti, both are implacable enemies of the Haitian workers and peasants.



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