Strikes, protests engulf Haitian capital as workers demand higher wages, better conditions

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Thousands of garment workers in Haiti's capital city Port-au-Prince continued their demonstrations Thursday following several weeks of strikes and protests demanding livable wages and an end to the super-exploitative conditions at the hands of US-based clothing retailers. The citywide eruption of protests, uninterrupted even in the face of mounting police brutality, is an indication of growing working class opposition to the regime headed by Prime Minister Ariel Henry and backed by US corporations.

Protests first arose in late January as videos circulating on social media showed workers in Caracol Northern Industrial Park in Haiti, a major industrial hub employing upwards of 60,000 workers. Workers had been forced to labor in sweatshop conditions nine hours a day for a daily wage of $4. Police immediately responded to the walkout with brutal aggression. One graphic video showed an officer shooting a protesting worker in the back with live ammunition as he lay on the floor with blood trailing down his back.

A little more than a week later, the Valdor Apparel's Tabarre 27 site, which is just outside Port-au-Prince, attempted to shut down the facility without compensating workers, triggering massive protests from workers who surrounded the building for several days. The general manager of the facility was reportedly trapped inside the factory. Workers claimed slave-like treatment, verbal and psychological abuse and the theft of pension and health taxes deducted from their miserable pay.

Last week, sweatshop workers at the SONAPI complex in the capital walked out to denounce the $4 a day wage, which many say cannot cover basic meals and transportation. Police were sent to the area where they unleashed tear gas against the protesting workers.

One worker spoke on video denouncing Valdor CEO Robert Rothbaum and the oppressive attempts to close the factory without paying workers. She said: "When we arrived … we learned that the factory was closing down and they were fleeing with our money. He [Rothbaum] has 11 factories in other countries. Robert is a multi-millionaire.

"For him to steal our money like this. We spent seven years working the machines. They've been sucking our blood for seven years. Working in these factories is not easy. It takes up all your energy. We have to pay for our children's school. We have to pay for housing. All these things. Robert can't do this to us. I will not lose my money."

Union leader Dominique St. Eloi, who is also a coordinator for the National Union of Haitian Workers, told Reuters in a telephone interview that workers are seeking to raise their daily wages to approximately 1,500 gourdes (USD $15) from an appalling 500 gourdes (USD $5) a day. "With 500 gourdes per day, without any government subsidies, we cannot meet our needs while the price of basic goods, transport costs have increased," said St. Eloi.

A spokesman for the office of Prime Minister Henry said he has been in discussion with the High Council of Salaries, the organization responsible for adjusting the country's minimum wage, on how best to end the demonstrations. Henry also reportedly met Tuesday with industry leaders of dozens of US apparel makers operating in Haiti, but no information from the meeting has been released. There can be no doubt that the employers are deeply shaken by the uprising and are relying on Henry to crush social opposition.

Haiti has for decades been a haven for American apparel manufacturing companies to generate super-profits from operating massive sweatshops where workers are not paid enough to eat three meals a day. The destitution and exploitation of Haiti's textile and garment workers can be traced back to the early 1990s, when the United Nations and the Organization of American States declared a trade embargo of Haiti but still granted concessions to US companies to reap booming profits from the impoverished workforce.

More than 60 US corporations are involved in shipping a torrent of goods intended for assembly into Haiti and then reimporting the assembled products back into the United States. Among the traded products are toys, fishing lures, cord, clay floor tiles, brooms, baseballs, softballs, pajamas, pants and T-shirts. The corporations received incentives offered under the Caribbean Basin Initiative, the US program to promote economic development in the Caribbean Basin, and the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), which allows goods from developing countries to enter the United States tax-free.

The incentives for US corporations to move labor-intensive, low-technology assembly operations to Haiti helped reinforce an already lucrative enterprise for US multinational companies, which could pay low wages and virtually no taxes while reaping fabulous profits. In the decade prior to the election and ouster of President

Jean Bertrand Aristide, the real wages of Haitian apparel workers were slashed by more than 50 percent, while assembly exports from Haiti to the United States skyrocketed. Apparel exports more than doubled from 1983 to 1989, rising from $81 million to $180.9 million.

Tensions had been burgeoning inside Haiti’s garment factories for the past two years due to the companies’ persistent non-compliance with social security payments and the disastrous health consequences for workers. This was detailed in a report in August of 2020 issued by GOSTTRA, a syndicate of the global union federation IndustriALL, describing the struggle for basic survival facing thousands of workers amidst the deepening social and health crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Earlier that year, two workers employed by the investment and manufacturing firm Palm Apparel Group died after being denied medical care after their employer reportedly failed to pay their social security contributions on time. Sandra René died from complications during her pregnancy, while Lionel Pierre died after being denied dialysis treatment. Workers at both factories downed tools in protest shortly after both deaths to oppose their egregious treatment at the hands of management.

Palm Apparel management had also clamped down on GOSTTRA union leaders and rank-and-file workers who had been fighting against the anti-democratic and oppressive atmosphere inside several factories. In one instance, dozens of union leaders and members were dismissed after protesting against the company’s decision to send them home in the middle of the day. At a Horizon facility, union leader Sandra Emilion was dismissed after lodging a complaint against excessively high target quotas and company speedups. In the MBI factory, union leader Sonia Saintvil was unfairly dismissed after rejecting an offer of promotion on condition she quit the union.

At the time of the GOSTTRA report, roughly a third of the 57,000 workers in the country’s garment industry were suspended or terminated and had yet to receive any compensation from the government in spite of earlier promises to the contrary. The rest had been, and still are, working reduced hours in unsafe factories that lack even the most basic precautions to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

The leaders of the trade unions organizing the strikes have resorted to fruitless appeals aimed at pressuring management and the Haitian government to address the workers’ demands. National Union of Haitian Workers leader St. Eloi told Associated Press (AP) news that if factory managers did not respond with concessions to protesting workers, the union would ask Haiti’s government to raise the minimum wage, a totally bankrupt strategy.

Countless protests have taken place at Haitian factories in the nation’s poorest slums, which have for years seen waves of strikes over abysmal salaries and deplorable conditions. The recent demonstrations bear a resemblance to the mass protest movement that began in 2018 following an announcement in July of that year from then-President Moise that fuel prices would rise astronomically, further plunging the nation’s desperate workers and peasants deeper into poverty.

Opposition to the hike in the price of gas and other consumer goods eventually evolved into widespread demands for the immediate resignation of the corrupt president, who was at the center of scheme carried out by Haitian officials accused of stealing billions of dollars from a development fund subsidized by Venezuela that was intended to help low-income Haitians and rebuild dilapidated social infrastructure.

The mass protest movement would go on to plague the presidency of Moise and his Parti Haitien Tet Kale (PHTK) party for the next three years all the way up until the president’s assassination. Moise routinely made use of armed gangs and police to crack down on the protesters and terrorize the population, which included the infamous massacre of 57 people in Port-au-Prince’s La Seline neighborhood in 2019.

The widely despised president also faced social upheavals as a result of his own refusal to relinquish his position at the end of his term in early 2021 and his moves toward consolidating an authoritarian government.

The main demand of the demonstrators has been higher wages in the face of a surge in the cost of living that has made life intolerable for the population. According to the latest government statistics, the inflation rate in Haiti increased to 24.60 percent in November of 2021 from 19.70 percent in October. The social crisis has been magnified by the deterioration in the world economy as increases in commodity prices on the international market have substantially raised Haiti’s import spending and amplified inflationary pressures.

Exacerbating these conditions is the extraordinary uncertainty and instability surrounding Haiti’s political and social crisis. Prime Minister Henry, whose INITE party represents ruthless sections of the venal Haitian bourgeoisie, presides over an illegitimate government implicated in the assassination of President Moise last summer and has refused to step down despite his term ending on February 7. The country has also seen a sharp spike in violence and kidnappings by warring gangs acting in the interests of rival sections of the nation’s ruling class.

The strike wave engulfing Port-au-Prince raises the need for the political independence of Haiti's working class and the waging of a revolutionary struggle against the entire capitalist system.