

THE CARIBBEAN country of Haiti has long been a centre of resistance to imperialism and slavery. It was the first black slave colony to rise up and overthrow its overlords, with a revolt led by Toussaint L'Ouverture beginning in 1791. The country declared itself an independent republic in 1804.

More recently Haiti has been in the news because of a series of food riots that rocked the country last month. These were triggered by rises of more than 50 percent in the price of imported food staples over the past year.

But there was another political dimension to these protests. Haiti's former president Jean-Bertrand Aristide was overthrown in a US-backed coup in 2004, and the country has been occupied by thousands of United Nations (UN) "peace-keeping" troops ever since.

A new government was elected in 2006, led by Aristide's former prime minister René Prével. But the US and the UN have prevented any attempts to dismantle the neoliberal economic policies that have been imposed on Haiti since the mid-1980s, with disastrous consequences.

Peter Hallward is the author of *Damming The Flood: Haiti, Aristide and the Politics of Containment*, a new book that exposes how the Haitian elite and their foreign allies have conspired to keep down the popular movement of Haiti's poor that has struggled for decades against exploitation and repression.

He spoke to Socialist Worker about the reasons behind the current unrest—and what the future might hold for one of the world's forgotten neoliberal occupations.

"The food situation in Haiti is a political disaster, not a fact of nature," says Peter. "Without damaging interference from abroad, and with genuine investment in local agriculture and the environment, Haiti would be perfectly capable of feeding itself.

"In the early 1980s—before the neoliberal economic plan took over—the country was self-sufficient in rice, the main staple food. In 1985 Haiti imported just 7,000 tonnes of rice from the US. Today that figure stands at around 300,000 tonnes a year.

"The collapse of domestic rice production was the result of a very deliberate policy. Neoliberalism impoverished local food producers and forced them into becoming a rural 'sub-proletariat' of agricultural labourers, or else drove them into the growing urban slums and sweatshops.

Slums

"This process of people being pushed off the land into urban slums began in the 1980s. That's when you see the sweatshops emerging, with workers typically involved in light assembly work producing baseballs, T-shirts, US army uniforms and so on.

"Over the past 30 years wages in Haiti have fallen through the floor. The minimum wage is now about \$1.75 a day, just a fifth of what it was in 1980 in real terms. And that's if you're lucky enough to earn a wage.

"Only a tiny number of people in Haiti are formally employed—fewer than 1 percent of the workforce. Everyone else lives through subsistence farming, by scrounging around in the informal economy or by surviving off money sent from relatives working abroad."

But Peter stresses that ordinary people have met this process of impoverishment with resistance. In particular, the Lavalas movement emerged from the country's slums in the 1980s, partly inspired by Catholic liberation theology.

In 1986 popular protests overthrew the hated dictatorship of Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier. The army stepped in to take direct control, and tried to suppress the growing mobilisation by killing hundreds of people. But four years later the movement brought Aristide to power. He was a radical priest whose powerful, simple language spoke directly to the experiences of the poor.

Aristide's movement was pledged to use non-violent methods, but the rulers of Haiti have shown no such qualms, being only too willing to use murderous force to hold down resistance.

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HAITI—OCCUPATION AND RESISTANCE

PETER HALLWARD SPOKE TO SOCIALIST WORKER ABOUT OPPRESSION, FOOD RIOTS AND THE GROWING STRUGGLE AGAINST NEOLIBERALISM

Haitians protest under the shadow of the gun

"The Haitian ruling class is a very small minority of the population," says Peter. "But it is very well armed. There are around 220,000 guns in Haiti and the great majority protect wealthy families and their businesses.

"In the past the elite used the army and paramilitaries to keep workers in check and make sure they didn't unionise. But that couldn't stop the protest movement from growing. By the late 1980s direct repression threatened to create a backlash that the elite couldn't contain any more."

Democracy

Ever since then, he adds, the elite's focus has moved towards accepting a degree of formal democracy while tying the hands of politicians in order to force them into accepting neoliberal economic policies that benefit the rich while keeping the masses in grinding poverty.

This strategy has led to permanent instability in the country. Aristide won the presidency in 1990, but was deposed by the elite in a military coup a year later. He was eventually returned to power in 1994, and shortly thereafter disbanded Haiti's hated armed forces.

Aristide was re-elected in 2000 with a huge majority. With Lavalas in control of both houses of parliament, and without the army standing in its way, Aristide's

government was finally in a position to push through significant political changes. But his enemies, both in Haiti and abroad, responded with a destabilisation campaign that led to the 2004 coup.

The country has been under UN occupation ever since. It is becoming increasingly dependent on NGOs and other international bodies for survival. Today around 70 percent of Haiti's revenues come from foreign aid.

"I don't know of any comparable situation where UN troops police a resentful local population, obliging them to accept a completely illegal and unjustifiable coup," says Peter.

"They are called 'peace-keepers'—but there was no war there! Instead there was a political crime, perpetrated by the very same countries who sent the UN in to police the consequences. The hypocrisy is extraordinary."

The situation has some parallels elsewhere in the world, adds Peter: "The way popular resistance is contained and overpowered in Haiti is similar to the situation in the Gaza Strip, where the Israeli blockade has deprived the elected Hamas government of revenues and made the population dependent on aid.

"Both in Palestine and in Haiti the people have been forced to pay a high price for electing the 'wrong' government."

The UN operation in Haiti is led by

Brazilian troops. "Its official acronym is Minustah, but some Haitians have taken to calling the troops 'touristas', since they seem to accomplish so little," says Peter.

THEY DRIVE around the cities in armoured personnel carriers, pointing guns at people who are starving, while doing

nothing to address either the political or the economic situation. It's no wonder that the people who mobilised recently against the intolerable price of food denounced the UN occupation as well."

So how organised were the recent food riots? And could they form the nucleus of a renewed radical political movement in Haiti?

"I'd characterise the recent protests as a limited and tentative political uprising," says Peter.

"It's too early to say where it might lead. Political anger is clearly very genuine and widespread, but there's a lack of coordinated leadership and direction.

"Aristide's organisation was suppressed and several key figures remain in exile. Some prominent Lavalas politicians, meanwhile, seem to have turned their back on the popular movement.

"In the absence of clear national

leadership, the protests have been organised informally by local groups.

"Most people are desperately poor—according to International Monetary Fund figures in 2006 some 55 percent of households live on \$0.44 a day or less. And then prices have almost doubled in just six months.

"People are really up against it, with no prospect of a decent future in sight. Some of the recent demonstrators told reporters 'We'd rather die facing bullets than die of hunger!'"

Meanwhile the machinations of the elite and their imperial allies continue. "This is something that complicates the picture," says Peter. "There's good reason to think that some members of Haiti's elite are trying to manipulate the popular mobilisation for political change and use it for their own advantage."

In particular, there is a group of senators linked to a right wing veteran of Haiti's security forces, Youri Latortue, that wants to restore the army and reverse some of the gains made by the popular movement. It is widely believed they took advantage of the recent unrest in order to force Prével's prime minister Jacques-Edouard Alexis out of office.

"Latortue and his allies have been trying to undermine Alexis for the last year and a half. These guys have very little popular support—but they have the resources and

Poor children at a food station (top). Anger at the UN-led occupation above (centre). Brazilian troops mount a patrol through Cité Soleil shanty town in the capital in Port-au-Prince (above)

'The neoliberal destruction of the economy means that it will require something like a revolution to salvage anything'

WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Why anti-abortionists want to cut the time limit

A MAJOR debate on abortion will take place in the House of Commons on Monday 12 May, writes Farah Reza. Amendments to the government's Human Fertilisation and Embryology bill will seek to limit women's access to abortion and MPs have been given a free vote on them.

The mainstream media has given much coverage to anti-choice arguments that use notions of "foetal pain" and "foetal viability" as reasons to lower the legal time limit for abortion.

The issue of foetal pain has always been a hardcore anti-choice argument. But much of the "evidence" used by anti-abortionists is unsubstantiated and not peer-reviewed.

Research by Sunny Anand is a good example. His claims that fetuses can feel pain do not seem to be based on any evidence, with the majority of his work being based on newborn babies and pain, not fetuses.

He declined to submit any evidence to the government's Science and Technology Committee, which considered developments relating to abortion last October.

The committee rejected his claims nevertheless, concluding that the evidence "does not indicate that pain is consciously felt, especially not below the current upper gestational limit of abortion."

There is no mainstream, medically recognised evidence to support the view that fetuses feel pain.

The nervous system takes time to develop in the womb. A report in the British Medical Journal by Dr Stuart Derbyshire found that there is "good evidence" to show that fetuses do not feel pain, and that the neural circuitry for processing pain cannot be considered complete until 26 weeks—after the 24 week limit.

And the psychological processes that make sense of pain are not developed until after this stage.

Survive

Anti-abortionists also argue that babies can now survive earlier due to advances in medical technology, so late abortions performed shouldn't be allowed. The evidence for this is problematic to say the least.

The Science and Technology Committee found that much of the research claiming that viability had significantly improved was referring to extremely rare cases where fetuses below 24 weeks old have survived only due to highly specialised equipment not available in most hospitals.

This evidence involved very small numbers and so was "far less accurate". So, an extreme example would be a hospital with one baby surviving after being born at 23 weeks could claim to have a survival rate of 100 percent.

The committee looked closely at the results for survival rates of fetuses below 24 weeks. It found that, even if the foetus survived birth, many died later or survived with severe disabilities. Of those born at 23 weeks, only 1 percent survived with no disability, and of those born

"The neoliberal plan is now discredited beyond repair. But the elite and their foreign backers continue to offer little more than a version of business as usual—grotesque inequalities of wealth, mass unemployment, ridiculously low wages, total destitution in the countryside.

"When popular unrest threatens to boil over, they send in the army or its equivalent. If things keep going this way the question will start to look very simple—starvation or revolution."

Damming The Flood: Haiti, Aristide and the Politics of Containment by Peter Hallward is published by Verso. It is available from Bookmarks, the socialist bookshop, phone 020 7637 1848. Go to www.haitianalysis.com



83 percent support abortion rights

at 22 weeks, none survived with no disability.

It concluded that, "while survival rates at 24 weeks and over have improved they have not done so below that gestational point.

"Put another way, we have seen no good evidence to suggest that foetal viability has improved significantly since the abortion time limit was last set, and seen some good evidence to suggest that it has not."

Limit

Doctors have voted overwhelmingly to keep the current time limit. Up to 80 percent of members of the General Medical Council voted to keep post-20 week abortions legal. The Royal College of Nurses and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists came to the same conclusion.

So-called "late abortions"—those that take place after 20 weeks—are a focus for anti-abortionists because 83 percent of people in Britain support a woman's right to choose.

So they hope to chip away at our rights gradually, and think that "late abortions" are an easy target. Their focus on this distorts the reality of abortion in Britain.

Late abortions are very rare—less than 1 percent of all abortions in Britain take place after 22 weeks. It is women in the most difficult circumstances that need them.

These include women who do not realise they are pregnant because of failed contraception, ignorance or mistaking symptoms for the menopause. Other women go into denial if they have suffered rape, or if they are very young.

Sometimes there may be a crisis with an existing child that shifts the priorities of the pregnant woman, or a change in circumstance that makes the pregnancy unviable. Other women experience delays in the NHS.

The decision to have a later abortion isn't taken lightly—the surgical procedure for a post-20 week abortion is more physically traumatic than for earlier abortions. The tiny proportion of women who access an abortion after 20 weeks do so because they are desperate.

The current arguments around the time limit are taking place because women in Britain do not have the right to an abortion. Abortions are granted on medical grounds.

We need to fight for improvements in the law. But we also have to fight hard to defend our current rights so that the carpet isn't snatched away from under our feet.

Women access abortions because they need them. It is the woman, not some vague idea about the "unborn", that matters. A woman should not be forced to stay pregnant and give birth to a child against her will.

We have to defeat the attack on abortion to show the bigots they cannot come back again and again to chip away at our rights.

Farah Reza is on the executive committee of Abortion Rights. Go to www.abortionrights.org.uk