

# Haiti: a history of struggle

THIS YEAR marks the 200th anniversary of the Haitian revolution, when the black masses abolished slavery and won national independence. Their deeds were an inspiration to the masses of the Caribbean and the working people of Europe. Yet, today, Haiti is the poorest nation in the northern hemisphere. Following a US-supported coup against its former President, Jean Bertrand Aristide, earlier this year, the country is now in chaos and under UN occupation. **NIAL MULHOLLAND** looks at the reasons for the current situation, beginning with the revolution in 1804.

**D**URING THE 1690s, French forces wrested the western part of the island of Hispaniola from Spain and named it San Domingo (later to become Haiti). San Domingo became the most lucrative colony in the world.

But this great wealth was built on the blood and sweat of generations of slaves that worked the sugar plantations and mines. Around 20% died en route from Africa and many more died due to harsh working conditions. Barbaric punishments were also used by the plantation owners: for example, slaves were burnt alive or filled with gunpowder and blown up.

Slaves reacted with individual revolt and a series of small scale slave rebellions. But it was the inspiration of the 1789 Great French Revolution (bourgeois-democratic) that led to revolution.

The Haitian merchants (the nascent capitalist class) demanded their own colonial assembly, like the new National Assembly in revolutionary France. They wanted more control over the island's economy and affairs.

But the ruling nobles were against any concessions, viewing them as a threat to the old order. They attempted to form a bloc with the 'mulattos', the mixed race part of the population. But this alliance soon fell apart when the mulattos' call for equal rights was spurned and a subsequent mulatto revolt was put down.

## Leadership

AT THE same time, the mass of the population, the slaves, began to agitate for liberty and equality. Although an uprising in 1791 was crushed, with the loss of ten thousand lives, a fuse was lit. Rebellion spread and François Dominique Toussaint emerged as the key black leader.

Toussaint understood that the slave revolt, however courageous, needed a disciplined army and tactics. He led brilliant military victories against stronger and modern armies and captured large parts of rural San Domingo.

The execution of the French King, Louis XVI, in 1793, represented a new radical stage in the French revolution. Seizing the opportunity, Toussaint called on all blacks to join his revolution and renamed himself, Toussaint L'Ouverture ('Opening' or freedom). This revolt terrified the ruling classes of Europe: slavery was integral to the profits, power and prestige of their empires. They were alarmed that Toussaint's call would

inspire revolutions throughout the colonies and even amongst the working poor at home.

The British dispatched forces to the island and areas captured by them saw a return to slavery. This enabled Toussaint to bring together blacks, mulattos and even a section of whites in his army. By 1795, he controlled big swathes of the island.

At this point, Toussaint still believed San Domingo should remain part of France. He thought that only practical aid from revolutionary France could help the economic, social and cultural development of the island. However, Toussaint failed to understand the significance of the political counter revolution underway in France.

The Directory was inaugurated as the ruling council in France in 1795, marking the end of the revolution's most radical and democratic phase. The bourgeoisie now wanted to consolidate its power and to crush the radical wings of the revolution. Toussaint eventually grew wise to the Directory's manoeuvring, and, in 1797, saw off French forces. The revolutionary fervour of the masses allowed the ex-slave army to go on and defeat the British forces on the island.

## Slavery abolished

AFTER VANQUISHING the enemy, Toussaint introduced a new social and economic programme: officially abolishing slavery, re-organising the administrative and justice systems, and building roads, schools and bridges. Crops in 1800 were equal to the highest ever. In 1801, the crop was even larger again! All this was achieved after years of revolution, counter-revolution and wars.

The Toussaint regime also introduced labour reforms, including cutting the working day. Whipping was banned and workers were given a quarter of the revenue from plantations.

Toussaint's style of rule could be autocratic and secretive but it appears he did not act for personal gain or for the interests of a narrow ruling elite. He genuinely wanted to better the lives of all people on the island.

To an extent, Toussaint's army provided an arena for political discussion but the masses were not involved in decision making. The revolution proved unable to deliver full national and social liberation; capitalism was still young and played a progressive role, and the working class – the only class capable of overthrowing class rule and running a new socialist society –

barely existed anywhere.

Toussaint's new regime soon faced mortal danger from Napoleon Bonaparte, the new ruler of France. As invasion loomed, Toussaint strengthened coastal forts and distributed arms to the masses. However, he failed to attend to growing discontent amongst the black masses that led to a large scale uprising in 1802.

Toussaint crushed the rebellion and in a desperate attempt to placate Napoleon, showed mercy towards whites who had also risen against his rule. This failed. Napoleon enlisted the help of slave colonial powers, including Spain, Holland, Britain and, secretly, the US, for an invasion. Despite the serious differences between the powers, when it came to fundamental class interests – the defence of the slave trade – they united.

Toussaint's forces successfully employed army and guerrilla tactics once Napoleon's expedition army landed on the island. However, at this stage, Toussaint decided to negotiate, perhaps believing that Napoleon was at his weakest point and would accept less than sovereignty over San Domingo. Toussaint's misplaced trust in Napoleon was rewarded with betrayal and arrest. He was despatched to France and, in a matter of months, died in prison due to ill-treatment.

## The first black republic

TOUSSAINT'S DEATH unleashed a new radical wave that finally ejected the French from San Domingo. Napoleon's attempts to crush the revolution cost 100,000 black lives and 50,000 French lives. On New Year's Day, 1804, Toussaint's successor, Jean Jacques Dessalines, made a 'Declaration of Independence'. San Domingo was renamed 'Haiti'. So was born the world's first black republic and the second colony to win freedom after the US.

From the 1840s, a series of "stand-in" regimes (stand-ins for the mulatto elite) ran Haiti and from the 1860s, the country and region increasingly came under imperialist domination.

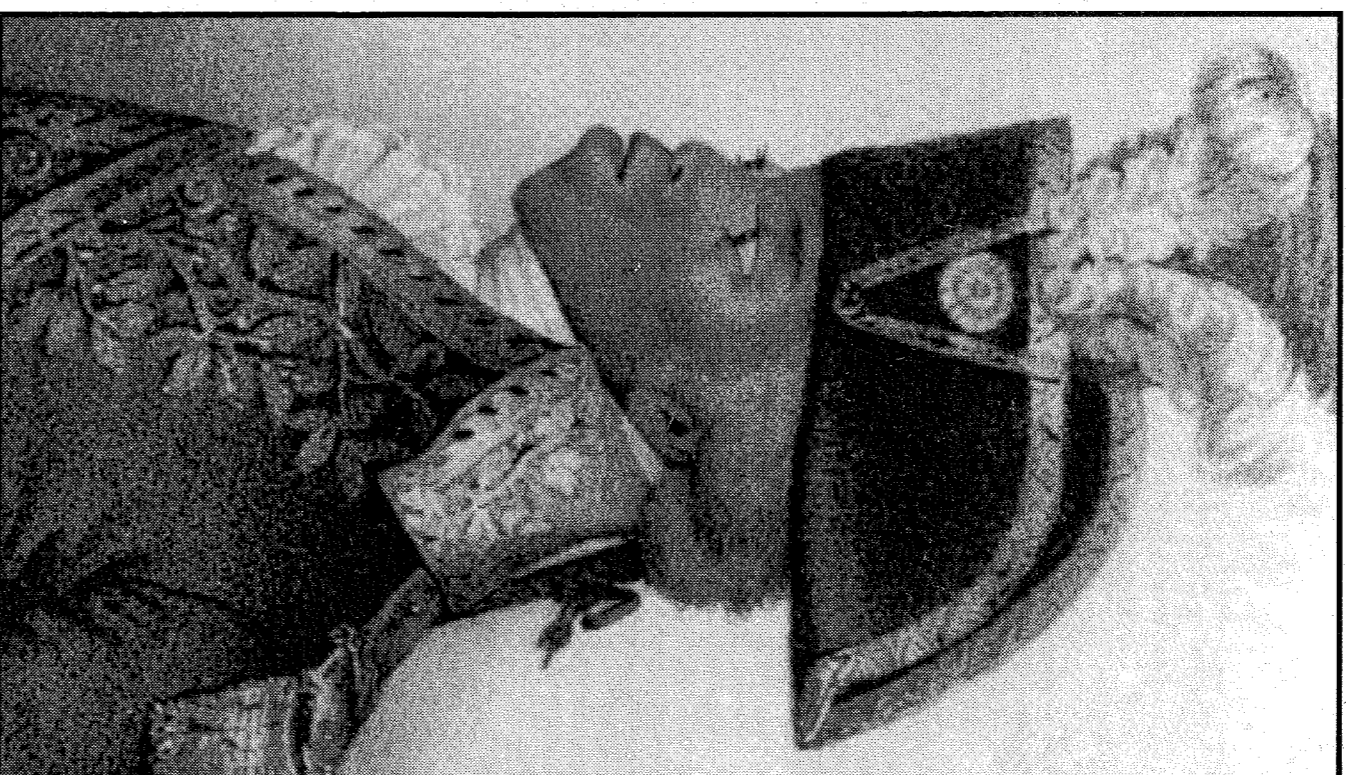
As well as pursuing imperialist interests, the colonial powers were also vengefully determined that the black republic would be seen to fail. The first ever US sanctions were levelled against Haiti. In 1915, the US went a step further and occupied the country. With lessons for the US presence in Iraq today, the occupiers in Haiti soon faced a guerrilla struggle. After twenty years of national resistance the US power left the island.

## Turmoil

THE 1930S and 1940s saw social and class turmoil in Haiti, including student and workers protests. In these decades, the small working class created trade unions. Several communist parties were also established but faced severe repression.

The notorious regime of 'Papa Doc' Duvalier, and then his son, Baby Doc, from the late 1950s to the mid-1980s, were finished by a mass struggle of workers and students. A series of highly unstable and short-lived regimes followed.

Unfortunately, these years of radical urban movements did not have a revolutionary leadership that could take power, sweep away capitalism and realise the demands of



Toussaint L'Ouverture. The Free Library of Philadelphia

working people.

The political vacuum was partially filled by Jean Bertrand Aristide, a popular priest working in the slum areas of Port-au-Prince, who won the 1990 presidential elections, promising to tackle poverty.

He was overthrown in 1991 by General Cedras but returned to power on the back of 20,000 US troops after the Clinton administration had eventually lost patience with the volatile and defiant Haitian regime.

As Aristide carried out social cuts and privatisations his support lessened. The reactionary opposition mounted an uprising in 2004 and the President was bundled out of Haiti by US troops. Pro-US lawyer, Boniface Alexandre, was appointed interim president.

Under the current foreign occupation poverty and unemployment have worsened. Poverty conditions led to the loss of 2,000 lives during heavy rains in May. The huge social gap between the impoverished Creole-speaking black majority and the French-speaking mulattos, 1% of whom own nearly half the country's wealth, remains unaddressed.

Only the masses of Haiti can find a way forward, with the working class playing the leading role. A mass socialist alternative has to be constructed in opposition to the reactionary elite.

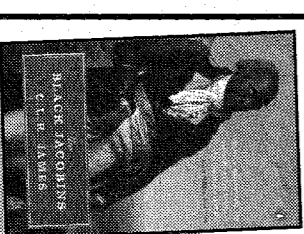
This is not an easy task given the defeats suffered by the Haitian masses and the immense levels of

poverty and class oppression they face. However, opposition will grow. During May 2004, slum dwellers held anti-US protests.

The working class requires its own mass organisations that take an independent class position. A genuine socialist leadership would emulate the revolutionary fighting spirit of Toussaint and the 'Black Jacobins'. It would stand for a socialist revolution throughout the Caribbean and link up with the US working class. Two hundred years after the Haitian revolution, the masses of that poor country can again be to the forefront of revolutionary movements.

## The Black Jacobins

by C.L.R. James



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