

Forum draws community interest

VANCOUVER—More than 75 people attended a forum Saturday afternoon about Haiti after the earthquake. The forum was organized by CUPE BC and co-sponsored by CUPE Metro, Haiti Solidarity BC, Co-Dev Canada, CUPE 391, and Help Hear Haiti (a UBC coalition).

Doug Sprenger, of CUPE BC's International Solidarity Committee chaired the forum. Dukens Raphael, secretary-general of Haiti's Confederation of Public and Private Sector Workers (CTSP) described the extremely difficult situation in Haiti. Michelle Langlois from Hope International shared her experiences on a recent trip and Roger Annis from Haiti Solidarity BC shared some disturbing statistics. Translation services were provided by Florence Étienne, a Vancouver resident of Haitian background.

Raphael explained that Haitian slaves threatened the status quo when they first revolted 500 years ago. Capitalists were worried that the revolution would spread to neighbouring colonies. But to understand Haiti's current problems, we only need to look as far back as the mid-80's when the International Monetary Fund (IMF) insisted that loans could not be used for public services. "When you read about Haiti as the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere – it is not a poor country – it was made poor," Raphael said.

The IMF instituted a program that has 90 per cent of Haiti's education system handled by private companies. There is no education offered past primary school other than in the capital Port au Prince. Because of IMF-instituted policies, there has been a massive exodus of farmers to the city. Port au Prince, a city designed to house 250,000 people, is home to over two million people.

Although it has now been three months since the earthquake that took the lives of 300,000 people, Raphael said that if you arrived in Port Au Prince today you'd ask, "Did it happen yesterday?"

Aid is not being distributed, and not all foreign aid is welcome. The United States provided 20,000 soldiers as part of their aid. Their first act was to occupy the airport with no discussion with Haiti's president. Planes carrying aid were not allowed to land and had to fly to the Dominican Republic and proceed overland from there. In contrast, aid from Venezuela came in the form of three hydro power plants and Brazil offered scholarships for Haitian students.

There are three main initiatives to be carried out.

The most immediate need is for durable housing. People are scrambling for shelter and living in tents during the rainy season, which will become hurricane season in June.

The second point of urgency is education. Raphael urged the audience to ask Canada to follow Cuba and Venezuela's example by hosting Haitian students and waiving their tuition fees.

Thirdly, Raphael would like to see bilateral partnerships between progressive groups in Canada with local branches in Haiti. He believes this will lead to aid actually reaching those in need. Currently aid is not always reaching those who need it most because of inefficiencies in the distribution system. Some aid ends up being sold on the streets rather than given to those in need.

Raphael concluded by stressing that Haiti doesn't want charity. "We don't want charity and condescension, but rather respect and solidarity. Our country has its struggles, like unions do. We thank you for your solidarity."

Michelle Langlois from New Westminster-based Hope International explained that their goal is to extend compassion by focusing on local ventures. Michelle recently returned from a trip to Haiti where she visited several hospitals where they had helped with medical supplies.

"We've been trying to get Haitians help, but the logistical problems have been huge," Langlois said. "It's a mess." Hope International sent three 40 ft containers and were able to get some things through the Dominican Republic.

Roger Annis of the Haitian Solidarity Committee showed slides that underscored the result of over 500 years of colonialism. One slide showed why people cannot make a living in Haiti because of deforestation. In 1950 Haiti had 25 per cent forest cover, today that's down to two per cent.

Annis said that a mass exodus from the countryside was the biggest cause of so many lives lost. There were major problems even before the earthquake. Only 30 per cent of Haitians had access to clean sanitation and only 50 per cent had access to clean water, including purchased bottled water. Even though the earthquake in Chile was more severe, less than 1,000 died in Chile and more than 230,000 perished in Haiti. The latest estimate is that 300,000 have now lost their lives because of the earthquake.

Annis told the crowd that "the needs of health care are immense" and that up to two million people have no home. He explained that women are particularly vulnerable and are the victims of discrimination and violence. As heads of the household, women are responsible for food and water for their families.

"Rebuilding will not happen without international solidarity," said Annis.

Topics raised include how Canadian aid is being received (considering the role our government had in overthrowing democratically-elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide); how the U.S. justifies closing the airport; the impact of Barack Obama's presidency; how groups work together in a civil society; view of Aristide; and the efforts and role of the Preval government in rebuilding.

A collection taken at the meeting raised \$1,308. CUPE BC's International Solidarity Committee will post information on this website on how Locals can best contribute to the effort to help build solidarity with Brother Duken's union and Haitian workers in general.