

Haitian Apparel Workers Resist

A Dominican mega corporation, Grupo M, owns the Codevi Free Trade Zone, in the town of Quanamithe, in northeast Haiti, a walking distance from the Dominican Republic. The corporation claims first place as the apparel giant in the Caribbean and Central America with its more than thirteen thousand workforce situated in its Santiago headquarters.

Caption ONE: Codevi apparel workers about to go on strike showing their identity cards needed to enter the free trade zone where they toil sewing Levi jeans. Photo by Jim Harney

The World Bank supports Grupo M. This is how it works: the International Financial Corporation comes up with \$20 million to get the Export Free Trade Zone up and running. The money arrives in zinc with IMF-World Bank pressure for the Jean Aristide government to make Haiti a win-win situation for foreign corporations: that seek low wages and a workforce free of unions. The dominant economic regime stresses a country favor its comparative advantage; with Haiti it's an abundant workforce that toils for lowest wages in the hemisphere.



Codevi apparel workers about to go on strike showing their identity cards needed to enter the free trade zone where they toil sewing Levi jeans. Photo by Jim Harney

The Codevi plant due a \$20 million aid package from the World Bank through its International Financial Corporation which gushes money toward market forces, and brutally pummeled of the Aristide government to cower to market reforms and allowed the sweatshop to go up. Grupo M acts as though the plant were its own private fiefdom with no responsibility to the community. The corporation bulldozed under

thousands of acres of rich agricultural to build the giant sweatshop. From a distance Codevi resembles a haunting US medium-sized security prison.

Grupo M dominates life in Quanamithe, where most of its 70,000 inhabitants live in poverty and face a staggering 70% unemployment rate. Most dwellers lack access to running water in their homes. Members of the local Catholic Church send their kids there in the evening to read since most homes have no electricity, those who do have a generator. An overburdened police force staggers before the daunting problem of maintaining a modicum of security in Haiti's third largest city; many fear to leave their homes in the evening: the night brings on a heightened world of pronounced menace with only the most daring walking the streets. On one side of town a protruding military fortress quarters troops who work without pay in an effort to rebuild an army that Aristide did away with when he became President: an army known for its bloody links to the old regime that ruled for most of the last century with a heavy hand and with US approval. A Justice of the Peace runs the town's only jail.

Little World Bank money trickles throughout this community where trucks, trailers, motorcycles and mopeds move at breakneck speed on unpaved roads and children dressed in school uniforms, lucky enough to go to school, walk muddy streets to school in the early morning.

World Bank money primed the economic juices of Grupo M and linked it to plunder-possibilities on a global scale: access to cheap labor and a corporate-directed comparative advantage that goes with it: obliterate union energy among workers under its control; go to whatever lengths to circumvent workers rights. Money given to Grupo M doesn't nourish a healthy workplace; it obstructs a commitment to community building. It's all about a globalized market, getting the cheapest price, going it "lean" with a pungent Wal-Mart logic behind it. And the "lean" means bloodletting and ruthless behavior, one of the reasons this sweatshop is under tight security by DR military people carrying weapons on Haitian land. I noticed the "lean" in walking dirt-paved streets, filled with idle teens. Women sell charcoal. Families open their homes with the hope of developing a clientele able to buy a lunch, taste some chicken, rice, beans, plantains, soup and strong Haitian coffee. They do it in a context where most Haitians are fortunate if they have one meal a day.

Most teens I spoke with had to strain to remember when they last worked. Some youth wanted to go into the army, others said that money spent on the military should go to help create jobs that are productive like helping people grow food. Adults work in the informal sector; some out of work for three or four years. Change needs to take place that deals with substantive stuff. A Haitian economist says, "If Haiti is going to make it, it has to delink from the system, and because it is so far on the bottom of a globalized world from the top-down, the poorest country in the western hemisphere, it has a better chance of doing it, because it has little to lose, it can't lose any more." "Focus on agriculture," he continues "and we stand a chance."

Yet imports from the US penalize local agricultural production: Haitians buy imported rice, sixty percent cheaper than the homegrown. Massive US rice dumping makes it impossible for Haitian farmers to cling to the earth for their livelihood. They flock to the Capital in a desperate search of work. Instead of work, they encounter an occupation army, streets filled with garbage, little employment, high food prices and a plethora of human rights violations particularly against those who backed Aristide. And then some of the contradictions: Argentina sending troops to help with the occupation. Brazil on board as well with troops; and even going to send a soccer team: Haitians love soccer. The price of admission? Bring a weapon and turn it in.

.....
POSTSCRIPT

A week after I left Haiti 350 women and men went on strike. When they ended the strike and wanted to return to work, management fired them. With international pressure two hundred of them regained their jobs. Grupo M pays them \$16 a week. They spend almost half of it on a daily lunch they buy in the shadow of the fenced in work place. The others still organize and do the important work of telling a story that comes from the bottom of the world and eclipsed by powerful media corporations in the US.

The women have to deal with something even bigger that awaits them on January 1, 2005. A draconian bit of trade legislation crafted ten years ago in a GATT (General

Agreement on Tariff and Trade) deal that says on the turn of the year all quotas on apparel coming into the United States will be done away with. The US provides a \$76bn apparel market. China wins the prize on this deal for it will control more than 80 per cent of apparel imports coming into the US by 2005. The trade deal will mean that in the Caribbean and Central America some 200,000 mostly women and men will lose their jobs as “maquilas” - sweatshops – will move to China where the country’s comparative advantage lures name-brand apparel transnationals who leave the production of their clothes to sweatshop havens, while they control distribution where profits are high.

Caption ONE: Codevi apparel workers about to go on strike showing their identity cards needed to enter the free trade zone where they toil sewing Levi jeans.
Photo by Jim Harney

Jim can be reached at jimharney@posibilidad.org

207-942-3501