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Workers’ Hopes Hinge on Fate of New Union

by Charles Arthur

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With Haiti on the verge of a major drive to expand the garment-assembly sector in both existing and planned industrial zones (NotiCen, Jan. 19, 2012), a new workers’ union is fighting for survival.

In September 2011, just days after the newly formed union, Sendika Ouvriye Takstil ak Abiman (Union of Textile and Clothing Workers, SOTA), obtained registration from the Haitian Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, six of the union’s seven executive-committee members were dismissed by three different garment assembly companies.

Four of the union’s leaders worked for the Genesis S.A. factory, near the international airport outside the capital, Port-au-Prince. The company, owned by the powerful Apaid family, produces almost exclusively for Montreal-based Gildan Activewear Inc.

The two others who were fired worked in factories in Port-au-Prince: the One World Apparel plant, which produces for Seminole, Florida-based Superior Uniform Group Inc., and Multiwear, which assembles garments for Winston-Salem, North Carolina-based Hanesbrands.

Yannick Etienne, an activist with the Haitian workers rights organization Batay Ouvriye, described the dismissals as an attempt "to decapitate the union."

Batay Ouvriye quickly mobilized international supporters to call for the reinstatement of the sacked union leaders. With the approach of the second anniversary of the January 2010 earthquake disaster, the international media spotlight was once again shining on Haiti, and the campaign raised awkward questions about the international community’s failure to champion Haitians’ basic rights.

Post-earthquake attention helps union

In a significant departure from normal practice, an important international organization launched an investigation into the dismissals. At the end of November, Better Work, a partnership between the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the World Bank’s International Finance Corporation (IFC), published a report confirming that the firing of the SOTA executive-committee members was motivated by their trade-union activity and was clearly a determined effort to break the new union. Better Work declared that freedom of association of factory workers must be guaranteed and recommended the reintegration of the fired unionists.

As a result of the report and the subsequent unfavorable publicity, both Gildan and Hanesbrands instructed their subcontractors in Haiti to reinstate the men. In mid-December, Batay Ouvriye reported that two of the unionists had been reintegrated and that meetings with the factory owners were planned to negotiate the return of three others.

The outcome of the continuing struggle to defend, and then build up, the new union will determine the fate of tens of thousands of workers who will fill the scores of new garment-assembly factories that are now being planned for Haiti.
Long viewed as a potential 'Taiwan of the Caribbean,' international development planners are taking advantage of the renewed interest in the country’s economic potential following the 2010 earthquake. The US Congress has passed a series of legislative acts giving garments assembled in Haiti preferential access to the US market, and both local and foreign investors are gearing up to take advantage of one of the cheapest sources of labor in the world.

According to the Haitian government’s Centre de Facilitation des Investissements (CFI), both the state-owned SONAPI industrial park in Port-au-Prince and the privately owned CODEVI industrial park in Ouanaminthe in the northeast are expanding their operations and constructing new garment-assembly factories.

The CFI also reports that, in addition to the state-owned industrial park in Caracol in northern Haiti, where a Korean textile company is expected to begin operations in March, three other industrial parks are under construction in and around Port-au-Prince: at Drouillard, next to the notorious shantytown of Cite Soleil; near the international airport; and outside the town of Croix-des-Bouquets.

### Plans to greatly expand assembly plants

Longer term plans to dramatically expand the industrial sector in Haiti were revealed in an IFC report published in December 2011, which recommended sites for seven Integrated Economic Zones (IEZs). Initially these zones will depend on investments in garment assembly but in the future it is hoped that they will accommodate a range of activities including industrial, commercial, tourism, and retail sales. According to the IFC, the IEZs could create 380,000 jobs by 2030.

Given the scope of Haiti’s planned industrial expansion, the struggle regarding the new garment-assembly workers union is clearly of major significance. All previous attempts to unionize workers in the assembly factories in Port-au-Prince have been thwarted by the owners, and, as a result, working conditions are poor and wages are paltry.

Workers are often required to assemble an unrealistic number of garment pieces per day to earn a minimum daily wage, which has only recently been increased to 200 gourdes (about US$5). Since it is impossible to complete the work in a regular eight-hour workday, the workers, who are usually woman, end up working 12-13 hour shifts.

Wages are generally below what could be considered a "living wage." In March 2011, the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center released a study looking at the cost of living for Port-au-Prince garment-assembly workers and found that, for a single woman with two children, average monthly living expenses totaled US$750. Assuming a 48-hour workweek, that breaks down to about US$29 a day.

Until the founding of SOTA, there was only one garment-workers union in Haiti—the Sendika Ouvriye Kodevi Wanament (SOKOWA) at the CODEVI industrial park in Ouanaminthe in the northeast. SOKOWA, formed in early 2004, only survived strong efforts to break it thanks to a major international campaign. The main contracting company, Levi’s, and the main financier of the park, the World Bank’s IFC, were obliged to insist that Grupo M, the Dominican company that runs CODEVI, allow the union to exist and negotiate with its leaders.

The unionized workers at CODEVI enjoy better working conditions and get paid between twice and three times the minimum daily wage.