

Haiti: Bill Clinton Receives “Lifetime Achievement Award” but Where is the Money for Reconstruction?

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The anger that erupted in the streets of Port-au-Prince on Jun. 5, 10, and 19 also flared in the streets of New York on Thursday, Jun. 19, 2014.

Over 100 Haitians and North American activists, mobilized with only 48 hours notice, protested against the Happy Hearts Fund of super-model Petra Nemcova awarding Haitian President Michel Martelly a prize for his “leadership in education” in a sumptuous Manhattan ceremony. The foundation also gave the former President Bill Clinton a “Lifetime Achievement Award.”

One of the main chants of the demonstrators on 42nd Street outside the Cipriani restaurant was “Clinton, where is the money for reconstruction?” The answer was “in whose pockets?”

Clinton was responsible for overseeing the billions of dollars in aid pledged to Haiti after the devastating earthquake there four years ago. While rubble has finally been cleared from the streets, some 200,000 people still live in tents. Only a fraction of the permanent housing promised and needed has been built. Those built are often poorly designed, badly located, or incomplete.

Some schools and other public buildings have been replaced. The jobs promised shortly after the disaster were scattered and temporary.

Some of the demonstrators’ signs and chants charged that President Barack Obama has continued the Clinton policy toward Haiti i.e. neo-liberalism.



Image: From left to right, Prime Minister Laurent Lamothe, President Michel Martelly, and singer Sheryl Crow at one of the fundraiser's 52 tables. The event brought in \$2.5 million for the Happy Hearts Fund

Another issue raised both in Port-au-Prince and New York was the United Nations "peacekeeping" force, which has now been in Haiti over a decade. Haiti is at peace, demonstrators point out; the UN is just in Haiti to "enforce" the U.S. agenda there. Events in both Haiti and New York called for the MINUSTAH military occupation of the UN to leave Haiti immediately. Clinton is the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy to Haiti.

In October 2010, the UN brought cholera to Haiti by the dumping untreated feces in Haiti's largest river. To date, more than 830,000 Haitians have been sickened from cholera, while more than 8,000 have died. Despite the overwhelming evidence of its guilt, the UN has refused any form of redress for Haitian cholera victims with strong support from the United States and other imperialist powers on the UN Security Council.

As one sign said: "Reparations: the UN is standing on a lie. The UN knows, the UN is responsible, the UN is guilty!"

For the Jun. 19 protesters, the prize given to Martelly for his "initiative" in the domain of education is an "insult" not just to the Haitian diaspora in the United States but to the people living in Haiti.

Another charge raised in both Haiti and New York is that Martelly is a thief. Although the theft is unlikely to be proven in a court of law while he is president (a judge investigating his corruption suspiciously died one year ago), it is clear that President Martelly loves ostentatious luxury in the numerous trips abroad he makes. He reportedly gives himself a per diem expense account of \$20,000. (Haiti Sentinel, December 13, 2012). This per diem does not cover other regular members of his entourage, like his wife. They get their own.



Image: On June 19, demonstrators rallied outside the Cipriani restaurant on 42nd Street to denounce the ceremony honoring Haitian president Michel Martelly and former US president Bill Clinton

"The ceremony inside the Cipriani restaurant is disgusting and hypocritical," said Ray Laforest of the International Support Haiti Network (ISHN), one of the organizations that called the New York rally.

“Petra Nemcova, as Prime Minister Lamothe’s girlfriend, is a part of the Martelly government. Martelly himself calls her his Ambassador. The Martelly government is just giving itself an award, carrying out yet another charade, thinking that we Haitians are too stupid to understand the bluff. We hope that some of the clueless celebrities inside hear our voices.”

Many protesters in Port-au-Prince were teachers who have not been paid for months and students who came to support them.

The Cipriani restaurant, where the ceremony took place, is owned by an international company with a long history of conflict with Local 6 of the union UNITE-HERE and has been repeatedly prosecuted for how it distributes tips and salaries. It is often used for bourgeois celebrations.

The ceremony itself was conducted by Petra Nemcova, who founded the Happy Hearts Fund ten years ago. The event attracted a number of celebrities such as actress Naomi Watts, figure skater Scott Hamilton, radio personality Dr. Ruth, singers Sheryl Crow and Bono, and members of the musical group Black Eyed Peas.

According to the “Page 6” column of the New York Post, “when Nemcova auctioned off a trip to Ibiza on a private jet (complete with a seven-night stay on a yacht) for \$85,000, she said she’d throw in a kiss, but then brandished a red ruler and told the crowd she’d spank the lucky winner if they ponied up \$100,000.”

With tickets sales and the auction, the foundation raised \$2.5 million, according to the Daily News.

Designer Donna Karan, reading from a script clearly given to her by the government, claimed that the Martelly government “has increased school attendance from 46% in 2012 to 83% in 2013 while subsidizing over 1.4 million school children’s tuition,” statistics which are as precise as they are suspicious. The Martelly/Lamothe government is infamous for throwing out concocted figures to give their propaganda an allure of reality. Martelly has “truly uplifted the country,” Ms. Karan said.

She then presented the award to Martelly, who took the floor to say that “today I am here to talk about children’s education, which is the centerpiece of my vision for Haiti.” To prove it, Martelly explained that “my first act on May 14, 2011 was to inaugurate with Petra the Happy Hearts School.” Making the inauguration of the school of his business partner’s girlfriend’s NGO is not exactly presidential.

During the ceremony, President Martelly sang two duets with Haitian singer Wyclef Jean: “Let It Be Me” and “No Woman, No Cry.” Protesters booed Wyclef when he entered the restaurant. Martelly, Lamothe, and Clinton found it wiser to enter through a rear door.

Mr. Clinton, presented by Ms. Nemcova, also spoke after receiving his award.

The Dessalines Coordination (KOD), KAKOLA, and ISHN were among the Haitian groups sponsoring the New York rally, which also included many members of the Lavalas Family chapter in New York. The International Action Center, the ANSWER Coalition, Harlem Tenants Council, and Socialist Action were among the North American groups who supported and came out for the rally.

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