

# Haiti: Stop the Attacks on Former President Jean Bertrand Aristide and the Lavalas Movement

By [Haïti Liberté](#)

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On Aug. 21, Haitian police wearing black masks and carrying heavy arms appeared in front of the home of former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide as a Haitian judge issued calls to arrest him. Hundreds of people courageously surrounded the house to protect him.

One week before, President Aristide was summoned to court on false corruption charges. This is the fourth time since his return to Haiti in 2011 that he has been the target of a politically motivated legal case. (Previous charges were dropped before he could even challenge them in court.) The judge in this case, Lamarre Bélizaire, has been suspended for ten years from practicing the law by the Port-au-Prince Bar Association for using the court to persecute opponents of the present regime. His suspension is due to begin once he steps down as judge.

President Aristide, a former priest, was Haiti's first democratically elected president. He is loved and trusted by the majority of Haitians. While in office he built schools and hospitals, encouraged agriculture, and doubled the minimum wage. He was removed and forced into exile with his family in 2004 by a U.S.-backed military coup. Thousands of members of his Lavalas movement were killed, raped or falsely imprisoned in the aftermath of the coup.

In 2011, after seven years of grassroots organizing in Haiti backed up by an international campaign, President Aristide and his family returned home. Tens of thousands of people welcomed him. He promised to work for education and the inclusion of all Haitians in the democratic process. He has done just that - reopening the Aristide Foundation's university, UNIFA, where today over 900 students from all sectors of society, including those who cannot afford higher education, are training to become doctors, nurses and lawyers.

Legislative elections due to take place in Haiti in October are triggering a new chilling wave of repression aimed at President Aristide and his supporters. Lavalas has overwhelming won every election in which it has participated, but since the 2004 coup the party has been barred from elections. As a result, fewer than 20% of Haitians turned out for the flawed election that brought the current President Michel Martelly to power in 2011. The Martelly government has not held an election since, and legislative elections are now three years overdue. Determined to consolidate dictatorial power, the Martelly government has systematically attempted to defame Lavalas, throwing out one set of accusations after another against President Aristide and other respected Lavalas leaders such as former Senator Myrlande Liberis-Pavert.

While President Aristide is being threatened with arrest, former dictator Jean-Claude "Baby

Doc" Duvalier – who is responsible for the deaths of thousands of Haitians during his rule – is living freely in Haiti, and has been openly embraced by Martelly.

Since the devastating earthquake and the cholera epidemic, doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals training at UNIFA are needed more than ever. President Aristide must be able to carry on with his vital work as an educator.

The last time President Aristide was summoned, thousands of people surrounded the courthouse, chanting: "If they call our brother, they call all of us." We echo their voices. Enough is enough. It is time for food, housing, health care and education. It is time for free, fair, and inclusive elections in Haiti, not dictatorship, so the urgent needs of the population can be addressed. The arrest warrant and other false charges aimed at President Aristide and his supporters should be dropped once and for all.

Signers:

Danny Glover, Actor and Human Rights Activist

Selma James, Author and International Coordinator, Global Women's Strike (GWS)/UK

Pierre Labossiere, Co-founder, Haiti Action Committee

Mumia Abu-Jamal

Rev. Francis Ackroyd, Minister of Vine Reformed Church, Ilford, UK

Jerry Acosta, Senior National Representative, Utility Workers Union of America

Kali Akuno, Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (MXGM)

ALBATV (Venezuela)

Jack Albert, Windsor Peace Coalition, Windsor, Ontario

Alexandria House, Los Angeles, CA

Bilal Mafundi Ali, Organization of African American Unity

Jahahara Amen-RA Alkebulan-Ma'at, Founder, Africans Deserve Reparations

Tayo Aluko, Playwright, actor, singer

Akubundu Amazu-Lott, Central Committee AAPRP

A.N.S.W.E.R. Coalition – Act Now to Stop War and End Racism (U.S.)

Arab Resource & Organizing Center (AROC)

Dr. Adrienne Aron, Liberation Psychologist

Dr. Nancy Arvold

Dr. Andrew Asibong, Author & lecturer in French studies, UK

Ayuko Babu, Pan African Film Festival

Patricia Barthaud, Ed.D candidate, University of San Francisco

Michael Bass, School of the Americas Watch

BAYAN-USA

Bay Area Latin America Solidarity Committee (BALASC)

Richard Becker, A.N.S.W.E.R. Coalition – (U.S.)

Professor Joel Beinin, Stanford University, Department of History

Herman Bell, US political prisoner

Miranda Bergman, Artist and educator

Lincoln Bergman, Educator and poet

Dennis J. Bernstein, Executive Producer KPFA/Flashpoints

Johanna Berrigan, House of Grace Catholic Worker, Philadelphia, Pa.

Roy Birchard

Diana Block, California Coalition for Women Prisoners

Diana Bohn, Nicaragua Center for Community Action, Berkeley, CA

Blase and Theresa Bonpane, Directors, Office of the Americas

China Brotsky and Dan Roth

Richard Brown, San Francisco 8/Committee for Defense of Human Rights

Dr. Siri Brown, Chair of Ethnic Studies, Merritt College

Paul Burke, Filmmaker

Peter Burke, Esalen Institute, Big Sur, California

Mark Burton, Visiting Professor, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK

Reverend Richard Meri Ka Ra Byrd

Joey Cain, SF LGBT Pride Celebration Committee Board Member

Sara Callaway, Women of Colour Global Women's Strike, UK

Rossana Cambron, member of Military Families Speak Out

Theresa Cameranesi, SOAWatch SF

Graham Campbell, Convener, Africans for an Independent Scotland

Dolores Canales, Organizer and activist

Jean Candio

Laura Carlsen

Pedro Pla Casaldáliga, Bishop Emeritus of São Félix do Araguaia – MT

Andrea Casher, PsyD, ABPP

Claudia Chaufan, MD, PhD, Associate Professor, University of California San Francisco

Chiapas Support Committee – Los Angeles

Claudio Chipana G, Encuentros Latinoamericanos, London, UK

CIP Americas Program

Terry Collins, KPOO

Comite Oscar Romero – Sicsal Chile

Brian Concannon, Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti (IJDH)

David A. Coolidge, Lay Servant, United Methodist Church

William Crossman

Robert Cruise, Unifor Local 195 Human Rights Committee, Windsor

Luke Daniels, President of Caribbean Labour Solidarity, UK

Shandre Delaney, Human Rights Coalition-Fed Up and Abolitionist Law Center, Pittsburgh, PA

Susan Dembowski

Manuel De Paz, East Bay Sanctuary Covenant

Jacques Depelchin, Historian

Dignity and Power Now – Los Angeles

John & Sara Donnelly, Sonoma, CA

Seth Donnelly, Teacher, Los Altos High School

Emory Douglas, former Minister of Culture, Black Panther Party

Helen Duffy & William Chorneau, Oakland, CA

Sister Maureen Duignan, Executive Director, East Bay Sanctuary Covenant

Carolina Dutton, Bay Area Latin America Solidarity Coalition (BALASC)

Derethia DuVal, PhD, MFT, SFSU Director of Counseling & Psychological Services Center

Ecumenical Peace Institute/CALC

Joe Emersberger, Writer

Mia Engberg, Documentary Filmmaker, Sweden

Yves Engler, Author and activist

Arla S. Ertz, MSW

Linda Evans, Organizer, All Of Us Or None

Leslie Fleming, Director, Anthropology Program, Merritt College, Oakland, CA

Laura Flynn, Author

FMLN – Northern California

Adrienne Fong

Terry Forman, Artist

Cindy Forster, Professor, Scripps College, California

Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular (Honduras)

Jose Frias, Comite Oscar Romero de Chile

Tova Fry, Workers World Party

Cynthia Fuentes, Educator

GABRIELA Philippines

Julisa Garcia

Mattias Gardell, Professor Comparative Religion, Uppsala University, Sweden

Anna-Maria Gentili, Professor History and Politics, Bologna University, Italy, retired

David Gespass, former President, National Lawyers Guild

David Gibson, Peacehome Campaigns

Eric Gjertsen & Dean Kendall, Payday men's network

Andy Griggs, LA Laborfest

Deeg Gold, LAGAI Queer Insurrection

Sister Stella Marie Goodpasture, OP, Dominican Sisters of Mission San Jose, CA

Guerilla Food Not Bombs

Ben Guillory

Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, Archdiocese of Detroit

Prof. Shadrack Gutto, PhD, University of South Africa

Peter Hallward, Professor of Modern European Philosophy, Kingston University, UK

Johanna Harman, Artist

Sue Harris, Co-Director, Peoples Video Network

Roxana Hart, Berkeley Women in Black

Maureen Hartmann

David Hartsough, Director, PEACEWORKERS, San Francisco

Daletha Hayden, RN and activist

Genesy Hernandez, Union Salvadorena de Estudiantes Universitarios, UC Berkeley

Charles Hinton, Inkworks Press, worker-owned collective

Marcus Holder, ILWU Local 10 delegate to San Francisco Labor Council

Hondurans in Resistance – NorCal

Julie H. Hoover

Gerald Horne, Historian

Phil Hutchings, Civil Rights activist (SNCC)

Nehanda Imara, AAPRP Organizer & Faculty at AFRAM Merritt College

Dr. Nia Imara, Harvard University

International Action Center

Carolyn Trupti Israel, Santa Cruz WILPF

Timoteo Jeffries

Kokayi Kwa Jitahidi, Campaign Director LAANE (Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy)

Sister Gloria Marie Jones, OP, Congregational Prioress Dominican Sisters of Mission, San Jose

Hank Jones, Committee for the Defense of Human Rights

Phoebe Jones, PhD, Quaker, Global Women's Strike

James Jordan & Chuck Kaufman, National Co-Coordinator, Alliance for Global Justice

William Joyce, Chair, Fr. Bill O'Donnell Social Justice Committee

Malaika Kambon, Photojournalist

Michelle Karshan, Haiti Dream Keeper Archives

Susan Roberta Katz, Professor, International and Multicultural Education, University of San Francisco

Willow Katz, Sin Barras; Santa Cruz, CA Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

Kathy Kelly, Co-Coordinator, Voices for Creative Nonviolence

Sara Kershner, International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network

Nadine Khoury-Quesada, RN, Trauma Nurse, San Francisco General Hospital

Nunu Kidane, Director, Priority Africa Network

Marcus Kryshka, Executive Vice President, National Lawyers Guild

Julian Kunnie

Eusi Kwayana, Caribbean Activist Without Borders

Tchaiko Kwayana, Educator

Labor Community Strategy Center (Los Angeles)

Michael Ladson, Auckland, New Zealand

Regina Day Langhout, PhD, Provost, Oakes College, University of California at Santa Cruz

Marilyn Langlois, Richmond CA Planning Commissioner

Gloria La Riva, National Committee to Free the Cuban Five

Rev. Dr. Phil Lawson, Pastor Emeritus, Easter Hill United Methodist Church

Carlos Manuel Alejos Levano, Callao, Peru

Richard Lichtman, Professor Emeritus, Philosophy, The Wright Institute, Berkeley, CA

George Lippman, Vice-Chair, Berkeley Peace and Justice Commission [for identification only]

Rev. Dr. Lewis E. Logan, II

Jose Lopez, Executive Director, Puerto Rican Cultural Center, Chicago

Nina Lopez, Coordinator Latin America working group GWS/Argentina, UK

Jean Robert Pierre Louis, Miami, Florida

Jacqui Lovell, PhD Candidate, York St. John University, U.K

Barbara Lubin, Director, Middle East Children's Alliance

M. Brinton Lykes, Associate Director, Center for Human Rights & International Justice, Boston College

Jeff Mackler, National Secretary, Socialist Action

Robert Majzler, University of California at Santa Cruz

Claude Marks, Freedom Archives

May 1st Coalition for Worker & Immigrant Rights, NYC

John McDonnell, Member of Parliament, UK

Gayle McLaughlin, Mayor, City of Richmond, CA

Anita Schrader McMillan, Warwick Medical School, Coventry, UK

David McPhail, Ruling Elder, St. John's Presbyterian Church, Berkeley, CA

Judith Mirkinson, San Francisco Women's International League for Peace and Freedom

Wazir Mohamed, Associate Professor, Sociology

Alejandro Molina, National Boricua Human Rights Network

Movimiento Cumbe Afrosalud Barlovento (Venezuela)

Leslie Mullin, Co-founder, San Francisco Dyke March

Michael Neocosmos, Director UHURU program, Rhodes University, South Africa

Robert Nixon, School of the Americas Watch - Oakland, East Bay

Kwazi Nkrumah, Co-Chair, Martin Luther King Coalition of Greater Los Angeles

Douglas Norberg

Carlie Numi

Kiilu Nyasha, Host/Freedom is a Constant Struggle

Oakland-Santiago de Cuba Sister Cities Association

Ofraneh (Organización Fraternal Negra Hondureña, Honduras)

Catherine Owen, Human Rights Committee & District Labor Council, Windsor, Ontario



Tanalis Padilla, Professor of History, Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, U.S.

Rosa Peñate, FMLN – Northern California

Peter Phillips, PhD, President Media Freedom Foundation/Project Censored

Kevin Pina, Documentary Filmmaker

Richard Pithouse, Professor Politics and International Studies, Rhodes University

Suyapa Portillo, Comité Solidario Graciela Garcia

Randall Potter

Margaret Power, Professor of History, Illinois Institute of Technology

Margaret Prescod, Host “Sojourner Truth,” Pacifica Radio & Women of Color/GWS/US

Myra Quadros, Principal, Sutro Elementary School, San Francisco

James Quesada, PhD, Chair and Professor, Department of Anthropology, San Francisco State University (SFSU)

Porfirio Quintano, Coordinator, Honduran Resistance FNRP Northern California

Kate Raphael, Queers Undermining Israeli Terrorism (QUIT), KPFA Women’s Magazine

Mary Ratcliff, Editor, San Francisco Bay View National Black Newspaper

Dr. Willie Ratcliff, Publisher, San Francisco Bay View National Black Newspaper

Michael Ratner, President Emeritus Center for Constitutional Rights

Barbara Rhine, Attorney

Aimee Riechel, Teacher, Mission High School, San Francisco

Wilson Riles, Oakland C.A.N.

Walter Riley, Attorney, Chair of Board, Haiti Emergency Relief Fund

William I. Robinson, Professor of Sociology, University of California-Santa Barbara

Marvin Roman, Windsor Peace Committee

Susan Rosenberg, former US political prisoner

Didi Rossi, Queer Strike

Robert Roth, Co-founder, Haiti Action Committee

Alex Sanchez, Executive Director, Homies Unidos

Carolyn Scarr, Ecumenical Peace Institute/CALC

Laurence Schechtman, The Neighborhood Village, Berkeley, CA

Peter Schey, President and Executive Director, Center for Human Rights and Constitutional Law

Jane Segal

Suzanne Seitz

Azadeh Shahshahani, President, National Lawyers Guild

Jeanie Shaterian

Haleh Sheikholeslami, MD, United States

Dan Siegel, Attorney, Oakland, CA

Judy Siff, Psychotherapist

Dr. Vito Signorile, Professor Emeritus, Windsor, Ontario

Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, National Council of Elders

Sin Barras, Santa Cruz

Kevin Skerrett, Trade unionist and member, Canada Haiti Action Network (CHAN)

AJ Smith, Artist, Windsor, Ontario

Bob Smith, Brandywine Peace Community

Susan Gold Smith, Professor Emerita, Windsor, Ontario

SOAW-East Bay

SOA Watch – San Francisco

Dale Sorensen, Director, Marin Interfaith Task force on the Americas

Phoebe Sorgen, BFUU Social Justice Committee

Jeb Sprague, Author and Instructor, UCSB

Rev Kristin Stoneking, Executive Director Fellowship of Reconciliation

Patricia St. Onge, Seven Generations, Nafsi ya Jamii: The Soul Community

Dr. Paul Sutton, Professor in Caribbean Studies (retired), UK

Nancy Taylor, Justice Activist, Oakland, CA

Ruth Todasco, Every Mother is a Working Mother Network

Clarence Thomas, member ILWU Local 10

Willie Thompson, Professor Emeritus Sociology, City College of San Francisco

Walter Turner, President, Board of Directors, Global Exchange

Akinyele Umoja, Associate Professor and Chair, Department of African American Studies,  
Georgia State University

Lisa Valenti, US Cuba Sister City Association

Sister Judy Vaughan, CSJ

Max Ventura, San Leandro, CA

Gloria Verdieu

Margaret Villamizar, Chair, Windsor Peace Coalition, Windsor, Ontario

Eleanor Walden, Gray Panthers of Berkeley/East Bay CA, Board of Directors, Housing Chair

Ernest Wamba dia Wamba, Congolese Historian, Philosopher

Kristin Wartman, Author and Journalist

Mary Watkins, Professor, Pacifica Graduate Institute

Tom Webb, Oakland Catholic Worker

Jane Welford, Berkeley, CA

David Welsh, delegate, San Francisco Labor Council

Michel Wenzer, Documentary Filmmaker, Sweden

Maureen Wesolowski, Peace and Social Justice Committee, St Mary Magdalen Parish,  
Berkeley, CA

Rose Marie Whalley

Laura Whitehorn, former political prisoner

Tobey Wiebe

Arlene J. Williamson

Witness For Peace Southwest

Michael Wong

Workers World Party

Pauline Wynter

Mario Zelaya, Father Bill O'Donnell Social Justice Committee, Berkeley, CA

Vivian Zelaya, Women in Black and Ecumenical Peace Institute

Zbu Zikode, President of Abahlalibase Mjondolo Movement, Durban, South Africa

Daniel Zwickel ben Avram — PeaceHost.net

*Affiliations listed for identification purposes only*

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