

# Haiti: What We Need is Solidarity, Not Charity

Interview With Haiti Union Leader Dukens Raphael

By [Dukens Raphael](#)

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*Haitian labour leader Dukens Raphael stirred delegates on the final day of CUPE BC's 47th annual Convention with a moving speech that called for greater solidarity—not charity—between international civil society organizations and the people they're trying to help in his earthquake-ravaged country.*

*Raphael, secretary-general of Haiti's Confederation of Public and Private Sector Workers (CTSP), said the January 12 quake, which killed more than 300,000 people and left two million homeless with untold others displaced, has highlighted issues of inequality and neocolonial exploitation that have plagued his island country since its founding in 1804.*

*Raphael's speech was preceded by a short film that provided an update on the reconstruction effort. The film revealed the grim realities of tent cities collapsing under monsoon rains and families living in mud puddles with no access to adequate food, water or clothing. But it also revealed a proud people determined to rebuild the country on their own terms.*

Exploitation a never-ending problem

"The last image was that of a flag," said Raphael. "This means that Haiti stands alone as a country like any other. But it is a country with a complicated history that has been further complicated by the earthquake."

Raphael said that the calamity resulting from the earthquake was not especially unique in a country that has never been well governed, where 37 of its 47 presidents have been forcibly removed from office, and where extreme poverty often exists in close proximity to extreme wealth.

The day after the earthquake, he said, "we were very promptly helped out by our American 'friends'. A force of U.S. soldiers 20,000 strong took control of the airports and harbours without even consulting the president of the country. What we really need is not troops but medical aid, and food....Sturdier and more durable forms of shelter will be needed before the hurricanes come in June."

Raphael's organization was in no way spared by the earthquake. The CTSP, an affiliate of Public Services International, lost 300 members, including 26 electricians who are members of the electrical federation of which Raphael is also the president. The CTSP trade union

office was completely destroyed by the earthquake.

Raphael paid tribute to CUPE and its members for demonstrating “the kind of solidarity that shows respect for us as the citizens we truly are. You contacted us to ask us what our needs were.”

The Haitian labour leader said that the first persons that should be consulted about the rebuilding of Haiti are the Haitian people. However, the international reconstruction plan presented at the United Nations on March 30 had no input from union groups, farmer’s associations or other private or public associations. Similarly, civil society organizations were not involved in the decisions surrounding the \$5.3 billion in aid that will be disbursed over the next 18 months by a foundation headed by former U.S. president Bill Clinton, the Special United Nations Envoy to Haiti.

Raphael said that the problem with most international aid is that a lot of the money that flows into developing countries like Haiti doesn’t get to the people who need it most.

“Within your community there has been much fundraising,” he said. “My call to you is to ask that, notwithstanding all the international structures in place, to think of what kind of bilateral relationships can be set.”

For more information, visit [www.HaitiJustice.org](http://www.HaitiJustice.org).

*During the 47th annual convention of the British Columbia division of the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) from April 21-24, CUPE Communications sat down with guest speaker Dukens Raphael, secretary-general of the Confederation of Public and Private Sectors Workers of Haiti (CTSP). This interview, which was posted on CUPE’s website, was conducted with the translation assistance of CoDevelopment Canada’s Carol Wood.*

CUPE: What is the current state of the rebuilding effort in Haiti?

RAPHAEL: As you know, there were about 300,000 deaths, and the electricity and telecommunications infrastructure – in 75 to 80% of Port au Prince – has been destroyed. There’s been some effort around reestablishing the electrical system. Phone service has been reestablished to a certain extent for cell phones, but land lines are not working, and potable water, drinkable water, has not been established in the areas affected by the earthquake. About two million people are living in tents, with no shelter. There are a lot of delinquents and insecurity. People are not safe. Obviously, if you’re living in a huge tent area, people are stealing things, there’s promiscuity, etc. But everything I’ve been talking about is not the hardest part. The hardest part for people right now is the psychosis of fear, because the rainy season has started already. When the rains come, the tents won’t hold. So the rain starts, then right after that, it’s hurricane season starting in June. So we are anticipating that the situation will get worse. The reaction of the people in government, instead of coming forward with more sturdy tents that would be more stable for people in this season, was to just spend millions of dollars on regular tents. And they’re not going to be useful.

CUPE: How have you been affected, personally?

RAPHAEL: Everybody has been affected, from labor leaders to workers. Our union offices

were completely destroyed. Over 80% of schools have been destroyed. For example, in the state university where most students go, there were 13 colleges and nine were completely destroyed. The four that are left are too dangerous to go into. It's the same with the health sector. Hospitals have been destroyed. In all sectors, the damage has hit everyone.

So the most urgent need right away is proper shelter for the rainy and hurricane season. The second priority would be to better coordinate the support that's coming into Haiti. People who need it most are complaining every day on television or radio that they are not receiving the help. Much of the material aid that has arrived can be found on the streets for sale. So there's been a lot of aid that has arrived in the country, but that's not the problem – it's that it's not getting to the people who need it.

CUPE: Whose fault is that?

RAPHAEL: It's a problem with the state. Everyone (aid agencies) just arrives and they do what they want. There's no regulation. The state needs to take responsibility and say who is doing what, and where.

CUPE: Is the government even capable of helping, given that it is in such disarray itself?

RAPHAEL: It's true that many government buildings have fallen down. And the government lost a few lives, yes. But the government has the responsibility to direct these things, to take responsibility, to govern. There are lots of things that come out in international media about such "disarray," and the government uses the situation as an excuse to not fully take on the responsibility. Despite this situation, there is a president, a prime minister and ministers, and they are still getting their salaries. So they should do their jobs. If they can't do them, they should leave. What I'm most afraid of is that we may end up with a popular revolt. People can't sleep at night. There is nobody to accompany them. The risk is that we'll see people in the street to solve their problems.

CUPE: How are civil society groups, unions, and other community organizations working together?

RAPHAEL: If there's something positive January 12 has brought to us, it's that – putting aside all the differences and divergences between civil society organizations that we've had before – we're sitting down together to try and find a way out of this situation. A number of the labor councils and the larger labor organizations (such as Public Services International and Education International) have sat down together. There were a number of commitments made for action. Among those was that we would try to work in unity as labor. The same thing is happening for agriculture workers groups, women's groups, youth groups, etc. What we're getting a glimpse of here is that if the government could work with civil society groups, we could get out of this situation.

The problem is that, even though civil society organizations are doing this work, the government just ignores it and doesn't do any work. For example, the Haitian government presented a plan for reconstruction in New York on March 31. But there was no debate beforehand – no input from civil society organizations. Instead, they're imposing a plan on us. Unfortunately, I can pretty much guarantee that it won't work.

CUPE: So, following this meeting of labor organizations, what message have you been trying to send to international organizations, in terms of how they can support the relief and

reconstruction efforts?

RAPHAEL: In terms of reconstruction, we state very clearly that the reconstruction effort must come first and foremost from Haitians. We need to decide what we need from you, then we will ask for help. We may need expertise, know-how, but we need to decide what that is first. It's not up to the Americans and the international community to decide what we need. I sit here with you, and yet I cannot tell you what's in the reconstruction plan. Somebody will say we got this plan from the Haitian government, but we don't even know what it is, and we're Haitian. Even Colin Powell, in a recent article, was willing to admit that many of Haiti's problems were caused by the Americans and the French.

I'll give you two examples. After Haiti's declaration of independence, the United States was opposed to Haiti's participation in the Congress of Nations. The U.S. didn't want to recognize Haiti as a nation. France, a colonizing country, made Haiti pay to be recognized: 150,000 pieces of gold, which is the equivalent of \$20 billion today. But that's a whole other discussion. People say that Haiti is the poorest country. It's not. It is the most exploited. All our resources have been stolen. I like American and French people, but you need to recognize the historic wrongdoings that have been committed by the colonizing countries.

CUPE: And if they don't recognize this, then they won't recognize how they're repeating the same patterns now?

RAPHAEL: Exactly. The last two coups d'état – the 1991 coup that lasted three years, and Aristide came back in 1994, and the next one – demonstrate this. Aristide made a lot of mistakes, but that didn't justify taking out the president who was duly elected. And we don't want a coup d'état now either. We're opposed to the policies of René Préal, but we want him to finish his mandate so that when he goes, the democratic process continues.

CUPE: Has there been any support from international labor organizations?

RAPHAEL: I can only speak for my own organization. We've had a lot of moral support. Concrete support we've had very little.

CUPE: What can we do to help get that aid through, for shelter?

RAPHAEL: Communication and support between unions, within the union movement, is fairly easy. Our union has defined a certain number of needs. You need to know also that within the union movement there's a bureaucracy that slows things down. The expressions of solidarity within the union movement have been very strong. We hope very soon that we will pass from expressions of moral solidarity to expressions of concrete solidarity.

So first of all, the question of shelter, and a lot of our unions have lost our offices, so we have to reconstruct a place to work. The third thing we have defined that we're looking for is support of the children of union members who were going to university who can no longer attend. We're looking for support so that they can continue their studies elsewhere. So far, the Brazilian government has provided 500 university scholarships, and the Dominican Republic has also offered various types of support to Haitians, including waiving the fees for a year, at the university. I would just ask that other governments and organizations that are able to follow those examples do so.

CUPE: What will you tell people in your speech (on April 24), and at the forum?

RAPHAEL: I think it's important to thank the people who have made this visit possible. It's an opportunity for us to get our message out to people who might not have heard it otherwise. We're looking for solidarity; charity we're not interested in.

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