A Brief History of Haiti
by Rising in Solidarity with Ayiti (R.I.S.A.)

- Prior to European arrival, Arawak-speaking Taino people inhabited an island they referred to by several names, including Ayiti, or “high land.” Numbering roughly 1 million, they were organized into at least five major settlements that were each led by a cacique or chieftain. They were very experienced in agriculture, but also hunted and fished.

- Italian explorer Christopher Columbus lands on the island on December 5, 1492. Claiming the island for the Spanish crown, he renames it La Hispaniola. Although Spanish settlers remark at the kindness and generosity of the island’s inhabitants, they nearly exterminated the Taino within several decades through a combination of torture and disease, forced labor and outright murder. The last cacique to fall was led by Queen Anacaona, who was captured through deceit and hung by the Spanish governor.

- The Spanish start to bring enslaved Africans to the island to cultivate the newly introduced sugar cane crop in 1501, the first of the Trans Atlantic slave trade. By 1540, the Spanish settlers count only several hundred Tainos, but over 30,000 captives from what are today Togo, Benin, and Nigeria, as well as other parts of West Africa. Roughly one in five of those held in slave ships perished during the voyage.

- Spain ceded the Western third of the island to France in 1697, which renamed it Saint-Dominigue. French settlers implemented a form of sugar cane cultivation that required vast tracts of land and massive work gangs. All sorts of cruelties were used to keep enslaved African end. A growing triangular trade brought finished products to the shores of West Africa to be traded for a human cargo bound for the Caribbean, where it would be exchanged for sugar and rum shipped for Europe. In the cane fields of Saint Dominigue, where the captives were not expected to live more than seven years, the languages of Wolof, Fon, Ga, Éwé, English, Spanish and French were melded into a common code. By the start of the American Revolution, Saint Dominigue was the wealthiest colony in the New World, with the brutality of plantation slavery generating more revenue than all the commerce of the thirteen colonies.

- Following a vodou ceremony held on August 22, 1791, those enslaved on Saint Dominique’s Northern plantations launched a well-coordinated revolt. Over the next twelve years, rebel armies of formerly enslaved Africans, ultimately brought together under General Toussaint L’Overture, fought a protracted war against the armies of France, Spain, and Britain. By the end of 1803, these forces had decisively defeated Napoleon Bonaparte’s best soldiers such that they were able to declare the country independent in 1804, the first free nation in Latin America. Of the more than half million people of African descent who inhabited the island in 1792, it is estimated that only 341,933 survived to see independence, with roughly 170,000 fit to work. In honor of the island’s original inhabitants, the leaders of the revolution renamed the country Haiti.

- During its first decades of independence, Haiti suffered under a diplomatic quarantine imposed by Europe and the U.S. In spite of this hostility, most Haitians become independent peasants as they divided former plantations amongst themselves to cultivate coffee, sugar cane, and other crops. Built on the remains of the plantation system, the peasantry was exploited by the state through a series of taxes and custom duties. Also, the generals who succeeded L’Overture competed for control of the state through coups and civil wars.

- In 1816, the Haitian government offered sanctuary and material aid, including troops, arms, and a printing press, to Simon Bolivar, the liberator of South America, on the condition that he abolish slavery. After gaining independence for much of South America, Bolivar abolished slavery but does not recognize Haiti.

- In 1824, France sent a flotilla of warships to demand from the Haitian government 150 million francs and a halving of customs duties on French goods as an indemnity for the losses of plantation owners as a result of the revolution. Accepted in 1825, this indemnity forced Haiti to take out loans from Paris banks, leading to French domination of the country’s finances and minimal economic independence. Estimated at $21 billion in today’s money, Haiti would continue to pay this debt until 1947.
The Catholic Church and the U.S. recognized Haiti’s independence in 1860 and 1865, respectively, ending its long isolation. However, foreign powers exercised increasingly more control over its economy and regularly intervened in its politics. This pattern culminated in an invasion by the U.S. Marines in 1915. Occupying the country, the Marines helped to develop infrastructure and reorganized the military; they also pressed thousands into forced labor and massacred rebellious peasants, rewrote the constitution and looted the Treasury. A student-led general strike brought about the end of the occupation in 1934, which left a heavily indebted government, propped up by a heavy-handed military.

In 1957, Francois “Father Doc” Duvalier won the presidential election organized by the army. Duvalier cemented his power by exiling rival politicians, expelling foreign-born bishops, and replacing unreliable army officers. He also created a repressive rural militia, the “tonton macoutes,” while securing more and more U.S. aid by playing into anti-communist hysteria. After Duvalier died from a heart attack in 1971, his son, Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier, succeeded him. Although less repressive than his father, Baby Doc imposed policies, including the 1978 culling of the Haitian pig, which further impoverished the peasantry, much of which migrated to the cities to work in the growing garment assembly industry.

A popular uprising sparked by anti-government protests forced him to flee in 1986, taking with him hundreds of millions of dollars from the nation’s Treasury. A provisional government led by the army took control of the country while the “lavalas” uprising developed into a movement for democracy and helped to introduce a new constitution in 1987. Within the movement, Jean Bertrand Aristide, a priest based in Port-au-Prince’s poorest neighborhood, rose to prominence and won the Presidential election in 1990 with 64% of the vote. The new government launched various initiatives, including land redistribution, an increase of the minimum wage, anti-crime efforts, and an adult literacy campaign. Eight months later, he was deposed in a U.S.-backed military coup, led by generals on the CIA payroll.

Until a U.S.-led operation restored President Aristide to office in 1994, the macoutes and Haitian army harassed and killed thousands of those involved in the lavalas movement. At the same time, a U.S. embargo on Haitian goods forced tens of thousands into dire poverty and, ultimately, exile. It was only after Aristide agreed to implement a structural adjustment program that lowered import tariffs on grain and wheats, fired state workers, and privatized state industries, including the flourmill and the cement factory, that constitutional rule was restored and Aristide allowed to serve out his remaining two years in office. Returned to office, Aristide abolished the army and instituted a civilian police force. Prime Minister Rene Preval won the presidential elections in 1996, continuing to implement this structural adjustment program as well as further land reform.

In 2000, Jean-Bertrand Aristide was re-elected President with 90% support, as opposition parties boycotted the election. In response, the U.S. and other countries blocked $500 million in loans and aid while also pressuring the government to pay out $5 million in interest and $66 million in debt. The U.S. government also funds a coalition of civil and political organizations challenging Aristide’s government. For his part, Aristide raised the minimum wage to 2.40 per day, demanded France repay the 1825 indemnity, attempted to stamp out corruption, and improved access to health care and education, stirring opposition from local elites and foreign powers.

In 2004, a band of former army office entered the country from the Dominican Republic and took control of several cities. As this armed group approached the capital, the U.S. Ambassador pressed Aristide to resign and had him flown to the Central African Republic, where Aristide denounces his removal as a kidnapping and a coup. Deviating from the Haitian Constitution, foreign powers selected a Council of the Wise to select a provisional government. Within days, U.N. peacekeepers are in Haiti to maintain law and order, especially in the poor neighborhoods where Aristide drew his support. Now integrated into the police force, former soldiers jail the Prime Minister and other prominent elected officials, while carrying out brutal attacks on those suspected of being Aristide supporters, killing several thousand in violence reminiscent of the 1991 coup.

In 2006, the Presidential election was held after being delayed four times. Preval is declared the winner in spite of ballot stuffing that undercut his lead. In 2008, demonstrations over the high cost of food paralyze the capital, forcing Preval to lower the price of rice and other goods and the Senate to replace his Prime Minister.