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“We’re looking for solidarity. Charity we’re not interested in.” – Dukens Raphael

During CUPE BC’s 47th annual convention (April 21-24), CUPE Communications sat down with international guest speaker Dukens Raphael, secretary-general of Haiti’s Confederation of Public and Private Sector Workers. The interview 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 per cent 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 in the main square, 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, et cetera. 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 labour leaders to workers. Our union offices were completely destroyed. Over eighty per cent of schools have been destroyed. For example, in the state university where most students go, there were 13 faculties 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 taken on the responsibility. Despite this situation, there is a president, a vice-president 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 labour councils and the larger labour 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 labour. 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 labour 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 wrong doings 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 coup d'états—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 Rene Preval, but we want him to finish his mandate so that when he goes, the democratic project process continues.

CUPE: Has there been any support from international labour 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 (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.