



Photo courtesy of Bill Haney.

CINE LATINO

Children bathe in a Dominican batey.

The Bitter for the Sweet

by Sara Lamson

The Price of Sugar
Directed by Bill Haney (2007)
Not rated, 90 minutes

lnd from the Dominican Republic's all-inclusive resorts and sandy beaches, far from the eyes of all but the most adventurous tourists, long stretches of two lane highway roll out through vast swaths of sugarcane. Roughly 500,000 tons of sugar are produced on the island every year, making it the country's most lucrative cash crop. The workers who cultivate and harvest the cane are, however, rarely Dominican: they are Haitian immigrants and the children of Haitian immigrants born in the Dominican Republic, many of whom have no rights and are not recognized by the Dominican government. Living in isolated, rural *bateyes*

(sugar company housing), these workers toil in conditions similar to those endured by their enslaved forebears who once made Saint Domingue the wealthiest colony in the world.

"The Price of Sugar" a new documentary by director Bill Haney, explores the lives of these Haitian laborers. The film follows the story of Father Christopher Hartley, an Anglo-Spanish disciple of Mother Teresa who moved to the Dominican Republic in 1997 to minister in the parish of San José de los Llanos, a town which lies in the midst of some of the nation's largest sugar plantations. The film recounts Father Hartley's nearly decade-long struggle to better the living and working conditions of his flock, whose lot he equates with modern-day slavery. Narrated by Paul Newman and illustrated with often stunning videography, the documentary captures a shocking panorama of life in the *bateyes* and cane fields.

Upon arrival in Los Llanos, Hartley is warned not to enter the bateyes. Ignoring the injunction, Hartley enters the company-owned communities to begin working with the residents. Galvanized into action by what he saw — workers with lost fingers and inadequate clothing; rampant malnutrition and child labor; crowded and decrepit housing; and a near complete lack of access to education, healthcare and other services — Father Hartley becomes an organizer among the workers, informing them of their rights and encouraging collective action. Working by night as an advocate for their cause, he labors to alert human rights organizations and others who might take an interest in his work.

If the film focuses largely on the immediate conditions in the bateyes — most of which are owned by the oligarchic Vicini clan, the film's designated villain and among the most powerful families in the Republic — it also looks outward to see how Haitian workers arrive in these communities. Tipped off by a disgruntled Vicini *buscone* (human trafficker), Haney films Father Hartley and a colleague as they travel to a popular crossing-point for migrants on the mountainous Haitian–Dominican border. There they interview migrants and border guards who admit to looking the other way when Haitian laborers are brought across. The camera captures the action as the migrants are stripped of identification, loaded into trucks and driven directly to the plantations. Once on the plantations, workers are not allowed to leave, a policy enforced 24-hours a day by armed guards.

The second half of the film traces the response to Father Hartley's efforts. Confronted first with anonymous death threats, he is later challenged directly by the Vicini Corporation. In a drought year, as fires plague the plantations, Hartley is accused of inciting arson. Gaining notoriety throughout the country and in international media circles, he is publicly denounced as an enemy of the Dominican Republic, a country where anti-Haitian animus has a long and sometimes violent history.

Hartley attributes the backlash to vested interests seeking to undermine his ministry and feed upon Dominican fears of “haitianization” of the country. “Take all of the Haitians back to Haiti!” shrieks television host Consuelo Despradel on her popular national TV program, decrying the “meddling” of Father Hartley. As tensions escalate, the Vicini clan petitions the Catholic Church to have Father Hartley removed from the country.

Haney's film, if at times cloying in its depiction of the pious Hartley's tale, still provides powerful ammunition to those in the international community outraged by the plight of Haitian workers. Its vivid scenes of human trafficking, exploitation and discrimination are supported by recent

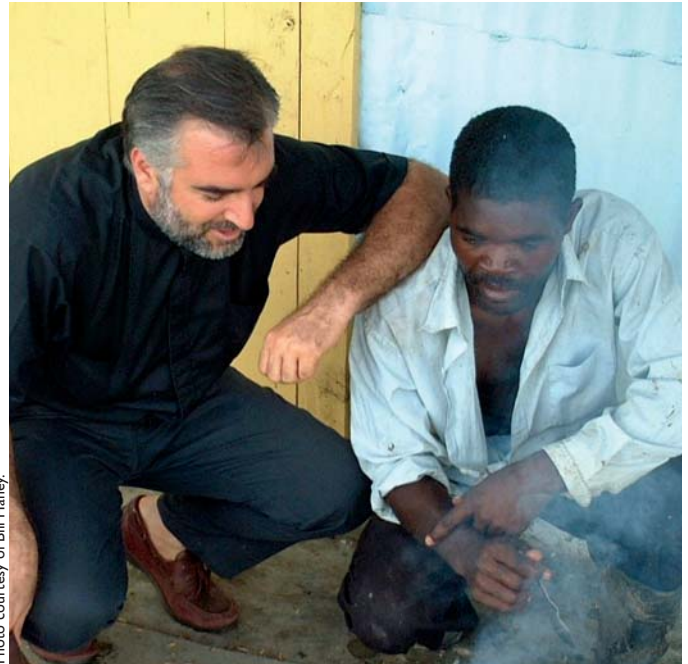


Photo courtesy of Bill Haney.

Father Hartley with a sugarcane worker.

reports from human rights organizations and the U.S. Department of State, whose 2006 country report on the Dominican Republic cited deplorable working conditions in agriculture — particularly in the sugar sector.

Where “The Price of Sugar” stumbles is in placing the situation it depicts within the broader political, economic and legal system in which it takes place. The audience is told that the United States has a preferential-trade agreement with the Dominican Republic and that this agreement forces Americans to buy Dominican sugar at up to double the world price. This implies increased profits for the corrupt sugar producing elite, while an estimated 650,000 cane workers continue in slave-like conditions. “Most American families would be very embarrassed to know at what price they put sugar in their coffee in the morning,” Hartley suggests. While these statements are incendiary, it remains unclear what choices viewers have or which American companies are involved in the Dominican sugar trade. It is a curious shortcoming in a film seemingly framed as an appeal to consumer awareness.

Likewise scant attention is paid to the longstanding policies that have allowed for a consistent pool of Haitian workers in the Dominican Republic and helped preserve the status quo with respect to their rights and living and working conditions. “The state is responsible for the presence of the Dominico-Haitian and Haitian community,” claimed Roxanna Altholz, Associate Director of the International Human Rights Clinic at UC Berkeley's Boalt Hall School of Law following the CLAS-sponsored screening of the film. “The government forcibly recruited thousands and thousands of Haitians to work the plantations when those plantations



were state-owned.” Notwithstanding this history, the state today disenfranchises the Dominico-Haitian community, denying Dominican birth certificates to the children of Haitian immigrants born in the Dominican Republic.

“Without birth registration, without their birth certificates, they cannot vote, they cannot marry, they cannot own property, they cannot study,” explained Altholz, who in 2005 litigated a successful case at the Inter-American Court brought against the Dominican government for denying nationality to two children of Haitian ancestry who had been born in the country, and who, according to the constitution, had the right to Dominican nationality. While the court ruled against the Dominican Republic, the government ignored the ruling and has found a legal loophole to continue denying birth registration to similar individuals. Now, according to Altholz, the state registers these children with birth certificates of a different color and in a different book. What this system ultimately means is that these children not only inherit illegality from their parents, but “are now from birth categorized as second-class individuals.”

In the bateyes of Hispaniola, as in so many places where the economy depends on cheap migrant labor, the struggle

to eliminate regimes of second-class citizenship and better the living conditions of workers remains difficult. Those in the Dominican Republic who dare to speak on behalf of Haitians’ rights face popular scorn and the familiar xenophobe’s refrain, “Haitians are stealing Dominican jobs.” Just this past year, internationally regarded human rights activist Sonia Pierre faced death threats and even an attempt by the government to strip her of her nationality for working to protect the rights of Haitian immigrants. Father Hartley was himself forced to leave the country in October of 2006, and the makers of the “Price of Sugar” are now facing a defamation lawsuit brought by the Vicini corporation.

On October 30, 2007, the Center for Latin American Studies hosted a screening of the documentary, followed by a discussion with Mariah Lafleur, a PeaceCorps volunteer in the Vicini bateyes and UC Berkeley Public Health graduate student and Roxanna Altholz, Associate Director of the International Human Rights Clinic at UC Berkeley’s Boalt Hall School of Law.

Sara Lamson is Vice Chair of the Center for Latin American Studies.

A Haitian man harvests Dominican cane.



Photo courtesy of Bill Haney.