The Story of the Nov. 13th UNNOH Teachers’ Strike & Mobilization in Haiti

• The strike itself was fairly effective in the capital but very solid in the provincial towns, such as Ti Goave, St. Marc, Gonaïves, Miragoane, Aquin, Hinche, Maissade, etc. Its power was expressed in the militant mass marches, 2,000 striking teachers in St. Marc and 1,000 or more in the capital. In the north the strike closed the schools but there were no mass marches because of the flood damage to the streets. High school students also joined the teachers in these towns, though not as many as in the capital.

• In Port-au-Prince striking union teachers, out in the streets for economic justice and the welfare of their students, including vaccination against cholera, became part of a much larger social struggle as thousands of young people took to the streets on the same day to protest the police murder of a student, Damaël D’Haïti, on the night of Saturday the 10th.

• Monday the 12th, the day before the strike, there were already thousands of students in the streets with fiery barricades demanding “Justice for Damael!”

• UNNOH at its pre-strike press conference on Monday denounced the killing of Damaël. Understandably, the news story became the student protests, not the teachers’ strike, but in fact the two struggles converged.

• On Tuesday the 13th, UNNOH strikers and supporters started early making signs at the Ecole Normale Supérieure (ENS, their alma mater), and the march set off at 9:30, planning to stop at various government ministries and deliver speeches from supporting organizations.

• But that plan and the route of march were changed as students took the lead and the strikers joined the mass student and youth revolt. Teams went from high school to high school in the capital calling on the students to come out—and they did, forcing security to unlock the gates and pouring into the protest, which at its height on Tuesday had up to 15,000 marchers. It was a rouleau, a steamroller of the people, like other great resistance movements of Haitian history.

• The group from ENS marched for two hours with minimal police presence until they reached the Rue Capois, where the Haiti National Police and the paramilitary force CIMO aggressively attacked the march, “firing live ammunition into crowds of children,” as one shocked international supporter reported. One 15-year-old boy suffered a flesh wound in the arm from a police bullet but his comrades took him to the hospital and stayed with him until he was treated and released.

• MINUSTAH, the UN “forces of order” who substitute for an army in Haiti, were also menacingly present, with armored vehicles. The UN troops surrounded and lobbed tear-gas canisters over the walls of the college campuses, which were closed to protest Damael’s murder and had become base areas for the marchers.

• MINUSTAH (the UN Mission to Stabilize Haiti) is considered an army of occupation by many Haitians, probably the vast majority. Many signs also denounced MINUSTAH as the source of the cholera epidemic, e.g., “Aba Ministry kolera”—“Down with MINUSTAH and cholera.”

• The young protesters responded with barricades and stones, resisting and protecting themselves and marching on through the dense clouds of MINUSTAH tear gas which sickened many of them. Many battle-tested youngsters took the
lead when confronted by the “forces of order.” Two highschoolers suffered asthma attacks from the gas and were taken to the hospital by their comrades.

• International supporters, who had been escorted back to the ENS for safety reasons, observed large crowds of students coming and going throughout the afternoon, taking a break on the campus and then returning to the battle.

• At its press conference Wednesday the 14th, UNNOH was asked to respond to criticism of the march, especially the presence of high school students, by government and police spokesmen. But UNNOH staunchly defended the protesters, the right of the high schoolers to protest, and the union’s role in building the march.

• It was the police who caused the injuries, not the union or the students, they said. Student and supporting organizations at the press conference loudly echoed the union’s stout defence of the right to protest and its condemnation of police violence.

• While the government has agreed to negotiate with the teachers’ unions, it has not granted any of UNNOH’s demands. The government professes outrage at the killing of Damaël and has the shooter in custody (he was actually captured by students and delivered to the police). But the police continue to shoot protesting children, to defend property and order, as their spokesman said.

• It a society like Haiti, any one oppressed group that stands up and fights is going to act like a clarion call to all their brothers and sisters. In this case, the UNNOH strike morphed into an unexpected mass protest by young people of which the union teachers became a significant part, forming a de facto teacher-student alliance, an alliance of union workers with the workers of tomorrow.

• Can anyone say the two issues are not related? A student was killed by police, and teachers already marching as a union joined in the youthful students’ militant call for justice. UNNOH itself had a marching teacher, Jean Louis Filbert, killed by a police tear-gas canister in 2010. “Same struggle, same fight.”

• We look forward to a future movement joining these brave young people with their progressive teachers to change Haiti radically. We call on you all to continue your support, because this was just one battle in a long war. And it is a battle, and a war, which like all workers’ struggles “knows no borders.” We international supporters of the Haitian teachers and their students are beginning to play the role which it is our internationalist duty to perform.