

New land laws in Vietnam will lead to greater rural poverty

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At the end of last year, the National Assembly in Vietnam adopted new land legislation. It was part of five draft laws demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to facilitate private business and encourage international investment. Other legal revisions are due to be implemented by early 1999, including changes to legislation on peoples committees and councils, education and the criminal code.

The laws are aimed at expanding agricultural industries such as broadacre farming, mining, fishery and forestry which have been made a priority under the regime's national development schemes. Foreign and native capitalists have been demanding access to unlimited areas of land with no restrictions on ownership before they make further investments. The legislation establishes individual ownership of land use rights. In addition, corporate leaseholders will be able to use the value of their property as capital for domestic and foreign joint ventures.

Since the early 1990s, the Vietnamese Stalinists have been opening up the economy through the Doi Moi reforms that brought in substantial foreign investment to exploit the country's cheap labour and resources. But along with other Asian "tigers," the Vietnamese economy has experienced a substantial downturn. Foreign investment and the value of exports of mining and agricultural products have declined.

In turn, the representatives of international finance capital are demanding further "structural adjustments". On December 2, the World Bank released a report calling for Vietnam to "display decisive and bold leadership to combat economic woes and get the country back on the road to rapid growth". The report pointed out that \$US26 billion of licensed foreign investment projects had yet to proceed, half of which

was in property and tourism, two areas where demand and price had collapsed.

The Hanoi regime claims that the new land legislation will ensure political stability, protect the traditional rights of small farmers and enable an expansion of broadacre farming. In reality, it will only further accentuate social polarisation in the countryside as more small farmers are driven from their land by high taxes and their holdings leased or sold to richer farmers, usually government officials. The first target is likely to be many peasants who have been accused by the government of "squatting".

Rural poverty is already rampant in a country in which about 80 percent of its 76 million people rely on small-scale farming. Officially rural unemployment is estimated at 18 percent and young people are often forced to leave their village and move to the city to search for work and send back money for their family. Many small farmers have been compelled to sell their land because they are unable to repay loans. An estimated 10 percent of the 13 million farmers in the Mekong delta area are now landless. In poorer regions, the proportion of landless peasants is as high as 35 percent.

A report on the village of Que Minh in the central province of Quang Nam, one of the poorest in the country, paints a terrible picture. About 8,000 people in the village earn as little as 6 US cents per day making straw hats to sell at the local market. The children cannot go to school because the fee of 6,000 dong or \$1.25 represents 20 days work. The average income nationally is \$270 a year but in Que Minh it is only \$12 a year.

In remote villages and hamlets in the mountainous provinces in the north of Vietnam, where 30 ethnic minority groups live, the villagers are known as the

starving poor because they lack basic daily needs of water and food. Most villages lack basic medical care and education. Medical workers and teachers working there are paid out of the commune budget, often with rice or other foods, because the government allows no money for salaries.

Lack of adequate food and basic health services results in appalling health figures. In 1990 a UNICEF report showed that 44 percent of Vietnamese children were malnourished. In 1998, the figure remains at 41 percent. The infant mortality rate in 1950 was 180 per thousand births and in 1995 it remains at 54 per thousand births. In 1997 more than one quarter of the 626,000 child deaths were the result of malnutrition and vitamin deficiency. Nearly half the population suffers from stunted growth. Yet, in 1997, despite widespread malnourishment, the regime exported 3.5 million tonnes of rice.

A particularly grotesque consequence of the widespread rural poverty was exposed in 1996 by reporter Nick Daniel, who wrote about the growing trade in Vietnamese child prostitutes. "Poor villagers, for as little as \$200, are selling their children to child sex traders. Business people trick the parents into debt and they are forced to sell their children to repay the loans. The parents are led to believe the children will work in restaurants or as maids 'for a few months' and money will be sent back to the starving families. The children are condemned to a life of torture, humiliation and disease as the playthings of pedophiles in Cambodia."

The new land laws will only lead to a deepening of landlessness and rural poverty along with all the resulting social evils as capitalist property relations increasingly come to dominate in the Vietnamese countryside.



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