

An exchange on Vietnam's new land laws

17 February 1999

Dear WSWS,

I just read your piece on the new land laws in Vietnam, and although I wholeheartedly agree with your indictment of poverty and government policies that do little to assist the rural poor while enriching others, I have to say that I think that your analysis relies too much on an outright condemnation of private property and does not adequately examine some of the local conditions that could make the right to private property advantageous to the rural poor. With the dissolution of the agricultural cooperatives in the early 1990s, the ambiguous rights to land have been a cause of tremendous concern among rural Vietnamese.

Farmers have been granted the right to work land, normally under the terms of a lease in many communities, but the ambiguity of this arrangement, along with the corrupt and rapacious behavior of officials (something that is visible in the skyrocketing number of complaints made by citizens against officials), have left many people vulnerable to official chicanery. As a result, many have lost parts or all of their land.

The question becomes then whether, by granting definitive rights to land, all of the problems your author describes will intensify. I agree with your condemnation of people losing their land to pay off debts and taxes, but I think a better response to that is more affordable and available rural credit schemes, something that is entirely lacking and leads people to borrow at extortionate rates, and tax reductions. What is most needed, however, is a functioning legal system to which citizens can appeal. At present, most citizens have little legal protection, which leaves them at the state's mercy.

Ironically, if you look at the situation in its entirety, it is startlingly similar to the problems Vietnam faced during the colonial period. However, given that rural Vietnamese are preyed upon not only by poverty but also by government officials, I would argue that the

granting of title to land is a better way for them to stabilize their own situations and protect themselves when government officials and policies obviously do not. If the government grants rights to land in a corrupt manner, which is indeed possible, then I agree that it will be a move in the wrong direction; but if land rights are given in a reasonably equitable fashion (which could happen given the recent assertiveness of rural residents), the rural poor can be spared one form of official predation and strengthen their own position vis-à-vis the Stalinist state. To do otherwise at this stage, I would argue, leaves them too much at the mercies of that state.

I would be interested to hear any of you or your author's responses.

Sincerely,

SM.

Dear SM,

Thank you for your email to the *World Socialist Web Site* regarding my article on changes to the land laws in Vietnam. The issues are clearly very serious ones for the fate of millions of poor and landless peasants and their families in Vietnam.

While you are sympathetic to the plight of Vietnamese peasants and my criticisms of the Stalinist regime in Hanoi, you are concerned at my reliance "on an outright condemnation of private property". The nub of the question comes towards the end when you write: "If the government grants rights to land in a corrupt manner, which is indeed possible, then I agree that it will be a move in the wrong direction; but if land rights are given in a reasonably equitable fashion (which could happen given the recent assertiveness of rural residents), the rural poor can be spared one form of official predation and strengthen their own position vis-à-vis the Stalinist state."

The issue is not simply one of corruption, which, as you say, is more than likely. The first point is that the land reforms, whatever the Hanoi leadership may

promote, are not aimed at providing secure land tenure for poor peasants. They are being carried out at the behest of the World Bank and the IMF as part of free market reforms aimed at opening up Vietnam to international finance capital. Their purpose is to encourage the growth of agricultural and extractive industries on a capitalist basis.

So what will happen if peasants are granted land rights even on "a reasonably equitable basis"? As I point out in my article, it will inevitably mean the further accentuation of social polarisation in the countryside as poor peasants are driven into debt and are forced to leave their land. You suggest that low-interest loans and low taxes would assist farmers. We agree. But such a scheme is not going to take place in Vietnam where the regime is intent on utilising whatever limited capital is available to establish private enterprises and constitute itself as a capitalist class.

It is a question of out of the frying pan and into the fire. Instead of being preyed upon by Stalinist bureaucrats on a small scale, the peasantry will now be robbed on a grand scale through the mechanism of the market. There is no solution to their problems either under capitalism or under the Stalinist regimes, such as the one in Vietnam, which have been fraudulently passed off as socialist. If you doubt this, all you need to do is examine any country in Asia--from Indonesia to India--where the operations of the market have been underway for decades.

The establishment of private property in land is not going to halt the predations of officials or strengthen the position of peasants against the Stalinist state. What is necessary is a political struggle for the abolition of the Vietnamese regime. The peasantry, by themselves, are incapable of carrying that out. There is no independent political road for the peasantry--a class that is divided, isolated and has its roots in pre-capitalist forms of society--either in Vietnam or anywhere else.

As Leon Trotsky explained in his theory of Permanent Revolution, in countries with a belated capitalist development, only the working class can solve the unresolved tasks of the bourgeois revolution, including land reform and other forms of assistance to the peasantry. Through a political struggle for a workers and peasants government against the Stalinist bureaucracy and its capitalist program of market

reform, the working class would win to its side broad layers of the urban and rural poor.

What would such a government do? It would immediately offer some form of guarantee to the poor peasantry to the land they live on, encourage a more equitable distribution of land and provide cheap credit, low taxes and access to agricultural expertise and technology. But in the long term the peasantry, with its low levels of productivity, has no future. It would be necessary to encourage voluntary collectivisation and more productive industrial farming as the technical means were developed. At the same time, the resources would be provided for the highest standards of education, health care, telecommunications, food and housing.

Such a perspective was never possible under the grotesque caricature of socialism implemented by Ho Chi Minh based on the Stalinist theory of socialism in one country. Behind the adoption of the Doi Moi reforms lie profound changes in the world economy. The global integration of production by huge transnational corporations has undermined all programs of national economic regulation, including the Stalinist perspective of national autarky. A workers and peasants government in Vietnam would only survive as part of the struggles of the working class internationally for the establishment of a socialist society.

I hope that these brief comments make our political perspective clearer. I would be interested in any material that you may have or may be working on related to the land question in Vietnam.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Sinnema,

World Socialist Web Site



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