

The failure of land reform in South Africa

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Almost two decades after the end of apartheid in South Africa, the failure of the agrarian reform policies of the African National Congress (ANC) has exposed the bourgeois nationalist liberation movement's inability to resolve the land question.

The land reform promise was encapsulated in the ANC's 1955 Freedom Charter, the movement's main statement of principles and program. It was advanced in order to garner the political support of the rural poor. The ANC claimed that "all the land (would be) re-divided amongst those who work it to banish famine and land hunger" and that "the state shall help the peasants with implements, seed, tractors and dams to save the soil and assist the tillers", and that the rural masses would be entitled to "the right to occupy land wherever they choose".

After 1994, the ANC promised to undertake broad and sweeping action to reverse the deprivations institutionalized under Apartheid. These promises were outlined in the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), a policy framework developed through extensive consultation between the ANC and its tripartite alliance partners, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the South African Communist Party (SACP). It contained government policy guidelines for agricultural and land reform.

The RDP's land reform goals had three broad thrusts. The first was the strengthening of tenure rights for the rural poor. Second, land restitution was to be made to those who could prove that their or their family's land had been stolen under Apartheid. And the third was to redistribute 30 percent of agricultural land to the rural poor. All three goals were to be achieved before the year 2000. More than a decade after this deadline, none of these goals have been realized.

The land restitution promised that people who were forced off their land from 1913 (when the Native Land Act was passed) until the end of Apartheid would have their property rights reinstated. The process itself was a farce. Poorly advertised, most people were unaware that the deadline for lodging restitution claims was to close at the end of 1996. Late registration was not permitted, hence the vast majority of forced removal victims were never considered for restitution. Among the tiny minority who did apply, 8,770 claims have yet to be settled; despite promises that the restitution process would be completed by 2005.

In many of the restitution cases, the primary beneficiary has died and consequently their children and grandchildren have

become joint beneficiaries. Worn down by endless bureaucracy, and countless delays, many have opted for a meager cash payment in lieu of the valuable prime urban land from which they were forcibly removed.

There are currently 500,000 subsistence farmers, struggling to eke out a living, and an additional 11 million rural poor who have not benefitted from land reform. There has been no mass transfer of agricultural land; instead the rural poor have been forced to migrate to the cities, living in squalid overcrowded townships, searching for work. Some of the rural poor find employment in the mines. Much of their meager income is repatriated to the rural areas in order to sustain families living on the brink of starvation. Since 1996, only 7 percent of the land—as opposed to the target of 30 percent—has been transferred. Of the land that has been redistributed to black farmers, 90 percent of farms are no longer productive. Agriculture is a capital intensive process, requiring tractors, implements, seed, fertilizer as well as technical assistance. These land reform support services have not been forthcoming.

In addition, the redistribution of land is governed by the 1996 Constitution of the Republic of South Africa—Section 25—which states that property may only be expropriated "subject to compensation, the amount of which and the time and manner of payment of which have either been agreed to by those affected or decided or approved by a court".

In order to divert attention away from the inability of the ANC to implement land reform, the ANC took a decision to scrap the willing buyer, willing seller principle at its June conference this year, with President Jacob Zuma claiming this principle was the major impediment to implementing land reform. Following the June conference, the president released a five point land reform plan to "speed up" the process, which included a provision for buying land at 50 percent of its market value, or at a "fair productive value".

The *Financial Mail* wrote that the President would have been aware that such statements could impact heavily on investor confidence. "The party was therefore careful to stress that the speeding up of land reform would be done in accordance with the Constitution, without alarming investors or putting the country at risk," according to the newspaper. "Unfortunately, a lot of what is being said by the president is heavy on rhetoric and short on detail," Ruth Hall, senior researcher at the University of the Western Cape's institute for poverty, land

and agrarian studies told the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper.

While Hall commended the government's attempts to speed up land reform, she argued that the process needed to be handled very carefully. "Setting up localised partnerships is a vital ingredient to the process of equitable land reform," said Hall. "But, how exactly commercial farmers will become involved in a process that is encouraging them to accept below market value is the big question."

Johannes Moller, president of Agri SA—South Africa's largest agricultural trade association—described the current proposals for land reform as "dangerous and unworkable".

"We think we should stick to market value-based land reform. If not, the security needed for a replacement industry for farmers leading the sector will be lost and you will be faced with further unemployment and other related problems," Moller said.

Moller added that this approach could also lead to banks and other investment institutions becoming wary of placing funds in agriculture. This process could then lead to the agriculture industry in South Africa being crippled by strike action that has thus far only plagued the Western Cape province.

Research by Princeton University professor Bernadette Atuahene, who worked with South Africa's department of land affairs and rural development, claims that there are two reasons why the ANC has had little success with the expropriation of land, and therefore its land reform policies—it is reluctant to do so, and the constraints imposed by the constitution. Reassuring international investors, Hall said the changes announced in June were not much more than a "political maneuver" and do not signal a new era of land reform.

Farmer Charl Senekal, South Africa's largest sugar cane producer, said any attempts to facilitate the sale of land below market should not be entertained. "It is enshrined in our Constitution that we will be paid a market value rate for our land," he told the *Mail & Guardian* newspaper. Senekal also warned about the possibility of food insecurity emerging in the country's agricultural industry if government did not buy land at market value.

"If farmers lose interest in this industry when they see the opportunity for success is dwindling, that will immediately lead to food insecurity and if you thought the disquiet in the mining sector was bad—you haven't seen the worst of what will come," he said. Senekal was referring to the wildcat strike in the mining industry, which led to the August 16 Marikana massacre, where 34 miners were massacred by the South African Police Services (SAPS). Subsequently, farm labourers in the Western Cape province initiated their own strike action aimed at increasing the current minimum wage, which is set at R69 (US\$7.85) per day, to R150 per day (\$16.70). The failure of the ANC's land redistribution policies has a direct bearing on the militant strike action by farm workers. Underlying the demand for the wage increase is the question of land reform, and the promised better life for all.

Despite the promises of "equality" and "democracy", the fall of Apartheid has ushered in a new era of misery and social degradation. The most elementary aspiration of the rural poor, the desire for land, has been unfulfilled. The ANC, as handmaiden of the capitalist ruling elite, on the one hand protects with brutal violence the inviolable right to private property enshrined in the Constitution, while on the other hand deceiving the rural poor into waiting for Godot—an endless wait for something that will never come.

Between two conflicting principles—the right of the rich to amass their fortunes and the right of all people to a better life—there can be no compromise. In the words of Karl Marx, "Between equal rights, force decides." The question of land reform will only be decided by the struggle of classes.

In the Permanent Revolution, Trotsky wrote "With regard to countries with a belated bourgeois development, especially the colonial and semi-colonial countries, the theory of the permanent revolution signifies that the complete and genuine solution of their tasks of achieving *democracy and national emancipation* is conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat as the leader of the subjugated nation, above all of its peasant masses."

The only way forward for a completion of the democratic and national emancipation tasks posed most sharply prior to the fall of Apartheid is through socialist revolution. All major financial, industrial and manufacturing corporations as well as industries critical to the basic functioning of society—including agriculture, telecommunications, education, health care and transportation—must be subject to public ownership and democratic control.

The struggle for power requires the unconditional political independence of the working class from the parties, political representatives and agents of the capitalist class. The working class cannot come to power, let alone implement a socialist program, if its hands are tied by politically enfeebling compromises with the political representatives of other class interests.

What is required is a new leadership in the working class based on an internationalist and socialist perspective to carry through the fight for genuine democracy, equality and socialism. This means the building of a South African section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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