

Philippine government to redistribute Hacienda Luisita plantation

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Thousands of farm workers in the Philippines are facing another bitter episode in the decades-long struggle for agrarian reform on the vast sugarcane plantation known as Hacienda Luisita. The most recent land redistribution agreement will further enrich the landowners and impoverish plantation workers, highlighting the fraudulent character of such reforms under capitalism. Luisita is owned and operated by the Cojuangco family, of which President Benigno Aquino III is a leading scion.

The Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) has announced that efforts will begin this month to distribute 4,100 hectares of the plantation to the 6,212 farm workers who qualified as agrarian reform beneficiaries. These workers will each be allotted 6,600 square metres of land, for which they must pay between P60,000 (\$1,400) to P70,000 (\$1,600) over 30 years. Some calculations put the final amount, including interest, as high as P837,000 (\$19,000).

Regular workers on Hacienda Luisita earn P160 (\$3.65) per day for backbreaking labour and are guaranteed only 80 working days annually. Meeting their loan payments will be almost impossible due to these starvation wages and the high cost of tilling the land. In addition, virtually all businesses and institutions on the plantation, including grocery stores and hospitals, are owned by the Cojuangcos, who charge extortionate prices.

Failure to meet loan obligations for three months will lead to the forfeiture of land title. Under such desperate conditions, many workers, especially those who are injured or approaching retirement, are likely to sell their land back to the Cojuangcos. Around 2,000 itinerant workers, who work for 60 days a year, cannot even apply for land.

While Aquino's DAR Secretary Virgilio de los Reyes

has acknowledged the difficulties faced by the plantation workers, he rejected out of hand any proposal to distribute the land to the workers free of charge. "From where I sit, that is chaos," he said. Reyes offered vaguely-defined "government support" to workers to continue to farm sugarcane, claiming this would improve incomes.

The allocation of land was conducted via lottery, displacing thousands by denying workers the right to choose their allotments. Farm workers' advocates claim this was to promote cash crops like sugarcane at the expense of vital food crops, such as rice, which some workers had planted to stave off hunger. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* reported that more than 90 percent of all workers on the plantation go hungry on a daily basis. Tenants often resort to eating rats and snakes.

The misnamed Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program Extension with Reforms (CARPER) will see the Cojuangco family handsomely compensated. The family's vast holdings, incorporated under Hacienda Luisita Inc (HLI), stand to gain as much as P1.2 billion (\$27.4 million) from the redistribution agreement. They will retain 1,500 hectares of the 6,400 hectare estate, and have already reaped billions from selling their land and starting their own lucrative business enterprises. A luxurious shopping mall, sparkling subdivisions, and an expressway are situated alongside some of the most exploited people in the country.

Hacienda Luisita is by no means an anomaly. CARPER has not alleviated the suffering of any section of the Philippine peasantry. It is shot through with loopholes, which landowners routinely exploit. For example, 255 farmer-beneficiaries in Quezon province are slated to lose their lands because the previous owner has reclassified the properties as "non-

agricultural,” effectively removing them from the DAR’s jurisdiction.

Aquino has had the lowest average annual land distribution rate of any Philippine administration. His promise to complete Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program’s stated mission of total agrarian reform before 2014 is a sham. Over 900,000 hectares remain to be distributed across the country, which would require parcelling out at least 82,000 hectares every month. In contrast, the DAR only distributed 92,100 hectares in all of 2012.

Aquino’s land reform posturing is deeply cynical. Hacienda Luisita was only put up for redistribution as a result of a bitter power struggle among sections of the Philippine bourgeoisie. Aquino and his Liberal Party moved against his predecessor Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and her allies. In retaliation for Arroyo’s arrest in 2011 on charges of election fraud, the Supreme Court, stacked with Arroyo loyalists, ruled last April in favour of Luisita’s redistribution.

The Luisita farm workers were pawns in this game, as they have long been under successive bourgeois regimes. When Aquino’s mother, Corazon, assumed the presidency in the aftermath of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986, she granted limited concessions, including land redistribution, in the face of increasing radicalisation among the masses. The result was the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP), a toothless piece of legislation. Landowners were allowed to sidestep redistribution by reclassifying their land as commercial or industrial, or by using the Stock Distribution Option (SDO), which converted ownership of the land to joint stock ownership and distributed a small portion of the shares to tenant farmers.

Aquino herself used the SDO to preserve the family plantation. The Cojuangcos denied compensation to the workers by claiming financial losses on its operations, despite the obvious of HLI. This situation has been replicated across the country. After CARP’s deadline passed in 2009 without, unsurprisingly, fulfilling its mandate, then-president Arroyo extended it to 2014 under its new acronym CARPER.

The Luisita farm workers have persistently fought for land and a better life, but they have been repeatedly led into a political blind alley by the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its various breakaways. The struggles of the workers have been

repeatedly subordinated to one or other wing of the national bourgeoisie, with disastrous consequences.

On January 22, 1987, less than a year after Corazon Aquino was installed as president, 17,000 peasants marched across Mendiola Bridge in Manila towards the presidential palace to present their request for land reform. With the CCP leaders fostering illusions in Aquino, the peasants walked straight into a hail of police gunfire while holding placards reading “Cory, our hero.” Thirteen peasants were killed and over 100 wounded in what has come to be known as the “Mendiola Massacre.”

In 2004, 6,000 Luisita workers and their families staged a blockade of the hacienda’s sugar mill, which was violently dispersed by then Congressman Benigno Aquino III’s own bodyguards. Seven in total were killed with the consent of Arroyo, an Aquino ally at the time whom the CPP had helped to usher into office in 2001.

The political bankruptcy of the CPP’s so-called “united front” program of class collaboration has led to one defeat after another for the farm workers of Hacienda Luisita. However, its front organisations continue to insist that the Aquino regime can be pressured to enact genuine reforms. Bayan chairperson Carol Araullo continues to peddle the lie that the Supreme Court decision on Luisita was the result of protest action and a win for the workers.



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