

# People-driven land reform

## Can the Left support it?



Many believe that South Africa's land reform programme has failed. In the run up to Cosatu's Conference of the Left, **Andile Mngxitama** challenges the Left to reflect on the land question, and puts forward what he believes would be a more successful route to land reform.

**T**he South African Left and the land and national questions have a long and unhappy relationship. In South Africa, the land question is a national question. I use 'national question', to mean the remaking of the nation in the post-apartheid period, which is about how justice is realised for blacks.

A related issue is how to characterise the Left. Much of what is called 'left' in SA is not left at all. Its main function is to provide a left cover for the ANC as it slides deeper to the right.

The Left includes the neo-liberal state with embedded forces such as Cosatu (Congress of South African Trade Unions) and the SACP (South African Communist Party) which occupy a centre-right position in the ideological field. Then there are the weak and ineffective segments of the pre-1994 liberation movement, such as the Pan African Congress, the Black Consciousness Movement formations including post-1994 splinter groups such as the Azanian People's Organisation (Azapo) and Socialist Party of Azania (Sopa) and the many Trotskyite groups

committed to building forms of the Internationale.

Then there is the 'existing' Left, which includes the post-1994 social movements. These formations do not necessarily define themselves as part of the Left or as committed to socialism, but their practice and points of struggle are certainly anti-capitalist. The problems they seek to resolve are caused by South Africa's history of racial capitalism which has been made worse by the post-1994 neo-liberal reality.

In short, there is no unified Left in South Africa but perhaps these observations will be of some use especially to those already de-linked from the state as opposed to those who simply wish to reform it or take over its management.

### LAND AS THE NATIONAL QUESTION

The social, political and economic structure of South Africa's history in the past 300 years is deeply embedded in the land question. The way South African politics is described is linked to this reality. Hence, South Africa as 'colonialism of a special type', a 'settler colony', a

product of racial capitalism and so on. In the main these relate to the deeply racist forms of colonisation and development that South Africa has undergone.

Three inter-linked processes of black dispossession are key in understanding the formation of the South African social reality: land dispossession, labour dispossession and the dispossession of the African being. All contemporary production, exchange and consumption rests upon this reality of black dispossession. South Africa is still a white supremacist country, despite the 1994 'democratic breakthrough'.

Through the thunder of the gun, Africa lost her land and labour. Africans became objects in production, a commodity for sale and ceased to be human. This was assisted by the Christian missionary project of 'civilising' the natives. It was not enough to take land and labour, even African gods were decimated.

Benjamin Magubane in his *The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa*, speaks of the process which included combining

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the white God with commercial interests. Blacks were given a new god, new clothes, new needs under the threat of jail, whip, and gun. Blacks were a subjugated people and a market for goods they didn't need. The white God was a god of capitalism. Magubane is describing social and cultural genocide.

The land question then becomes the national question, which is in essence the race question. As Fred Hendricks argues, land dispossession created a situation of "accumulated privileges of being white". This feeds into the post-1994 ideologies of 'development' and 'reconciliation' which serve to legitimise the continued colonial white supremacist settlement of accumulation and consumption. Hendricks shows how the settler colonial conquest is deeply linked to the land question.

Land dispossession, accompanied by racist policies of segregation, resulted in 55 000 white farmers owning most farm land outside of African reserves where 20 million rural blacks barely survived on tiny allotments in communal areas. This white privilege has remained etched on the political landscape.

The embedded Left has not shown any grasp of the race question, which is central to the resolution of the land and national questions. Post-1994, has seen little mobilisation on the land question from the PAC and BCM. The SACP's Red October campaign on land reform was motivated more by a desire to occupy the space created by the Landless People's Movement (LPM). The Land! Food! Job! Campaign of the LPM was crudely copied by the

SACP, as it tried to exert influence over rural struggles. But the campaign was not grounded in an historical understanding of land as a national and race question.

Frantz Fanon writes of the social pathologies produced by the colonial encounter, which manifests in the complex relationship between coloniser and colonised. This is similar in South Africa, "The black is a black man; that is the result of a series of aberrations of effect, he is rooted at the core of a universe from which he must be extricated." He points to the "complexes" which arise out of this colonial encounter: "There is a fact: white men consider themselves superior to the black men. There is another fact: black men want to prove to the white men at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect".

At the most extreme level, these relations exist between white land owner and farm dweller. The story of how Oupa Chisale was killed and then thrown into a lion's den illustrates the power of the white land owner over the farm dweller. It is inconceivable that three fully human black men could follow the instructions of a white man.

More importantly the Appellate Division has overturned the white farmer's sentence and denies that historic power relations had anything to do with the murder. The court argued that to dwell on the past is political as if the interpretation of law is not deeply political in itself. So the white farmer walks, his black assistants stay in jail. This says much about the racist legal system, where the original theft of

black people's land and labour has been sanitised.

### LAND REFORM POST 1994

The post-apartheid land reform package based on the logic of the market is a decoy. It functions to induce forgetting, and deflects the land question. Land reform sometimes delivers land, but from a broader perspective there is little effective reform which addresses colonial and apartheid legacies.

In 15 years, government has delivered about 4% of agricultural land into black ownership, a far cry from the 30% promised in the first five years after 1994. At the same time massive new land dispossession is happening from communal areas where platinum lies, and from commercial farms where more than a million farm dwellers have been evicted. The land reform programme sustains racialised dispossession at the same time as it permits new forms of dispossession and precludes more radical possibilities for change.

Land reform supported by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and land research institutions hopes only to remove the worst aspects of the agrarian structure. AGRIBEE (Agricultural Black Economic Empowerment) is a perfect tool to incorporate a few black stakeholders into existing structures while not undermining the power of the land-owning classes or the white supremacist reality.

### THREE MODELS OF LAND REFORM

Three models are dominant in addressing the land question in international debates. These are: the World Bank market land reform which South African has adopted; state-led land reform programmes as in Zimbabwe and Venezuela; and people-led land reform practised by the Zapatistas, the Landless People's Movement of Brazil and the LPM in

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South Africa. There is now consensus that the South African model of 'willing buyer, willing seller' does not deliver land to the poor; nor address the land and national questions.

State-led land reform is favoured by sections of the Left and is normally accompanied by calls for nationalisation of the land. The dangers of this model are apparent in Zimbabwe, where the question of colonial ownership is resolved, but it is not based on a resolution of the social question. It creates new problems, unevenness and exclusions. State-led reform projects are an improvement on the market process, but are likely to be top down. A more democratic state project, driven from below could act as a facilitator as in the Venezuelan case.

South Africa needs a people-led programme of land and agrarian transformation. It must be underpinned by clarity on the character of the South African social reality. A land reform programme driven by people must confront the white supremacist structures inherited from the past. In short, there is no land reform outside of the resolution of the national question.

A people-led process also answers the key question of the re-humanisation of excluded black people including farm dwellers. It would require a process as traumatic, massive and dramatic as Fanon's cleansing, violent encounter between the coloniser and the colonised. If it is to be a true freedom, blacks must claim it. The needs of the excluded, must find an ear in the Eurocentric left.

### EFFECTIVE LAND REFORM

An effective land reform programme must break the power of the landed oligarchy. This can be achieved through a massive redistribution of land, and democratisation of land ownership, administration and control. Such a change should take place in traditional communities in former 'homelands' and on commercial farms.

An effective programme must focus on restructuring the whole agricultural production system away from profit maximisation to re-focus on meeting the needs of the people. The current agricultural model needs to be dismantled. This is the best way to answer the food crisis in a country which is an exporter of food.

Land reform must be people driven, within a political environment of a progressive constitution. The South African Constitution needs to be amended to make provision for de-commodification of land, and the insertion of a clause of 'use it or lose it'. It must allow for the occupation of unused land by the land hungry as with the Brazilian constitution.

Such changes would enable the landless to carry out their own land reform which must be supported by the state. This approach would help to break the paternalistic relationship between the people and the state. Such a dispensation has to be struggled for. That is why it is so important that the landless themselves deepen the process of self-organisation.

Can the South African Left be a catalyst for radical new ways of operating? Some support from friends of the landless has

undermined the self organisation of the landless. During the National Land Summit in Johannesburg in 2005, there was a moment of unity in action between the LPM and the Alliance for Land and Agrarian Movements (Alarm). Alarm consists of land NGOs who in the weeks leading up to the summit had accepted SACP leadership. The LPM stayed out of the alliance but decided to work with it on the land summit.

They made a joint decision that the World Bank could not speak at the Summit since failed government land reform was based on a World Bank model. Further, they agreed that this would send a message to repressive international institutions that their time was over. On the designated day, the landless under the leadership of the LPM peacefully removed the World Bank speakers from the podium. However, Alarm and the SACP went behind the backs of the landless to allow the World Bank to speak. This isolated the LPM and made it appear an irrational, extremist formation.

The Left must seriously ask: why the loud rejection of the World Bank land reform programme while at the same time accommodating it?

A progressive left programme for the resolution of the land question requires an appreciation of the historical reality which remains by and large a racist reality. To date the Left has come short as agents of a more liberating mobilisation around the land question. At best, it has been opportunistic. Can the Left shed its conceptual blinkers?

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