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Big Land Grab in U.S. Coming to a Halt? Solidarity America By John Funicello BC Columnist

Usually, stories about land grabs are about transnational corporations and powerful and rich governments going into developing countries and buying up land or leasing it for 99 years and using the land to benefit their own people, while excluding the local populace.

For a half-dozen years, however, American companies have sent their agents across the continental U.S. to convince landowners that they can get big money for just letting an "energy-extracting" company drill a few holes on a small piece of their property. "You won't even notice it's there," is the line the landowner is usually told.

In this short time, the effort by oil and gas corporations has been "one of the biggest land grabs in recent memory," according to a *Reuters* story this month. The monumental effort has been made because most of the farmers, ranchers, and landowners who were promised that wealth "happened to sit atop some of the richest oil and gas deposits in the world," according to the London-based news service.

Chesapeake Energy is one of the companies that fanned out across New York State in recent years, telling landowners that they might share in a jackpot of money if they would just lease a few acres of their farm or property for hydrofracturing for natural gas, which abounds in the Marcellus shale formation or the Utica shale or one of the other shale formations. Many farmers in New York, strapped for cash and living on the edge of bankruptcy in a region that continues its economic decline hurriedly signed leases over to the energy

companies, often without knowing what they were getting into or how little money they were being offered, compared with other areas or other countries.

Even now, as the giant firms slow down the pace of seeking leases, they are filling the television airwaves with scenes of bucolic rural life, with green grass under blue skies and happy families eating lunch in the local diner of small town America. It reminds one of the infamous "morning in America" political ads used in the campaign for presidential candidate Ronald Reagan.

Just as his presidency turned out to be disastrous for working men and women across the country, hydrofracturing, or "fracking," has been a disaster for untold numbers who have leased their land and for entire communities all across Pennsylvania and other states where it has been allowed without much restriction. And, it's what the oil and gas firms are trying to do in New York State. A look at a map of the oil and gas industry's planned fracking shows a huge portion of the country in play for exploitation. There are few areas that do not have some sort of shale formation and those are the targets. One of the reasons for the industry's backing off on buying up leases is that the price of gas has dropped enough that profits cannot be maximized at this time.

Depending on the duration of the leases and how the leases are worded, the companies can come back and the landowners might not have any recourse but to allow the fracking of their land and neighborhood. Even if they are winding down the land grab, they want to keep their options open, in case they want to return, so they haven't quite gone away.

Shale formations do not want to give up their gas or oil easily, so the drilling engineers have come up with a way to get it out. They drill deeply into the earth, sometimes as much as four to five miles down, and then they put the well casing in place and force a combination of water, sand, and cancer-causing chemicals under high pressure into the shale, causing the shale to crack and allow the escape of the gas or oil. Then, they collect the prize and they keep doing that until that well plays out (possibly a few years, sometimes as much as 10).

The question for those who oppose this method of oil and gas extraction is: What happens to the millions of gallons of wastewater that contains large amounts of toxins, including some known to be carcinogenic? The companies say that it is removed and taken to municipal wastewater treatment plants for processing, but some plants

cannot handle what has been termed an “undisclosed cocktail of chemicals” and it has been claimed that such waste has been simply dumped into local waterways.

The Green Party’s newspaper, *Green Papers*, noted this month, “Residents of drilling areas have become chronically ill from liver, heart, blood and brain damage as well as leukemia and other cancers due to exposure to carcinogenic, neurotoxic, and radioactive wastes in the air, water and soil. Although hydrofracking has been around for more than 60 years, new techniques and new chemical compounds bring it to a whole new level of danger and in the last 15 years its use has increased by 3,000 percent, according to advocacy group Food and Water Watch.”

Fracking is not a benign form of energy extraction. In the past, however, the drilling was vertical and the fracking was kept to the area adjacent to the well. Now, the drills can go in any direction, horizontally, for as much as a mile and the chemicals are new and undisclosed by the companies.

The millions of fracking opponents in New York fear the contamination of ground water and it is not just the water of the rural areas that is threatened. Many reservoirs of major cities are in rural areas and the water of lakes, streams, and rivers eventually reach those reservoirs. It’s likely the reason that New York Governor Andrew Cuomo placed the watershed of New York City off limits to fracking, but is preparing to allow it along several Southern Tier counties, adjacent to Pennsylvania, where fracking has caused havoc in community after community.

There is precious little potable water (clear, clean, drinkable water) on the earth, compared with all the water there appears to be on this “water planet,” and the continued destruction or diminishment of our potable water will spell the end of many things for all life, not just humans. Just remember, even to water the crops where that is possible, it takes water that is not tainted with toxins. No good water, no food.

The U.S. government has a bad habit of viewing “mineral rights” as the government did back in the 19th Century and, in many cases, the payment to the government by the mining and other corporations is not much more than it was in the 1880s. That’s money for every kind of mineral (oil, gas, copper, zinc, gold, whatever) that the taxpayers are not receiving and that loss becomes profits for the corporations.

The so-called mineral rights owned by big-money interests historically have caused landowners to go under, since they only own the surface and have no control what the corporations do under the surface, which they have to breach to get to their minerals underneath.

In the past decade, when the U.S. was starting another of its wars in the Middle East, someone jokingly remarked, "How did our oil get under the sands of those countries?" The same could be said of so many other "natural resources" that seem to belong to the richest countries, no matter the location of resource or who is the apparent owner. That's what the fight against land grabs in Africa, South America, Asia, and elsewhere is all about. The people who live on the land that is grabbed are left out of the development and what is left is the tailings or some other remnant of the destructive "extraction" industry. And the land is no longer fit to sustain life (like the notorious tar-sands oil that is being extracted in the Canadian province of Alberta).

Just because the extraction industry is going after gas and oil in America's various shale formations does not mean that the object and results are not the same as land grabs in Cameroon, Somalia, Borneo, or Brazil. Corporate America has had a lot of practice in the last 150 years, starting with the vast expanses of our own west, in having their way with the land and the people. Horizontal fracking is being done in sections of the country that are under extreme economic stress, just as the so-called developing world is in economic and social distress. They will grasp at any promise of help for the people and, therefore, are willing to sign over vast portions of their countries to foreign powers.

America's rural areas have been steadily emptying for the past half-century and the communities that are left are stressed. There are no jobs and there is little economic activity in many of them. Just remnants of their communities are left and the young people are gone...to the big cities where they hope to find work. They don't find the work they need, but they don't return home, either.

Enter the oil and gas industry's "landmen," stumping for leases and inflating the benefits of gas drilling and minimizing the disruption and destruction of land, air, and water. And, because farmers, ranchers, and other landowners are strapped for cash, they sign the leases, seeing this as a way out of an economic dead end. It's the promise of salvation through easy money and, of course, there is no such thing.

Someone will pay the price and there are millions of people who do not want to pay the price of fracking.

In land grabbing, there is a difference between what is happening in developing countries and what is happening in the U.S. Transnational corporations that grab land in poor countries have the help of the U.S. government (diplomacy, commerce, and aid programs), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and, even, when necessary, the military. The oil and gas industry's landmen don't have such ready assistance, but they have a long history of exploiting the powerlessness of the people and Corporate America thrives on it. They may have backed off a bit on buying up leased land and they may have backed off a bit on drilling, but when they feel the urge to come back, you know they will. This is a short respite, if it is any respite at all.

This is what the fight over fracking is about...an old story and an old fight, but one worth taking on: The people versus Corporate America and its political and government supporters. All of these entities have a habit of not listening to the people. That's why the opposition to fracking has such staying power and is growing. As in so many areas of our national life, only the people will save the people. Organizing is the way to do it.

BlackCommentator.com Columnist, John Funciello, is a labor organizer and former union organizer. His union work started when he became a local president of The Newspaper Guild in the early 1970s. He was a reporter for 14 years for newspapers in New York State. In addition to labor work, he is organizing family farmers as they struggle to stay on the land under enormous pressure from factory food producers and land developers. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Funciello.



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