

The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

An independent weekly internet magazine
dedicated to the movement for economic justice,
social justice and peace - Providing commentary,
analysis and investigations on issues affecting
African Americans and the African world.

www.BlackCommentator.com

Sept 20, 2012 - Issue 486

Land Grab Techniques Useful In U.S., As Well As Third World

Solidarity America

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While land grabs continue at an accelerating rate in the developing world, it is mostly ignored that the same techniques are being used in the U.S., despite the claims to freedom and democracy.

Generally, land grabs are the taking of (mostly) farmland from peasants and indigenous people in countries where it is easy to accomplish, especially if the form of government is dictatorial or authoritarian or the failure of democracy is such that the taking can be accomplished without much opposition.

The land grabs are happening in Africa, Asia, South America, and to a great extent, in large regions of India. It is being done by developed countries or corporate entities, which have taken a look at food production in their own countries and have seen that they no longer can provide for the nutritional needs of their people using just their own farmland. It happens in taking land for its natural resources, as well, but that has been going on for centuries and is considered by many to have been the primary reason for colonialism and the impulse toward imperialism.

Land grabs for the growing of food is a rather new phenomenon, having begun in the last decade. Countries like Saudi Arabia, which has a shortage of arable land, has gone to Africa (a relatively short distance away) to purchase or lease land for growing of food for its populace, and China is doing likewise. But authoritarian governments are not the only ones to seek land in other countries for their own

purposes. Belgium and other European countries are involved in the land grabs, too.

When viewed from the perspective of the nations or their transnational corporations, it all seems so right and proper - after all, it's legal. Buying or leasing land for 99 years is just doing business. And, it doesn't make any difference if it is 1,000 acres or 100,000 acres, or a million acres. It's all just business.

But, when looked at from the perspective of the people of the land, the peasants and indigenous peoples, it is, indeed, a land grab. Seizure might be a better word. For the people whose subsistence depends on access to the land, what these massive land transactions amount to is a sentence to impoverishment, long-term hunger, or starvation. All of this amounts to nothing among the elites, whether they are kings or presidents or executive officers of transnational corporations...it's just business. Among the people, it is the difference between life and death.

Land grabbing happens when the people from whom land is grabbed have little or no power in their societies. They can be displaced, almost at will. Where they go when they are forced off the land is of little concern to the powers that be, and that's how the problem of urbanization has occurred in developing nation after developing nation. Forced off the land, the people go to the cities to find work and a way to feed their families.

It is not so different in the U.S. Ever since World War II, there has been a steady migration from the country's rural areas to the metropolitan areas, where the people hope to find work. With the demise of small farm agriculture, they could not find work at home, so they left for the cities. It is an army of unemployed, something that Corporate America has encouraged, for, with three or four unemployed workers seeking every job opening, they find people willing to work for a fraction of the pay. It is, indeed, a race to the bottom, although the wages in the U.S. are not likely to even approach the low level of wages of developing countries. That's why it is highly unlikely that the exportation of industry and jobs from the U.S. to other countries will slow to any appreciable degree, at least in the foreseeable future.

The rural areas of the U.S. are among the poorest in the country and there are close similarities between how the people there are being treated and how the people of developing nations are treated. In developing nations, the land is taken from the people by fiat or by

force, to grow food for foreign peoples, usually by agreement or collusion between authoritarian leaders and transnational corporations or, even, foreign governments.

In America, it's a little different. In the case of hydrofracturing for natural gas or oil, for example, the land is not taken, per se, but the giant corporations (along with a few small ones) that do the "fracking" are preying on the poverty of the rural areas. Farmers and landowners, fearing that they will lose their farms or land because they can't make them pay for themselves (let alone make a living for the family) are signing over leases to oil and gas companies, hoping that they will make a killing.

Hydrofracturing (fracking) is a method of drilling as deep as five miles into the earth, then drilling horizontally and injecting under high pressure a toxic combination of water, chemicals, and sand to break up shale formations to allow the escape of gas or oil. Millions of gallons of fresh water might be injected into a single well and, of course, that water becomes part of a toxic mix that must be disposed of or treated. When they talk about tens of thousands of wells, that's a lot of water, and it's happening in wide areas of the country.

The corporations assure the people that the ground water and their drinking water wells will not be contaminated, but the people in the fracked areas have had a different experience. They have suffered sickness and ill health from air and water pollution and the disruption of their communities from the negative effects of any boom economy, not unlike a gold rush or silver rush or oil strike.

Why do they sign over leases to their land to the gas companies? One struggling farmer described fracking her land as "sitting on a gold mine," and that's how those who stand to make some money see it. But the long-term damage to the water and the general environment is too great a price to pay for the many who are opposed to fracking. To the relative few who will benefit, the money is the thing.

So, desperation plays a great part in the U.S. land grab. Farming doesn't pay, but a gamble on fracking makes sense in the short haul for those who get the money. The energy companies know this and they play on people's fear and desperation. Their batteries of lawyers and their sociologists, psychologists, and others who study mass behavior have learned the techniques necessary to exploit virtually any situation, and to make it come out in their favor. This, they have done with great skill in the fracking controversy.

Although there is no formal draft in the U.S., it is evident that there is a kind of economic draft, in that people in areas of great poverty and high unemployment and those with limited education are more likely to volunteer for military service. It's not openly coercive, as is conscription, but it intentionally targets those who do not have long-term prospects for higher education or a well-paying job. And, so it is with the great American land grab: Where people are desperate, they are likely to do things they would not ordinarily do. And the few who will benefit have embraced fracking, no matter the destructive effects of the method.

It's a land grab, whether it's in Somalia, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Brazil, Indonesia, for growing food, or in Pennsylvania, New York, or Ohio, in the quest for "energy." Those who roam the world searching for profits at any cost do whatever they can and whatever they will to take those profits. At first, it's the people who suffer. In the end, though, it is the earth that suffers, and human beings do not have the capacity to heal it.

We are getting just a glimpse of the earth's response to the abuse it has suffered for many human generations, with climate change being one of the effects, and it's not a pretty sight. What those who plunder the earth fail to see is that it is their children who will suffer along with everyone else. However rich and powerful the politicians and the corporate hierarchies across the globe, they will be powerless to protect their own children from the results of their own acts.

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.

