THIRD FORCE

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Who's Claiming Our Land and Why?

by Francis Calpotura

They say that when you rob a people of their land you steal their soul. Land is central to any people's economic, political, social, cultural and historical experience. It guarantees the continuation of a people's culture, provides a base of economic stabililty, and consolidates a sense of community. When this relationship is severed, this central experience is shattered.

In this society, land has been reduced to a commodity that is bought, sold and drained of its essence and resources with one purpose in mind--to make a profit. This article will focus on three dramatic examples of attempts to separate people from their land and how they are fighting back.

Black Farmers: Headed Toward Extinction?

It has been projected that the year 2000 will mark the end of Black ownership of rural land in the U.S. In 1920 there were nearly a million Black-operated farms; in 1978, fewer than 60,000 remained. At the current rate, fewer than 10,000 Black farmers will be left at the end of this decade.

The factors that have pushed Blacks from their land are varied and complex. An inability to farm efficiently is not an explanation; in fact, the percentage of Black farmers' net income that is farm-related is 15%, compared to 9% for all farmers. Rather, factors contributing to the decline in Black-owned farms are lack of ownership and operating capital, and the concentration of farmlands into larger parcels in the hands of fewer people, largely due to government encouragement of agribusiness. The predominantly small family farms of Black owners cannot compete with the capital-intensive farming of agribusiness. Moreover, Black farmers have a hard time getting loans to upgrade their farming techniques due to discrimination, cumbersome bureaucracies, and a lack of "creditworthiness" since they own small plots of land. The result is that Black farmers are being pushed off their land.

Members of the Emergency Land Fund (ELF) and the Rural Coalition have assisted local farmers in their efforts to keep their land. These organizations keep a close watch on the U.S. Department of Agriculture, especially its lending agency, the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA), by examining FmHA's role in the loss of Black-owned farms. Complaints have been filed with FmHA by the Civil Rights Commission, among others, charging discriminatory lending practices toward Black applicants. The complaints, however, have not improved the situation. In some ways, things have gotten worse. As Joe Brooks, former director of the ELF points out, "We've won a number of victories but the economic climate definitely favors big landowners."

The land belongs to those who work it.

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