

# Agrarian Reform :

*This is a summary of a paper delivered by Henry Bernstein at the Ruth First Memorial lecture held at the University of the Western Cape in August 1992.*

*Henry Bernstein is a rural sociologist attached to the Institute For Development Policy And Management at the University of Manchester. He is currently doing research in South Africa on agrarian reform and is attached to the Centre For Social And Development Studies at the University of Natal in Durban.*

**I**N South Africa, there is, on the one hand, a long history of contestation of racist land policies and practices. These have been mostly local and vary between open and hidden struggle. On the other hand, political organisation and representation of rural oppressed classes and groups beyond local level is almost non-existent.

This has potentially serious effects for perceptions and theorisation of land and agrarian reform by the national democratic movement, which in turn affect the formulation and practice of any agrarian strategy. In fact, at present, there is no political strategy on the agrarian question. By contrast, debate of urban and industrial strategies draws on the accumulated experience, weight and perspectives of trade unions, especially those in COSATU, civics and ANC urban structures.

The development of a viable strategy is inseparable from identifying potential social forces and then, in a political-organisational sense, constituting them as social forces whose mobilisation, engagement and representation are necessary conditions of any democratic resolution of the land question.

The organisational forms for articulating demands, channelling political

energies and developing political capacity in the countryside cannot be determined by any simple "model". The formation of ANC rural branches in itself would not satisfy the kinds of political tasks indicated. Much would be gained from assessing the experience of rural action committees, formed as support organisations for struggles against forced removal from white farming areas and now grouped in the National Land Committee.

There is scope for a diversity of organisational forms, in relation to the diversity of emphasis, interests and demands that would emerge. Mobilising the ideas and political energies of the oppressed groups in the countryside is the indispensable condition of carrying struggle forward, a process the national democratic movement can do much to stimulate, support and inform. In turn, this requires greater commitment of intellectual, material and political resources to struggle on the land question.

It is in the interests of all those subject to national oppression in South Africa that the de facto and de jure control of land by the white minority is broken.

Different classes and groups experience national oppression in different ways, which affects how social forces

# Which Way?

might be constituted around agrarian reform.

One grouping that provides an immediate basis for political-organisational work comprises those with claims to particular lands in white farming areas. It would be most useful to investigate what types of white farms now occupying those lands would have to be expropriated to satisfy the historic claims of those removed from them.

Another immediate basis for political work is unionisation of farmworkers and organisation of their struggles, actual and potential, over conditions of work and pay and legal rights.

The single most strategic objective of democratic transition remains to break the de facto and de jure white domination of land ownership and farming. At the same time, the immediate and comprehensive expropriation of white farms is neither politically feasible nor necessary to the tasks of the current phase of struggle. Accordingly, targeting the weakest and least efficient sectors of white farming for land redistribution provides terrain on which there is apparent partial convergence of conservative and liberal reform proposals with national democratic objectives. Conservative reform can accommodate the "sacrifice" of the least



efficient (and most indebted) white farmers, and the allocation of state land to black farmers, in its strategic objective of saving the greater part of white commercial agriculture. Liberal reform is prepared to go further to realise its strategic conception of a "deracialised" agriculture balanced between efficiency and equity, in which the "freedom of the market" is available to all viable farmers regardless of colour or type of commercial enterprise (both capitalist and petty commodity production).

Contradictions within apartheid institutions provide opportunities to national democratic initiatives on the agrarian question and present dangers to them. The

dangers are that such initiatives are limited to state sponsored reform, not least the promotion of selective "market-based options" which disregard popular aspirations and block popular actions on land.

Discourses that centre on "market" and "state", constituting farmers as individual economic actors on the one hand, and possibly as political "interest groups" (farmers' lobbies) on the other hand, implicitly dissolve the concept of social forces and collective action.