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Land and Liberty

Anarchist Communist Group

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This article is based on a talk given by the London group of the ACG at the Radical Bookfair on June 2, 2018.

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The slogan ‘Land and Liberty’ has long been an anarchist slogan. It was the name of the Russian revolutionary organisation ‘Zemlya i Volya’ in 1878 and was used by the peasants in the Russian Revolution. When women marched in St Petersburg on the 8th of March, 1917, helping to kick off the revolution, the slogan was Bread, Land and Peace. ‘Tierra y Libertad’ was prominent in the Mexican and Spanish Revolutions and is still used today as the name of the Iberian Anarchist Federation paper.

It is not surprising that land is a key demand. Rural land workers represented the majority of the working population well into the 20th century in much of the world. Land ownership was concentrated in the hands of a few large landowners and people struggled to survive under this semi-feudal system. And it is still an important demand for many peasants and agricultural labourers around the world.

The anarchist Flores Magon explains why land is crucial to anarchism:

“We want bread for all. We consider it absurd that a few people should possess the earth, and the many not have a place to lay down their heads for rest. We want, then, that the land be

accessible to all, just the same as the air, the light, the warm sun rays are there for all creatures on earth. We consider it absurd that those who neither toil nor produce should enjoy all at the expense 'of those who till and toil and have a life of misery...'

However, Magon made it clear that land was directly linked to liberty:

"We think that political liberty is a beautiful lie so long as it has not for its basis economic liberty and towards the conquest of that liberty our steps are directed... We demand that the proletariat of Mexico organize and by doing so enable itself to take part in the tremendous struggle that alone will liberate the proletariat of this world, the struggle which someday — maybe in the near future-will place all the goods of this earth within the reach and power of all human beings."

Kropotkin also explained why a demand for land is so important. Land is basically part of the means of production. If workers do not have access to land they are unable to support themselves and must sell their labour to the capitalist/landowner. The revolution is therefore about expropriation of land and other means of production.

"We do not want to rob anyone of his coat, but we wish to give to the workers all those things the lack of which makes them fall an easy prey to the exploiter, and we will do our utmost that none shall lack aught, that not a single man shall be forced to sell the strength of his right arm to obtain a bare subsistence for himself and his babes. This is what we mean when we talk of Expropriation; this will be our duty during the Revolution, for whose coming we look, not two hundred years hence, but soon, very soon."

Expropriation is essential if the workers are to be free. Magon:

"In short, I see a society of workers economically free; owning themselves, because, at every step, they own the material on which they work; the land where the potatoes grow; the trees they fell and strip; the timber they fashion into limber;

the houses into which the lumber goes, and so “ad infinitum.” A society purged of tribute to the parasite.”

The Spanish Revolution: Expropriation and Collectivisation

The 1936-39 revolution in Spain provides one of the best examples of what can be achieved by workers when they take over the land. The revolution on the land was more extensive and more radical than that in the urban areas. Not only were Spain’s landowners rich and powerful but they were also notoriously conservative and authoritarian. They had opposed reform in every way, and had over the decades had financed violent suppression of both the CNT and the UGT. Collectivisation of the land was extensive covering almost two thirds of all the land in the Republican zone. In all, between five and seven million peasants were involved, the major areas being Aragon where there were 450 collectives, the Levant (the area around València) with 900 collectives and Castile (the area surrounding Madrid) with 300 collectives. In the villages workshops were set up where the local trades-people could produce tools, furniture, etc. Bakers, butchers, barbers and so on also decided to collectivise. (Source: Kevin Doyle www.struggle.ws/talks/spain_feb99.html)

The essential features of collectivisation were:

Large landowners expropriated.

Voluntary participation in the collective.

Different from Popular Front: land managed as a collective rather than dividing land up into many plots.

Run on libertarian communist principles, from each according to their ability and to each according to their needs.

Individuals and families still independent in the collective with own personal possessions.

Land still matters

The demand for land is a vital part of today’s revolutionary movement, and not only in societies with large rural populations. Land is the basis of all wealth. It is the source of food

and provides the materials to build shelters, make clothes and everything else we need. It is a physical space where we meet and socialise with others and an inspiration for music, poetry and culture. If we do not have access and control of this land, we are not free. We are completely dependent on someone else for all aspects of our lives. It is both a rural and urban issue. Factories and offices are built on land. Property developers acquire land in order to build homes and offices for huge profits. Access to land is controlled in the cities, with more and more privatised space. Land in public ownership is not an answer. Land owned and controlled by the State is still not under our control thanks to a political system in which politicians are unaccountable and largely pursue the interests of capital.

The following facts show the continued inequality in land ownership. Source: <https://www.landjustice.uk/why-land-matters/>

- 69% of land in the UK is owned by 0.6% of the population.
- 70% of land is agricultural land and 150,000 people own all of it.
- UK housing is concentrated on 5% of the country's land mass so people owning their own home represents a small amount of total land ownership.
- 1/3 of British land is still owned by aristocrats.
- 432 people own half the land in Scotland.
- The property wealth of the top 10% of households is nearly 5 times greater than the wealth of the bottom half of all households combined.

Though the aristocracy, the Queen and the public sector are still important in terms of land owners, it is increasingly corporations and institutional investors that own and control land in London.

Getting involved

The Land Justice Network was set up in June 2017- a network of organisations, groups and individuals who aim to build an inclusive movement for land reform. For more information see: www.landjustice.uk.

Sources and further reading

<https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/brian-morris-flores-magon-and-the-mexican-liberal-party>
http://struggle.ws/talks/spain_feb99.html
www.landjustice.uk
www.whoownsengland.org
Fight for the City (Pamphlet produced by London Anarchist Communist Group)

general rise in air and water pollution. Waste has also caused problems both on land and in the oceans.

Climate change and other environmental problems are not factored in to balance sheets. There will be a price to pay in the future but for now money is to be made out of environmental destruction. The way land is used is determined by the profit needs of both private landowners and government.

Biodiversity

The intensification of land use means that other species are squeezed out. Countless species are becoming endangered. Other species do not own land or control land. The only ones which are of importance are the ones that either make money for the landowner or are part of the culture of those who have wealth. Therefore we have levels of sheep, deer, grouse and horses that take up large amounts of land, whereas countless other species are being squeezed out by the general trend to urbanisation, industrial agriculture and energy.

Land and Liberty: a slogan for today

Campaigning on land should be a priority for anarchists and all those who would like to overthrow the current society. Land issues underlie so many issues (see above). A focus on land can bring all these struggles together and therefore make us more effective. By demanding land reform we are challenging the very basis of capitalism: private property. The solution, however, should not be State ownership but expropriation and libertarian collectivisation, including co-operatives with direct control of land and resources and non-hierarchical self-organisation. We must also link the struggle for land with struggles for control of the workplaces and our communities. According to Kropotkin:

“All is interdependent in a civilized society; it is impossible to reform any one thing without altering the whole. Therefore, on the day we strike at private property, under any one of its forms, territorial or industrial, we shall be obliged to attack them all. The very success of the Revolution will demand it.”

1. Canary Wharf Group (Qatar and Canadian investment company)
2. City of London
3. Transport for London
4. Aviva (Insurance and pensions)
5. BNP/Paribas (Bank)
6. The Queen
7. Legal and General (Insurance and pensions)
8. Segro (real estate investment company)
9. British Land Company (Property developer)
10. Network Rail
20. Duke of Westminster

Most struggles are related to who owns, controls and makes decisions about land.

Housing

Housing costs have become a serious burden for most people, especially in cities such as London. People either have to struggle under the yoke of a mortgage or pay exorbitant rents to property investors or buy to let landlords. The housing crisis is a land crisis. Housing is built on land. The value of ‘dwellings’ (homes and the land underneath them) has increased by four times (or 400%) between 1995 and 2015, from £1.2 trillion to £5.5 trillion. The value of dwellings depends on the value of the land. In central London 80% of the value of property is the value of the land. 74% of house price increases between 1950 and 2012 in the UK can be explained by rising land prices with the remainder attributable to increases in construction costs. Rather than a need, housing is now a source of profit for many- an investment opportunity, a pension supplement or a money-laundering opportunity. There is some land in public hands. However, as land prices increase and different branches of government struggle to maintain spending, land is being increasingly sold off to developers. This includes land which has homes on it or land that could be used for homes. It is the value of land that determines the cost of housing.

Food

Britain imports more food than it exports and the cost of food has always been higher than many other countries. There is also a problem with access to good quality, organic food which is also cheap. Together with housing, food costs contribute significantly to poverty in Britain. Food grows on land which is all privately-owned. All the chain of distribution, from source to the supermarket is determined by market forces.

Resources

In addition to food, the earth provides all the resources that make our lives possible, eg material to build our homes, timber for our paper and furniture, minerals that go into our technology, metals for our cars and transport, and all the sources of energy, eg oil, water, natural gas. As with agriculture, other resources are also largely privately owned, with some exceptions such as forests in Britain. If these resources are subject to market forces and the demand for profit from private companies then these resources will not be used for the benefit of all, nor will there be sufficient controls on development in order to halt climate change.

Work and livelihood

There is great inequality with regards to people's income and their working conditions. Any definition of a better society must incorporate a reduction in economic inequality, the end of poverty and a drastic improvement in people's working conditions. Land, as the source of wealth, has a direct impact on people's overall economic and work situation. If you own land and the resources on it you are less likely to have to engage in poorly paid labour but can reap the benefits of your assets. People go to work on land, whether on farms, in mines, on oil rigs or offices, which is owned by someone else. The ownership of the physical land, not just the business, is an important part of the wealth and power of the employer.

Social and Community Spaces

Most social and community groups do not have the money to buy a premise. They are either dependent on a council premise (increasingly difficult to get and not free) or renting a premise from a private landlord. As rents have gone up, it is a constant struggle to keep social and community spaces going, especially in London.

Similar to housing, the cost of other assets are dependent on the price of land. As land is at a premium in the cities, those who can afford to buy or rent will get access to land and the buildings on it. This means hotels, nightclubs, restaurants, shopping malls, not community, cultural and social spaces for the working class.

Leisure and recreation

Though places such as National Parks and other areas for quiet recreation exist, there are still not enough for such large population. In the cities, parks are in high demand. With cuts in government spending, there is not enough money to care for both countryside and urban parks and open spaces. In addition, there is pressure to use these areas as sources of profit, eg house building, grouse moors, golf courses or admission-charging entertainment in public parks. In addition, there has been increased privatisation of space. The view is now that if you are not spending money then you don't have the right to be there.

Land that is used for quiet recreation does not make a profit in itself. Therefore, like all other issues, the use of land that is privately owned, and often publicly owned, is determined by what will make a profit for the owner.

The environment

The intensification of development in Britain has led to many environmental problems. The extraction of mineral resources-coal, natural gas, fracking etc, the massive road building programme, the decimation of peat bogs, modern farming practices, the spread of urbanisation and the car culture have all led to an increase in the emission of greenhouse gases and a