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Deborah Tyroler

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Honduran Congress Approves Modification Of Agrarian Reform Legislation: Events & Reactions (part 1)

by Deborah Tyroler

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The Honduran government first enacted agrarian reform legislation in 1962. Pressure from foreign banana companies effectively limited implementation to redistribution of government-owned land. In 1972 and 1975, the congress approved land reform bills mandating that agricultural land owned by both public and private entities must serve a "social function." The legislation specified that idle and underutilized land was to be expropriated and redistributed to landless peasants. The government's stated goal in 1975 was to redistribute about 600,000 ha. to over 120,000 peasant families within a five-year period. In reality, however, only about 25,000 households benefitted from the land reform. At present, an estimated 150,000 agricultural workers are landless and unable to meet basic subsistence needs. In 1991, President Rafael Callejas' government proposed modifications to the 1975 legislation based on a document prepared in 1989 by the US Agency for International Development (AID). The "agricultural modernization law" drops expropriation of land failing to meet "social function" guidelines. Instead landowners can rent idle hectares to tenant farmers. According to the Honduran Peasant Organization Coordinating Committee (COCOCH), the new legislation permits owners to leave arable land fallow for up to 20 months. In addition, the status of collective forms of ownership has been "drastically" changed. When first introduced by the Callejas administration, the legislative package met with vociferous opposition from peasant organizations. (See CAU 09/18/91.) In response, the government offered several concessions and, at the end of 1991, representatives from several organizations representing agricultural workers signed an accord supporting the initiative. Since then, however, opposition to the administration's vision of "modernized" agrarian property relations continued to be widespread. Agricultural worker union leader Lucas Aguilera said the government spent US\$2 million to promote the legislation and manipulated a "small group of peasant leaders" to support the initiative. COCOCH president Rafael Alegria said the proposed legislation was unconstitutional, and would reverse even the paltry gains made by agricultural workers over the past three decades. He added that because the law dispels hope for many thousands of landless workers, upheaval in the countryside can be expected. On March 3-4, thousands of agricultural workers blocked highways and occupied public buildings in 12 of the country's 18 departments. Archbishop of Tegucigalpa Msgr. Enrique Santos warned that "much blood will flow" if the congress approves legislation eliminating the hope for a better life among the vast majority of the nation's agricultural workers. During International Women's Day celebrations on March 8, about 2,000 women marched through the streets of the capital protesting modifications to agrarian reform laws. At a special session on March 4, the agricultural modernization legislation package was approved by the congress. The ruling National Party has a majority of seats. Legislators voted down a request by a Liberal Party deputy for a 24-hour postponement in order to seek support of agricultural unions through consultations, and cancelled the second of three scheduled debates on the bill in order to rush the legislation through. President Rafael Callejas and Natural Resources Minister Mario Nufio told reporters that the new legislation will end stagnation in agriculture, the nation's most important economic sector. (cont.)

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