

Agrarian Reform in Portugal

The Lessons of a Successful Peasant Revolution

At the Portuguese Communist Party's "Conference of Peasants of the North," held in the city of Oporto last February, thousands of small peasants and farmworkers gathered from miles around to discuss the solutions to Portugal's agricultural backwardness, which has caused the enmiseration of the vast majority of fully one-half of Portugal's 8 million population. What was published in the final document, following intensive conference discussion, was the highest level of conceptual awareness to date on the part of the organized rural proletariat of an underdeveloped country: any real improvement in the agrarian situation of the underdeveloped sector necessitates an alliance with the working class to provide the massive inputs of agricultural technology from the industrialized nations.

In the way of solutions, the lengthy document outlined how a policy for "the importation of two or three selected tractor models which offer the best guarantees of quality" must be implemented along with the necessary inputs of "fertilizers, agricultural machinery and chemical products." The document furthermore detailed the need to promote the "reconversion of milk production via mechanization" and the expansion of corn production through the "improvement of all of agricultural technology."

It was with that rigorous international programmatic perspective that the PCP mobilized farmworkers and small peasants to expropriate over 2 million hectares of large landholdings (latifundios) since the left-wing military coup, April 25, 1974. Today, with the indispensable aid of Portugal's industrial workers, the peasants and farmworkers are well on their way toward implementing an authentic agrarian reform in a country long acknowledged to be the most agriculturally backward in Europe.

The success of the peasant revolution in Portugal, as opposed to the disastrous defeats of the peasant upsurges in Mexico and Italy in the early part of the century, is intimately connected with the PCP cadres' ruthless adherence to two essential facets of a successful rural organizing strategy. First, the struggle of the rural proletariat must be linked to the struggle of the urban working class through the forging and continued strengthening of a worker-peasant alliance. Second, a rigorous programmatic policy must be promoted which is based on the modernization and expansion of agriculture via mechanization — a policy which can only be implemented with the help of the industrial workers in the advanced sector.

A Background of Repression

The current PCP-led drive for agrarian reform in Portugal emerged after more than four decades of brutal repression by the police forces of the Salazar and Caetano dictatorships. Each successive rural proletarian struggle was won only through long years of imprisonment, torture

and murder at the hands of the infamous PIDE (secret police).

In the Alentejo region, the huge latifundio area in southern Portugal populated mainly by landless farmworkers, the PCP's local organizations penetrated the entire region by the mid-1940's. Despite the bloody repression, they immediately led the "struggle for bread" during the "great years of famine."

Through the distribution of the clandestine southern farmworker organizing newspaper, *O Campones* and the operation of the underground *Radio Livre Portuguesa*, the PCP then led the struggle for the 8-hour day, the mass action by 200,000 southern farmworkers in May of 1962, and the struggle for labor contracts. The latter was not won until after the April coup. Today, as a result of the PCP's vanguard role in defense of the interests of the southern farmworkers, "the Alentejo is, without a shadow of a doubt, the zone of the country of greatest PCP influence" according to a PCP central committee member. In some districts over 50 per cent of the population are card-carrying members of the party.

In the largely minifundia-dominated north of the country, where hundreds of thousands of small peasants and tenant farmers scratch out an existence on half hectare plots of land, the less socialized, more isolated nature of the peasants made PCP organizing more difficult. Nevertheless, through the clandestine PCP northern peasant organizing newspaper *A Terra*, PCP militants consistently defended the rights of the small peasants, who were frequently thrown off their miserable plots at the whim of the large landowners.

The April Opening

After decades of such wretched conditions and wholesale repression, one of the PCP's first marching orders following the overthrow of the dictatorship was to mobilize for the expropriation of uncultivated lands mainly the latifundios owned by absentee landowners. In most cases, the PCP followed up the land seizures by organizing the farmworkers and small peasants into agricultural cooperatives, like the "Red Star Cooperative" just north of Lisbon. Highlighting the essential vanguard role of the PCP in leading the agrarian reform process, PCP head Alvaro Cunhal began a speech before thousands of rural workers at the Red Star Cooperative, March 30th, by saying:

"Comrades: Each man lives and dies, but the Party remains. The working class remains, the working people remain. The ones who make revolutions are the people, the ones who transform life are the working people. Agrarian reform is also what we all want. But it is the working people of the fields, with the help of the industrial workers of the cities and under the leadership of the Communist Party, that the agrarian reform for which we

have struggled so long will surely be realized..."

Only two months earlier, the land occupied by the cooperative was an abandoned latifundio and a "spectacle of desolation and death." Now, Cunhal added, thousands of workers come to see "how the peasants of Red Star could pull the fields out of abandonment, how the cattle could be pulled from death, and how a new agriculture could start to be constructed."

After widespread forceful land seizures had already taken place, mainly in the Alentejo region, with the dual goals of "improving the conditions of life of the rural proletariat" and promoting a "radical increase in agricultural production," the government has been forced to legalize the land seizures through a land reform decree that set limits on the amount of land that could be individually owned.

Organizing the Small Peasant

The mobilization of the northern peasantry was a more difficult task. Their more backward sociological make-up is coupled with an artificial antagonism created between the small peasants and the landless farmworkers. The large northern landowners had coopted many of the small peasants into joining their landowners' association, playing on their self-delusions that they are "landlords, not producers like the PCP-organized farmworkers."

Soon after the April coup, Cunhal clearly outlined that the small peasantry is an ally of the working class. The mobilization of the peasantry is an "indispensable condition" for the victory of the revolution. Addressing this problem at the party's Seventh Congress last year, Cunhal affirmed that what is necessary to link the peasantry to the revolution are the "concrete measures that respond to (the peasants') most immediate needs and solve them." "Propaganda is very necessary," Cunhal added, "but what will politically bring the peasantry over to the revolution are not words, but acts." It is using the new political situation to force through the elimination of the uncultivated lands, and the offering of compensating prices for their products., Cunhal continued, that the peasantry will become a "firm ally" of the revolution.

As for the base-level aspects of this peasant organizing strategy, the PCP has consistently focused on building the class consciousness of the peasant through organization membership in a "peasant league" or a type of cooperative which will defend the class interests of the peasant. The peasant organizing bulletin *O Arado* directly conveys this point: "The only way that small peasants like us can begin to improve our conditions of life is by organizing ourselves into cooperatives. Cooperatives will not solve all of our problems (lack of roads, sewage, doctors, etc.), but since they are a form of our organization, they will permit us to struggle for the support that the State must give us (lower prices for fertilizers, the support of agro-technicians and aid for the purchase of machinery)." In terms of what forms such an organization can initially take, *O Arado* adds that "a cooperative

can start just as an association for the purchase of fertilizers or for the sale of the products that our lands produce." What is important, however, is that the normally isolated and paranoid peasant enter into a social context in which his class interests can be brought to the surface and defended.

The PCP then moved to unite the struggle of the small peasants with that of the farmworkers by holding joint meetings between the two groups and focusing on how the "common enemy" is the big latifundists who exploits them both. Once the small peasants were made aware that the Communists were not out to take away their miserable plots of land, it became more difficult for the latifundists to rally the small peasants against the seizure of the big estates. Many of the small peasants actively took part in that process throughout large areas of the south, as well as in several areas of the north. As an immediate result of the formation of cooperatives, the summer 1975 grain harvest in the cooperative areas increased by as much as 30 per cent over the harvests of the previous years.

Gonçalves Government

Soon after the widespread formation of cooperatives, Alvaro Cunhal, providing the necessary programmatic orientation, stressed that "the liquidation of the latifundios does not only mean the destruction and disappearance of the latifundios. It is necessary to know what to do next."

In this respect, the 5th Provisional government, headed by the pro-Communist Prime Minister, Vasco Gonçalves, began to move full-scale to create the conditions for the expanded reproduction of the agrarian sector. Through a wide-ranging series of decrees, across-the-board cuts of 30 per cent in the price of fertilizers were offered to the cooperatives and small farmers in order to eliminate their exploitation by the big intermediaries. A huge agricultural credit fund was set up for that sector to facilitate the purchase of the necessary agricultural technology. On a broader scale, funds were allocated for the huge Alqueva irrigation project in the south, which would double the amount of irrigated land, while increasing agricultural production tenfold. As a preliminary emergency measure, meanwhile, excess wine production was bought up by the government so as not to cause the bankruptcy of that sector. Finally, faced with an intensifying economic boycott by the major capitalist countries, the Gonçalves government initiated trade deals with Socialist-bloc countries in order to maintain production.

During the same period that "popular assemblies" and "Committees in Defense of the Revolution" (CDRs) were formed to guard against economic sabotage by internal reactionary forces and to ensure the maintenance of production. Most of these organizations included the participation of both rural and industrial workers, and received the active support of soldiers and sailors.

It was not until after the fall of the Gonçalves government in the late summer of 1975, however,

that it became objectively and immediately necessary for the worker-peasant alliance to demonstrate its strength. Portugal came under an intense bombardment of internal and external NATO-led pressures. The agent-dominated 6th government reneged on most of Gonçaves' pro-development measures. The survival of the agricultural cooperatives was being threatened by the government's open economic sabotage and anti-development policies. It was at this time that the class-for-itself embryo went into action in Portugal.

In early October, Portugal's industrial proletariat fully mobilized "in defense of the struggle for agrarian reform of the southern farmworkers." Following an unprecedented PCP-sponsored rally in Lisbon, including the participation of thousands of industrial workers, rural workers and soldiers, a fullscale working class offensive against the agent government began, accompanied by qualitative leaps in the revolutionary consciousness of both industrial and rural workers.

* At the first meeting of Farmworkers and Metalworkers of the South, near the city of Evora, the latter agreed to break the government's block of agromachinery deliveries to the southern cooperatives by delivering the needed machinery direct from the factory warehouses to the farmworkers. The bill was sent to the government!

* At a farmworker-industrial worker-soldier meeting in the Lisbon industrial suburb of Barreiro, military spokesmen agreed to use Army transport vehicles to deliver the necessary fertilizer and seed shipments to the southern farmworkers, a promise which was fulfilled scarcely a week later.

* Chemical workers in the industrial city of Setubal sent shipments of artificial fertilizers direct to the cooperatives.

* In a show of reciprocal and active class solidarity last week a column of at least 100 trucks loaded with southern farmworkers and peasants drove into Lisbon to support the wage demands of the striking construction workers. Their solidarity was a major factor in forcing the government to give in to the demands and consequently scrap its "emergency austerity plan."

* In the north of Portugal, a "Movement of Farmers of the North" has emerged in the city of Oporto to set up commissions "in every parish in the north" and to link up with the struggle for agrarian reform of their "southern comrades." This comes only weeks after agricultural workers and trade union leaders from the south went up to Oporto to organizer support for agrarian reform.

Today, swept by the force of this PCP-led worker-peasant-soldier alliance that is tightening its grip around the necks of the austerity agents of the 6th government, the Portuguese rural workers are no longer accustomed to saying "If I don't see agrarian reform my children will." They are active participants in assuring its final victory.

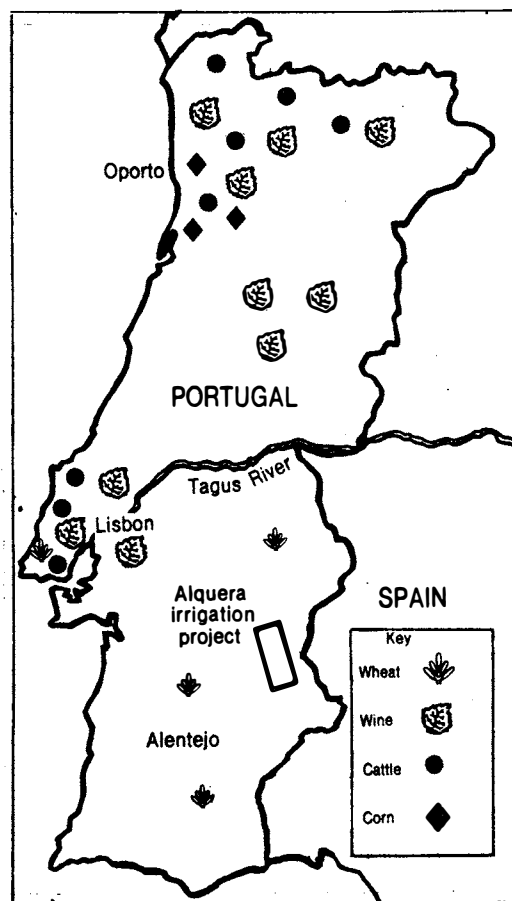
International Implications

The victory of the PCP-led agrarian reform movement will begin the process of building the urban and rural infrastructure of a twentieth-century society; an object lesson in socialist

planning for such agriculturally backward regions as Italy, Latin America, Africa and Asia.

The success of an integrated program of agricultural development in Portugal depends on the provision of capital goods and materials from the worldwide productive network and demands the full productive employment of the world's working class. The increased production of wheat and corn in Portugal, for example, initially made possible through the collectivization of arable land, will increase the demand for fertilizer from the chemical industries of the Ruhr and Northern Italy, and for agricultural equipment from the auto plants in France, Germany, Spain and Italy. Not only will Portugal become a major supplier of food, but the rapid development of the urban, industrial working class will convert Portugal into a supplier of vital manufactures to the Third World.

To insure that victory, the fight for agrarian reform of the Portuguese worker and peasant must be linked to the fight for international development via an International Development Bank and expanded East-West trade.



The Alentejo region in Southern Portugal, clearly dominated by the PCP's agrarian reform organizing, is an area of large, increasingly mechanized agricultural collectives. Its primary crop is wheat. In contrast, the northern region is dominated by small, labor-intensive grape and cattle producing farms. Until recent PCP organizing inroads, the landless peasant has been easily pitted against the small, landowning farmer.