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Black farmers down to a precious few

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GUEST COLUMNIST

According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, there were 740,670 "Negro" farmers in the United States in 1900. In 1920, black farmers increased to 922,914, and then started on a catastrophic decline. In 1969, there were 90,141 black farmers and, by 1992, the number had been reduced to 18,816. In other words, black farmers declined by about 98 percent between 1920 and 1992.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which black farmers call the "last plantation," speeded up the exodus of black people from the land. Pearlie Reed, a senior black official at the USDA, admitted in 1997 that the USDA discriminated against black farmers, cheating them of their dignity and loans that could keep them in operation.

North Carolina illustrates how power-hungry food corporations marginalize black farmers throughout the country. In just 14 years, between 1978 and 1992, black farmers declined by 68 percent, from 5,820 to 1,866. Meanwhile, pigs, the main product of animal factories, grew rapidly in North Carolina. In the early 1980s, about 11,400 hog farmers raised 2.5 million pigs. By 1998, the number of hogs in North Carolina soared to almost 11 million, but hog farmers dropped to around 3,000.

The insidious politics of these two transformations -- decline of the black farmers and growth of hogs in North Carolina -- is that they are related.

Corporate agriculture pushed its animal factories into the neighborhood of blacks. Pig farmers settled in black rural communities in eastern North Carolina. The stink and human-life threatening pollution of the hog factories bring the urban industrial development model into the countryside, making a factory out of rural society. And because the black people of rural North Carolina are so few and largely powerless, they become the targets of large hog operations and other plantation farmers.

The USDA is the only government agency distributing Treasury checks to farmers. But this money goes through the county committee system, which is under the control of large white farmers who hate family farmers, especially black farmers. Add this hatred to the complexity of USDA regulations and the result is discrimination and fear.

It's this fear black people have for the dreadful plantations and their white owners that paralyzes everything about black farmers and their history. The continuing theft of the little land black farmers still own is devoured in this fear.

The incredible thing is that there are any black farmers still on the land who mean to fight to retain their land. Langston Hughes put it best in 1938: "We must take back our land again, America!"

Yes, we must. The crisis of black rural Americans trying to protect their land and continue with family farming is a welcome opportunity for challenging agribusiness. Start by dismantling the patronage system of agribusiness, the national farm county committees delivering most of the government's money to large farmers, plantations and animal factories.

The corporate growers taking the land of the black farmer are also eyeing the white small family farmer. When the black farmers become extinct, and their days are numbered if we do nothing, it will only be a matter of time before the already stressed small white family farmers also become landless and disappear.

What then?

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