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Brazil

Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement: "Here we are all leaders"

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It was a day during the month of September in 1991, an hour before dawn. The clouds and the rain had vanished, giving way to the sun. A strong wind made itself felt along the passageways of this small city of canvas. A clump of eucalyptus offered some protection. At the side of the tents a stream, where women and men washed their clothes, ran downhill. In the camp, different teams of people began their activities of the day: some in charge of looking for firewood, while others prepared food or cleaned the site.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/gif/mstflag.gif>]

Some gathered together to exchange ideas about the future of this encampment of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST - Movement of Landless Rural Workers'), built alongside a highway approximately eight kilometres from the city of Bage and 120 kilometres from the frontier with Uruguay, in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. There are two hundred cabins of varying size, with walls and roofs constructed of wood and black nylon. The cabins extend some 1,500 metres alongside the road, giving shelter to 800 farm-workers' families.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/mstbarracacamp.jpg>]

MST encampment

Along both sides of the encampment, separated by fenced wire, are 2,700 uncultivated hectares of land belonging to the Brazilian Agricultural Research Company. Close to a fire, rubbing their hands to keep warm, Cesar and Gilberto, two leaders, talk about the occupation of the Fazenda Sao Pedro (Sao Pedro estate), located a few kilometres away. At the beginning of April, they say, their camp was surrounded by the military police. With the arrival of the rainy season, most of the families became worried because they were over-crowded on just a few hectares of land belonging to the state.

The feeling of the peasants was that if they did not take quick action, they would be forced to spend another winter in those overcrowded conditions. On the sixth of April, three proposals were presented to a general assembly of the encampment: to accept the land in the state of Mato Grosso offered by the Government; to march to Bage; to occupy a large country estate. "The first proposal was rejected," commented Cesar, "since Mato Grosso lacks infrastructure and the struggle of the landless is about each peasant obtaining land in his own state. The second one (to march to Bage) was also rejected because the military police had closed all the ways out of the region. On the 8th of April, at 5.00pm, we decided to occupy an estate to put pressure on the government and set in motion the 'possession of the land'." At nine in the evening, the peasants began to cross the road to occupy the Sao Pedro estate, which was closest to their camp. More than 3000 people were mobilised.

Police open fire

When these people arrived at the main entrance, the military police opened fire from their automobile. However, on seeing the large number of occupiers, the police took refuge in a house from where they continued shooting. When the peasants had approached the house, calling for them to stop, two peasants fell wounded and one was killed. At 10.00 pm the owners of the house and the police surrendered. Sao Pedro was occupied.

"We maintained the occupation for days," added Gilberto, "but we decided to vacate the property because the Government promised to settle with all the families within ten days."

Months passed without the families being settled so that they had to resort to new mobilisations such as long marches of 450 kilometres to the state capital, Porto Alegre, and new occupations. As time passed, more than thirty people died, both children and adults. Now, nine years later, the majority of the 8th of August Camp are settled, but hundreds of other encampments of black canvases stretch the length and breadth of Brazil.

The encampments for those "without land" are schools where the peasants begin to transform themselves into inhabitants of the new society. This new society is accompanied by a new way of looking at culture, improving the way of coexisting, of living together, with attachments and organisation. The families -between five and twenty -, who live close to each other, form a group that is the base of the organisation. Each group elects a leader and vice-leader, all of whom form a leadership to co-ordinate the running of the camp. There, the discussions are open and at times quite heated. Votes on decisions are only taken after everyone is clear about what they are deciding. As this grouping is made up of a high number of group leaders and vice-leaders, they usually elect an executive commission, which is then charged with implementing the decisions voted upon. This commission, on its own, does not have the power to decide anything.

The general assembly is the body with most power: it meets every two or three months, or when necessary to make an important decision, such as a march or a mobilisation that would involve the future of the camp. All those in the camp participate.

For each of the essential needs of the camp, teams are created from representatives from each group, to look after health needs, the planning and construction of cabins, feeding, internal and external security, gathering of firewood, hygiene, religion, recreation, education, sports and women's issues.

Everything is discussed in the groups and the delegate to the general co-ordinating meeting brings the position of the group to that meeting and is not able to change decisions, without prior consultation. Further, the inter-group co-ordination permits the maintenance of operational autonomy. The camp dwellers continue working as rural labourers, and with what they earn, they acquire food, which is distributed amongst everyone. The work is organised by means of teams that work for a determined amount of time, and others relieve them, so that they can maintain the internal organisation.

The organisational structure allows the mass participation of everyone in each decision in a way that affirms, as a reality, " here we are all leaders". Each tenant farmer leads some kind of activity. To be a leader implies concrete responsibility inside the encampment. All activity is vital and everyone must contribute; this gives confidence and creates a spiritual force of solidarity.

The camp dwellers, together and individually, are responsible for their common destiny. The families in the camps of the landless are taking the principal role in radically changing the way of living, of living together in harmony and in relation to each other. It is a new experience for everyone and an education for the society that is going to be built collectively in the townships where they establish their land.

Collective and individual

However, the concern for the collective goes hand in hand with respect for the individual. The sovereign society and group that tries to build respect for the individuality of the person imposes nothing. It is in this way, for example, that each group organises a collective kitchen to save fuel and to achieve a better distribution of food. Nevertheless, if any family wishes to cook separately for themselves, this decision is respected without any kind of pressure. In this way they counteract the feeling of everyone crowding each other and the feeling that "everything collective" is good

and "everything personal" is bad, as if it were a black and white movie.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/mstseeds.jpg>]

The MST produces Latin America's only organic seeds

Of the 800 families, many will remain with the MST, occupying other estates to win their land, whilst others will give up the dream and will hope for better luck searching for work in the cities or distant regions. The majority will be successful in being settled.

The first 67 families of the August 8th Encampment who were settled in 1991 on 1,500 hectares located in Santana do Livramento, almost on the frontier with Uruguay, are now building an agricultural production co-operative, and after overcoming start-up difficulties, have constituted a productive example for the zone. The surplus of production over the needs for survival of the encampment and contributions from the camp-dwellers is sold through the Central Co-operatives so as to obtain the best prices. The settlement also has a school for the children and a health centre to treat the inhabitants.

The challenge that faces the landless with their organisational model, is that the struggle is for agrarian reform and the settlements may be transformed into centres of production of culture, where food production becomes integrated into the construction of a new model for social living, which is based upon solidarity and mutual aid. The comparison between the previous situation and the reality today proves the success of the rural encampments.

The process "changed the life of the previously marginalized who were without perspective, who are now farmers who have dignity with monthly incomes superior to that of the rural population in general", says João Pedro Stédile, National Coordinator for the Movement.

Moreover, the concern of the peasants for the education of their children, their struggle for the provision of schools and health services in the encampments, the efforts to train the required professionals for farming, such as veterinarians, agricultural engineers and farm equipment operators, is now obvious. More than 4,000 encampments presently exist throughout the country.

At the same time, the MST has grown, in numbers of families and in occupied territory and has been consolidated into a large national movement, which has won many victories throughout the country. It was awarded the Alternative Nobel Prize and has achieved a lot of international recognition for its work.

The MST had its birth in the states in the south of the country, with their extensive estates of livestock breeding, soya plantations, and thousands of small farmers who had lost their land.

The 1970s, a period of total dictatorship, saw the setting up of Rank and File Church Communities (base Christian communities) in the cities, and above all, the coming into existence of "family groups" in the interior. The agrarian policy of the government tended towards concentrating the land into fewer and fewer hands so these ("family groups") became spaces for reflection about the real experiences in organising opposition by rural workers.

When the seventies ended, the peasants in different parts of the country intensified the occupations of the estates. In the 1980s, they were most successful in the state of Rio Grande do Sul in 1979, and in the state of Santa Catarina in 1980. This helped promote the growth of the MST, which became one of the social movements with the greatest mobilising power in Latin America.

In 1981, 700 landless families decided to camp in the area of Encrucilhada Natalino, in the municipality of Ronda Alta,

in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, in the south of the country. The encampment lasted three years and was transformed into a symbol that would denote the future of the MST.

The struggle between more than 10,000 families in the state of Paraná against the government, provoked by the construction of the Itaipu hydroelectric dam, which flooded their land, must also be added to the above actions.

While the state proposed monetary compensation, the peasants demanded other lands arguing that the money they would receive was not enough to pay for their lost land. In the states of Sao Paulo and Mato Grosso do Sul also, thousands of rural workers undertook mobilisations claiming land.

In September 1982, in Goiania, capital of the state of Goias, the Comissão Pastoral da Terra [CPT-Pastoral Land Commission created by the liberation theology wing of the Catholic church-ed.] organised the first national meeting where workers from sixteen states participated.

According to João Pedro Stédile, Co-ordinator of MST, and one of the participants in that event, "this was the first meeting to exchange experiences about the land struggle. It was the first national meeting I had ever attended because I had never before been out of Rio Grande do Sul. We began to get acquainted with each other and the idea arose that we must remain in contact. The delegates of the five southern states (Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, Paraná, Sao Paulo and Mato Grosso do Sul) decided to form a regional coordinating committee. "

"This committee," says Stédile, "decided that it must be organised throughout the country and we decided to have a national meeting about the land conflicts in January, 1984, in the city of Cascável, Paraná. The meeting in Goiania was organised by the CPT to reflect on the land issue within the framework of the rural workers' struggle."

Cascável signified the foundation and organisation of the MST, a movement of landless peasants, national in character, with a goal of struggling for land and agrarian reform. A coming together of the MST, the Confederation of Agricultural Workers (CONTAG), the Central Union of Workers (CUT), the Catholic Church, several political parties and entities took place to demand agrarian reform. In opposition to this process, the Rural Democratic Union was organised in 1985 to mobilise the estate owners to resist agrarian reform, often through violent action.

After 1985 - according to statistics from the CPT - 1,169 victims of violence were recorded in the centre of rural Brazil, among them unionists, peasants, their lawyers and priests. Out of all those responsible for so many murders, only sixteen have been tried and sentenced.

On April 17, 1986, the largest massacre of landless peasants took place in the municipality of Eldorado dos Carajás, in Amazonia, and became a symbol for agrarian reform in Brazil. Hundreds of families marching on a road towards Belem, capital of the state of Para, were attacked with gun-fire by the police, resulting in nineteen dead and dozens injured.

A way of building the future

Even though laws exist to promote the redistribution of estates with those who are without land, in practice, agrarian reform is only granted when the occupations are intensified. This method of occupying has transformed the struggle. In 1993, eighty-nine occupations by 19,092 families were carried out. In 1996 there were 398 occupations, with the participation of 63,080 families. In 1999 the occupations involved more than 40,000 families.

"The occupation has a symbolic significance for the landless", states Stédile. "It is an action that opens a space for political socialisation, for struggle and resistance. This space, built by the workers is the place of experience and training for the movement. The occupation is the movement."

In the movement, new individuals are being formed. Each land occupation creates a source for generating experience that throws up new individuals who would not exist without that action. The occupation is a condition of life for those without land.

With the occupations, the peasants are continually recreating their history and they are winning, in fact, the potential for negotiations with the government.

Moreover, they win the possibility of achieving a new educational model for their children in the encampments and the right to a greater participation in decisions about their destinies. "The occupation is a form of beginning to build our destiny, of creating", says Stédile.

Attempting to end this form of struggle, the government of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso issued a decree that prohibits the expropriation of an estate occupied by the peasants, attempting to end this form of struggle.

According to Stédile, "there is a contradiction here. The President's idea is that the landless will stop occupying on seeing the threat that the land will not be expropriated. However, he now only yields to the occupiers, after the struggle and the occupations."

During the first government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1994-1998), agrarian reform was presented as a necessity for the development of the family farm, the solution to the problem of food safety and the reduction of agrarian conflicts. However, the old model for agricultural development has not been modified.

For João Pedro Stédile, the agrarian policy of the current government simply continues the model of agricultural development introduced by the previous military regime. "This economic policy", he says, "does not recognise the importance and potential of the small farmers in the agricultural production process. The family farm is still seen as backward within their model of capitalist agriculture."

It appears that governments don't realise that in the last 34 years of implementing this kind of policy, the conflicts remain and tend to grow. It seems a contradiction that during this same time food production has increased and so has the number of hungry Brazilians. The family farm is being assaulted by a single model of agricultural development."

The National Institute of Colonisation and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) is the state entity responsible for implementing agrarian reform. After 1999, seeking to speed up the acquisition of lands for distribution, it resorted to the direct purchase of some estates. However, INCRA was denounced for over-paying on several acquisitions, which was justified by the Director of Farm Resources of INCRA, Luis de Matos Pimenta, who blamed the landless, saying that if "the MST occupies the estate and claims it for settlement, the owner is permitted to exact the best price."

Another mechanism used by INCRA, with help from the World Bank, is to authorise credits to small farmers so that they can acquire land. For Stédile, these proposals have the effect of privatising agrarian reform and are not economically viable.

An action that puts into question the government's leadership on this matter is its announcement of reduced public

expenditure in order to deal with the international financial crises. To overcome its limitations, INCRA will have to be changed into an executive agency, freeing itself from bureaucratic squabbles. What they want is to "eliminate INCRA as a public organ and convert it into a property business", said Stédile.

Grave consequences

A study carried out by Professor Guilherme Dias, a government specialist, revealed the grave consequences of the Brazilian large estate model for agriculture. According to his research, in the last few years, 900,000 properties with less than 100 hectares remain. Of 700,000 properties in the employers' sector, only 88,000 are economically viable. Of the four million farmers who work the land through the family, nearly 700,000 could be viable, and not one property of up to 50 hectares has a monthly income greater than a minimum salary. Two million rural salaried workers lost their jobs in the last four years.

"Government technicians admitted in November, in an article published by the magazine of the agricultural ministry, that another two million very poor families will leave the countryside in the coming years, expanding the misery on the periphery of the great urban centres, with between eight to thirteen million people", states Stédile.

He also argues that the "disaster", a consequence of the adopted model inspired by the United States, is fostering the production of grain for export, especially soya, with large investments in transportation infrastructure, such as railways and ports. This implies the "de-nationalization of the Brazilian agricultural market which has passed into the control of large foreign businesses", and favouritism towards those amongst the small farmers who were integrated into agro-business, observes this leader of the landless.

"The centre of rural impoverishment is that a farmer earns three reals (\$1.55 U.S.), for a box of tomatoes, but the consumer must pay fifteen times more for the same product", points out economist Ladislau Dowber, recommending that the production channels be investigated to look for prices that "might be more fair for producers and consumers".

Stédile is of the opinion that this problem is the result of the domination of the market by large businesses, especially the trans-nationals.

An example is the Italian Parmalat Company, which according to Stédile, pays seventeen cents a litre to the milk producers of the encampments controlled by the MST, and sells it for fifty-two cents in the super-markets. But in Italy, where the selling price is similar, the company pays forty-eight cents to the milk producers, a difference that can only be explained by monopoly practices, says Stédile. These businesses, for their part, say the difference is due to high taxes and financial charges added to the cost of transportation and labour.

The right to property

The struggle for land in Brazil can also be seen in the cities, the economic and political centres par excellence of the industrial world, where the needs and feelings for agrarian reform influences the discussion amongst the political parties, the unions and the State. The landless, by their occupations, place action on the discussion table.

At an urban level, the political forces in favour of agrarian reform often view this political process in an economic perspective, purely as a way of dealing with improving family incomes. Nevertheless, the landless are establishing

their struggle for agrarian reform, not only as a way to improve their working conditions, but to win their right to property, and they undertake land occupations as a continuation of their historical development as workers and farmers.

It is their only way of maintaining their status as *campesinos* (peasant farmers) and avoids being transformed into salaried workers. The struggle for the right to diverse kinds of property ownership cannot be framed within the concept of capitalist property relations.

Through their experience in building their movement, the landless workers are winning their own space for political socialisation. The struggle for the land has gone beyond being understood as an economic question to the conception of a socio-cultural project for the transformation of their reality. The effects of these movements on social relations reaches into all of society.

Each encampment gained is a fraction of territory that passes on to be worked by the landless. The encampment is a territory of the landless. The struggle for the land raises the issue of more territory because on winning an encampment, the prospect of winning more is moved to the top of the *campesinos* agenda.

If each encampment is a fraction of conquered territory, the combination of conquered areas is called "territorialisation". This is the biggest difference between the MST and other peasant movements that end their struggle after conquering some land.

For the MST, winning land is a step in the process of the "territorialisation" of conquered areas. "Our struggle is not only to win the land. We are building a new way of life, with all that this implies, socially, culturally and politically. Winning the land is a step towards this new model that is functioning in the encampments", emphasises João Pedro Stédile.

The highest level of the MST is the Congress, which meets every five years. The next levels are the national coordinating committee, the national leadership, state coordination, regional coordination, the leadership of the Central Co-operatives created by the encampments, the coordination of the campers and the encampments.

The process of encampment "changed the life of people who were previously marginal and without perspective and who are now farming citizens", with monthly incomes equivalent to three times the minimum wage (\$230) promised and superior to the rural population in general, maintains Teta, a well-known cinematographer who made two documentaries on the "landless".

Between 1994 and 1999, the MST dedicated itself to deepening organisation within the encampments, concentrating on developing co-operative organisations for those settled, creating co-operatives of production and regional and local services. The regional cooperatives form a Central Co-operative and the Centrals are organised at a national level into the Brazilian Co-operative Federation of Agrarian Reform.

The MST has more than 500 encampments with more than 150,000 families organised throughout the country and anticipates they will spread ultimately to embrace all farming areas.

It also has the support, to a large extent, of the families that were settled during the agrarian reform of the 1980s, around 400,000 according to the government and not more than 250,00 according to the MST.

Historical background

The present reality of the Brazilian countryside has its historical background in the agrarian policies implemented by the military dictatorship between 1965 and 1985. This was to the detriment of peasant family farming when Brazilian farming suffered a significant change by the establishment of a farming policy model that gambled on modernising the agricultural sector through the introduction of large, export based agro-business.

This policy was underpinned by technical and financial modernization based on the National System of Rural Credit, causing farming to be dependent upon the industrial manufacturers of materials such as pesticides, resulting in the break-up of small producers and promoting the growth of salaried work.

The destruction of the family economy led to the expulsion of millions of peasants to the cities and the growth of millions of "landless" families.

As part of the military dictatorship's agricultural industrialisation policy, a business opening was provided for trans-national businesses such as Volkswagen, who were able to acquire land without limit resulting in large land concentrations in a few hands. With the progress of this kind of colonisation, large estates were consolidated and the creation of others was encouraged, especially in Amazonia.

The agro-business exploitation of the land in the regions of the south, south-east, west-central and north-east parts of the country, points to a monoculture based upon export, with large plantations of soya, oranges and sugar-cane for the production of alcohol and other products.

The numbers speak for themselves. In fifteen years, 48.4 million hectares of public lands were transformed into large estates. This corresponds to double the landmass of Sao Paulo state. At present, Brazil has the second greatest rate of concentration of land ownership, behind Paraguay.

One-percent of owners now control forty-five percent of the agricultural area of the country. Ninety-percent of farmers, with less than a hundred hectares each, occupy twenty-one percent of the agricultural area. Twenty-two percent of all Brazilians live in rural areas, and it is estimated that 4.8 million families need land.

Even though the Constitution provides for the expropriation of properties that are not fulfilling their "social function", in terms of production and employment, the land is managed by the government like a pool of riches, an asset for financial speculation, and not as a resource to produce food.

No matter how large the lands belonging to these large estates are, the greater part is unproductive, according to Ladislav Dowbor, economist at the Catholic University of Sao Paulo. Whilst small farmers cultivate sixty-five percent of their land, individual owners with more than 6,000 hectares, only use six to seven percent of theirs. Basing himself upon official statistics, the above expert affirms that there are 371,000,000 of cultivable hectares of land in the country, but only 52,000,000 are intended for temporary or permanent cultivation.

The 1995 to 1996 census of agro-businesses, undertaken by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, revealed that in ten years, 5,400,000 people in agriculture remained unemployed. Later investigations indicate that in spite of the victories of the MST, in recent years, this process of concentration has been maintained and has actually intensified.

A different educational model

For the landless, agrarian reform is not restricted to changes in the land and capital, but also means similar changes for the people as citizens. According to their leaders, "the access to education by the peasants plays a very important role in the development of their political consciousness, because they themselves make a critical reading of their own reality".

The MST is gambling on an education based upon the values of the countryside as a method for grappling with school absenteeism and reducing illiteracy. The application of this new model to various regions, for example, results in the starting of school classes for pupils at a time of the year that respects the agricultural calendar. The number of pupils in rural areas, who earlier had been condemned to cutting short their education, has now tripled, and illiteracy has been halved.

Classes that traditionally began in February or March, now do not conflict with local seeding and harvesting activities, being scheduled between January and May, the rainy season. The children continue working, but without losing two months of school, which used to lead to them quitting school entirely or having a poor performance record.

This is an example of the inadequacy of applying pedagogic methods designed primarily to meet urban criteria to a rural locale. Other problems were found in the content and teaching methods that did not take into consideration local culture and conditions.

On the other hand, in the training centres located in the encampments of the MST, they respect the "cultural values of the countryside", such as the relationship with nature, the spirit of mutual assistance, the agricultural people's perception of time, their bonds to the land and the need to defend it.

In July of 2000, in Luziana in the state of Goias, a National Conference with the theme, "For a basic education in the countryside", took place, promoted by United Nations agencies, the MST, the Catholic Church and the University of Brazil, where the kind of education that is required in the Brazilian countryside was debated.

The conference championed and adopted positions around the idea of a rural education with better material conditions, with teachers trained to pay attention to the reality of the countryside and with a school year adapted to the farming calendar.

In Latin America "in spite of its agricultural tradition, and even when the majority of the population was rural, in general, education was not connected to the characteristics of people's lives and production in the countryside", said Jorge Werthein, representative in Brazil of the United Nations Education, Science and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). Schools in poor physical condition, classes taking place during harvest time and poorly qualified teachers, reflected the lack of attention to the world of the peasant. These conditions have been reversed in the encampments of the MST, but the idea is that their model should be expanded to all of rural Brazil.

Exodus

With the exodus of people from the land "provoked by the shortages, lack of fundamental social services and economic perspectives, the rural population was decimated", but little has changed in the material conditions and teaching concepts in the countryside, indicated Werthein.

"It is necessary to place teaching in the context of rural development", summarised Ana Catarina Braga, who is responsible for education at the United Nations Foundation for Children (UNICEF), co-promoter of the conference of Luziana, together with UNESCO and the Brazilian organisations.

This first national meeting on the topic of rural schooling, with 900 participants, approved a final document, entitled 'Challenges And Proposals For Action', with 105 recommendations. The proposals are aimed at influencing public policy, and promote a more adequate school programme actually developed in the countryside, and a school system that prevents the continuing rural exodus, Braga point out.

The deliberations of the conference on the themes discussed, such as secondary schooling and education of professionals, teacher training and the experiences of teaching methods in the countryside, will soon be published, announced Braga.

In addition to introducing a new educational model for Brazil in their encampments, the MST is also trying to achieve 100% school attendance for their children to eliminate illiteracy.

For this reason, it is heading up a mobilisation for basic rural education and has signed agreements with three universities to prepare teachers who shall have the qualities of conveying "adequate schooling for our reality", according to João Pedro Stédile.