

BACKGROUND

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Now It Is Time: The MST and Grassroots Land Reform in Brazil

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“Forty years ago, everyone in Brazil but the rich and the generals knew that Brazil needed an agrarian reform. It was the only thing that would bring this country around to use its land rationally, economically.... We threw that chance away and went through years of dictatorship instead. What if Brazil had had its reform starting then?... What kind of a country would we have been able to construct! Instead, we have all this... violence, this waste. Now it is time. We shouldn't waste another forty years.”

—SMALL BUSINESSMAN, NORTHERN BRAZIL

Since the late 1970s, more than one million people in Brazil have transformed their lives. They have done so by organizing peaceful protests that have forced the Brazilian government to redistribute approximately 20 million acres of agricultural land to 350,000 families and to assist them further in creating new livelihoods. These people have vastly improved the quality of education and health care available to their families, achieving these gains by successfully challenging the institutions and some of the most powerful people of Brazil, a nation of 175 million people and one of the world's ten largest economies.

The million people—men, women, and children—who are members of the MST (*o Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra*, the Landless Workers' Movement) have faced down police, the military, and gangs of hired gunmen, suffering imprisonment, beatings, and sometimes death. Instead of waiting for the government to meet its long-standing promises to redistribute land, members of the MST have occupied land claimed by others, continuing the occupations until the government has met their immediate needs for land. And they continue to do so: at this writing more than 80,000 MST families who have not yet benefited from land distributions are



Photo: Angus Wright

Guedeson, an MST settler in Assentamento Onalicio Barros, in the Amazonian state of Pará. The movement's approach to keeping people on their land has great potential to help halt environmental degradation in the Amazon and beyond.

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An MST encampment in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil's southernmost state. These black plastic tents are typical of the encampments where MST members spend months or years before gaining title to land.

occupying land in the continuing battle to make agrarian reform an enduring reality in Brazil. In addition, approximately 200,000 families who are not members of the MST have also received land in the agrarian reform sparked by the MST.

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The Social Function of Land

Although MST members often have had to confront police, military troops, and the court system to gain land, the MST strategy of land occupations does not usually break the law but instead is based on forcing the government to comply with the law.

Brazil has for nearly five centuries been plagued by a radically unequal distribution of land. Wealthy landholders ruled the countryside with impunity, grabbing land through fair means and foul, intimidating and even murdering those who stood in the way of their dominance of the land. They held sway over state legislatures and courts and there were few who could challenge them. They were encouraged by their dominance and impunity to use the land wastefully, retarding the development of the economy and trapping millions of Brazilians in poverty. To combat this problem, successive Brazilian national governments beginning in the nineteenth century asserted the idea (which also had roots in the colonial legal tradition) that land, in order to be legally claimed by an owner,

had to “serve its social function.” Brazilian governments repeatedly promised to make this concept meaningful by redistributing land to the poor, but the power of landholding families and their domestic and foreign allies has kept the governments from fulfilling their promises.

In the late 1970s, landless rural people realized that they might be able to achieve reform by occupying land and demanding that the government apply the “social function” principle. They were also often able to successfully challenge the titles held by wealthy landowners because so many of the titles were based on fraud. The key was organization. Land occupations needed to be carried out by enough people—usually several hundred or more—and enlist enough community support that the government and large landholders could not displace them except through embarrassingly large and politically costly jailings or massacres. Catholic priests inspired by liberation theology (a movement within the Church emphasizing social justice) and lay political activists helped the landless organize these occupations. Once proven successful, occupations began to break out throughout Brazil, and by 1984 the landless were able to create a national organization, the MST. Significant agrarian reform had begun for the first time in Brazilian history.

The Land Occupation Encampments

It is not easy to organize or maintain successful land occupations. The greatest motivator is the desperation of the rural poor, pressed to the wall by ongoing inequalities that continue to throw them off the land—inequalities exacerbated by the aggressive development of capital-intensive agricultural operations. MST organizers must identify enough people in an area ready to take on the difficulties of an occupation. They must also keep a constant eye out for land that is held under terms that can be legally contested. When the landless first move onto a piece of land, they are usually thrown off it one or more times by gunmen employed by landowners or by police forces under landowner control. The landless set up camps on the land itself or nearby with shelters made of large sheets of black plastic—whatever materials may come to hand. They plant any ground available—often just small gardens—and usually must rely on support from the MST state and national offices, other settlements, labor unions, church groups, and sympathetic political organizations. It is difficult to maintain the morale of the families in the camps in the face of hunger, disease, and demoralizing delay.

It is essential to stay put until a court and/or the government's agrarian reform ministry makes a decision to grant land—



An MST settler in the doorway of her house, on land she and her family and others won in an occupation.

a process that typically takes two to four years. In the meantime, landlords or police may attack the encampment repeatedly, abusing, beating, and imprisoning people. Several hundred MST leaders have been assassinated in these struggles. Even more rural leaders not affiliated with the MST have been murdered, as they do not enjoy the support and protection the MST affords. In spite of the problems, however, the people's deep hunger for land and the organizational skill of the MST have made it possible for people in thousands of encampments to succeed in getting land.

The Challenges of Success: Making Agrarian Reform Work

People in agrarian reform settlements say again and again that "the land is only a first step." They mean this in three ways. First, it is not easy for small farmers in Brazil (or anywhere) to succeed against government and corporate policies that favor large operations. Second, agrarian reform does not in itself solve many of the social and economic problems that rural poor people face. Third, the MST and most of its members see themselves as a revolutionary force leading the transformation of Brazil into a more just and prosperous nation.

Agrarian reform settlers carry into their communities most of the ingrained problems of their society as a whole: sexism,

racism, and the tendency to rely on hierarchical, paternalistic, and personality-based relationships. The difference in MST settlements is that the organization and a large share of the settlers are deeply committed to fighting these old problems. The organization was founded in part on the educational ideas of Paulo Freire, who insisted that the awakening of critical consciousness and a sense of social responsibility are the foundations of learning and positive change. Settlers engage in formal and informal discussion of the problems and establish rules and understandings meant to create a more

egalitarian society, both for Brazil and for each settlement. The MST trains thousands of elementary and secondary teachers and community organizers to help carry the vision of social equality forward.

Settlers must also struggle to make their landholdings productive and sustainable. The MST has trained hundreds of its own agronomists and technical advisors, and it pressures the government to provide more. The organization demands, with occasional and partial success, adequate production credit. They work with other family farmers to try to transform government policy favoring export and large-scale agriculture into policy that would favor feeding Brazilians and supporting small-scale agriculture.

In its earliest years, the MST was influenced by the idea that "modern," chemical-intensive agriculture was the most viable. Now, the organization has been educated by experience to see that the most successful small-scale farms are those that produce a diverse range of products for local markets and that conserve and enhance the productive quality of the land. The MST has adopted this sustainable model (called an "agro-ecology" model) as its goal for all MST settlers, though both the organization and the settlers themselves recognize that most settlements are far from realizing this vision. Some settlements, however, have already become successful models of organic and agro-ecological production.

Take Action....Support the MST!

Join the growing network of Friends of the MST, working together with the Landless Workers Movement (MST) since 1997.

- ☒ Visit the website: www.mstbrazil.org
- ☒ Receive Updates and Urgent Action Alerts via our listserve.
- ☒ Host an MST representative in your area.
- ☒ Volunteer to translate Portuguese to English.
- ☒ Get involved in the Nourish the New Brazil Campaign (www.nourishnewbrazil.org), working in conjunction with national mobilization in Brazil around the Zero Hunger Campaign to end hunger now and forever through real agrarian reform and sustainable agriculture.

For more information on the MST, contact: **Friends of the MST**, c/o Global Exchange, 2017 Mission Street, #303, San Francisco, California 94110 (415) 255-0795

Learn more about land reform at the websites of the Land Research Action Network (LRAN), www.landaction.org, and the Global Campaign for Agrarian Reform, www.foodfirst.org/action/cgar.

The MST has also played a significant role in redefining the debate over the fate of the Brazilian Amazon, insisting from the very beginning that agrarian reform on existing agricultural land is the solution for Brazil's rural poor, and that expansion of the frontier into forested land is not. Within the Amazon itself, the MST endeavors to stabilize agricultural settlements through the practice of agro-ecological and agro-forestry models that end or reduce the need for settlers to clear new ground.

A More Promising Future Has Arrived

The MST is one of a larger set of social movements that arose against a brutal but tottering military dictatorship in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Among the other movements was a "new unionism" led by Luis Inácio ("Lula") da Silva of the Brazil-

ian Metal Workers' Union. Lula and his cohorts founded a new national labor confederation and a new political party, the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, or PT). Lula and the newly militant unions supported the MST from the beginning and vice versa. There have been some divergent views among the MST, Lula, and the dominant faction of the PT over the years. Nonetheless, Lula's inauguration as the President of Brazil on January 1, 2003 almost certainly means that the MST will for the first time enjoy a more active and sympathetic response from government than it has at any other time in its history. The kind of financial and technical support agrarian reform settlers need will also most likely be more forthcoming.

However, there is strong international pressure on the Lula government (as on those of many other countries) to promote

large-scale, export-oriented agriculture. In this context, it's important that the MST maintain one of its core strengths: its policy of independence from its allies, which include indigenous peoples movements, church organizations, unions, and political parties like the PT. Its clarity of purpose and structural independence from these groups will stand the movement in good stead whatever the policies of the Lula government.

The future is brightening a bit for Brazil's poor and landless, and most MST settlers would agree that today more than ever, "now is the time." But they would also agree that they are just beginning to take a second step on the long journey of constructing a genuinely egalitarian Brazil.

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