



## The Brazilian crisis and the land struggle

Rosa M Cañadell

One of the world's biggest countries, Brazil is riddled with social and economic contradictions. On the one hand, it has a sizable industrial sector and rich agricultural and maritime resources, as well as tropical jungles and broad rivers. On the other hand, it is a country of multimillionaires and extreme poverty: 10 per cent of the population receive 51 per cent of the national income, while half receive only 12 per cent. Children idly roam the streets, and slums continue to grow in its great cities.

According to MST leaders, land ownership is the root of all the country's injustices. One per cent of the population owns 45 per cent of all the agricultural land. The twenty biggest proprietors own fifteen million hectares. Only sixty million of the country's 360 million hectares of land resources are cultivated: the rest is reserved for speculation. The great latifundios (plantations) are mainly involved in production for export—coffee, soya etc.—while agricultural products for internal consumption have to be imported and sold at prices that put them out of reach of the bulk of the population. Work conditions in the big plantations, with their own laws and private police, are absolutely feudal. Labour rights don't exist, salaries are pitiable and living conditions deplorable. All of this has forced thirty million of the rural poor to emigrate over the last twenty years to the great cities, where all they can expect is marginalisation and grinding poverty.

### The Movimiento de los Sin Tierra (MST)

In 1985, in Curitiba (Paraná state), various groups fighting for land came together, helped by the Comisión Pastoral de la Terra (Pastoral Land Commission), and decided to form a movement which would unite and articulate all of the struggles of the peasants for land. So was born the MST (Movement of the Landless). Under the slogan "Ocupar, resistir y producir" (Occupy, resist and produce), the MST organises landless peasants to occupy lands not in cultivation.

To this end, they are able to organise between 300 and 3,000 families in groups which, having decided the zone, the day and the hour, take collective possession of the land. The next step is to defend it. Sometimes gunmen appear on the scene, sometimes the army. The peasants don't have arms, but they defend themselves with their work tools and, if necessary, abandon the lands. Sometimes they lose their lives—the El Dorado dos Carajás massacre in 1996, which left seventeen dead, being a case in point. The families establish their encampment and begin a process which finishes, ideally, in the legalisation of the occupation. The Brazilian constitution recognises a right that unproductive land be "susceptible to agrarian reform", that is, distributed. "Occupation is one way to put in practice the constitutional mandate to bring about agrarian reform and to ensure that lands carry out their social function," writes MST leader Joao Pedro Stedile in his book *La Lucha por le tierra* (The Fight for the Land). Once the occupations have been legalised, something that does not always happen, settlements are organised. Those who have 'conquered' the land decide on all questions relating to its use: how to distribute it, how to work it, where to build houses, the school, etc. It is a democratic, collective, participative process. The political line of the MST favours the development of collective production, but the ultimate decisions lie with the men and women who have settled the land.

At present more than 1,500 settlements have been legalised, comprising 350,000 families in a total of seven million hectares, which they have the right to use and the obligation to conserve (but not to own, as their land is the property of the state). There are at present four hundred peasant associations, and over eighty production co-operatives have been formed. In the meantime, 16,000 families are in encampments awaiting legalisation of occupied land.

### **Land, agrarian reform and a more just society**

Seizure of the land is one of the basic objectives of the MST, but its fight does not stop there. The land problem can only be solved when an agrarian reform comes about which gives all the landless access to land, together with state planning and support. All of this implies fundamental change in property relations and, therefore, in the country's economic and political model. A more just society is the ultimate aim of this movement. To this end, it not only occupies lands, but organises the men and women of the countryside, educates its young, founds co-operatives, demonstrates along with other sectors and forms alliances with other social movements: the Sin Techo (Without a Roof), indigenous Brazilians, women, unemployed, trade unions, small agricultural proprietors, etc.

The MST combines three basic elements which are what make it different in a new and hopeful way.

On the one hand, it solves concrete problems *here and now*. Not needing to wait to gain power in order to carry out its promises (as usually occurs with most political parties), it fights by direct action: occupying land and thereby making it possible for those who were excluded to have food, work and education.

In this way it demonstrates that another way of organising life, in regard to property, production and community, *is possible*. Collective property, co-operative production and the democratic and participatory organisation of the community are yielding highly positive results. According to a recent study of the settlements by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, peasant farmers who are beneficiaries of land occupation earn three times more than before, illiteracy has been eliminated, infant mortality greatly reduced, and opportunities for youth in the settlements are greatly expanded by the technical, professional and political education they are offered in them.

Finally, once the objective of founding one settlement has been achieved, the MST keeps on looking for new land in order to settle new rural men and women. A part of the product of those already settled serves to support new occupations, and the experience of some helps the organisation of others in one huge circle of solidarity which makes sense of the new slogan: *Agrarian reform is everybody's business*.

### **Lula's government and social disenchantment**

Even if the MST isn't linked organically to any political party, the movement clearly stood four years ago with the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores, Workers' Party) and contributed actively to the election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva – known popularly as Lula – as president of Brazil in 2002. Lula was one of the defenders of the agrarian reform, and in his electoral campaign promised extensive social reforms in favour of Brazil's poorest. However, after four years, the assessment of his performance by all social movements, including the MST, is totally negative. This is so not only because he has failed to deliver on his promises or solve any of the structural problems which beset the country (hunger, poverty, unemployment, repression, illiteracy etc.) but because these four years have seen the dissolution and demobilisation of most of the social movements. This was a result of confidence in the new government which

impelled the movements to act cautiously and not attack the Lula government and, on the other hand, because many leaders went to work within the state apparatus and so abandoned the struggle.

Hopes in the new government were misplaced, and in those four years, Lula has basically continued to apply the pre-existing economic model, including payment of the external debt at exorbitantly high rates of interest, with a fiscal deficit greater than that of the previous avowedly neo-liberal regime of Cardoso. The result of these policies has been a reduction in the amount of money which could have been invested in areas of social concern, in infrastructure and in agrarian reform. And so unemployment has increased and workers' incomes have clearly declined, including that of the poorest sectors of the population. In 1980 workers' income accounted for 50 per cent of the country's GNP; now it accounts for 36 per cent. Four million families live without any remuneration at all, 350,000 of those in Sao Paulo. Half of the unemployed are under 25 years of age, and only 35 per cent of youth aged between 15 and 17 have graduated from school. Lack of hope in their future is one of the causes of the upsurge of violence, especially in the big cities like Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. In 1990 the number jailed in Sao Paulo was 23,000; in 2006 it is 155,000.

In the matter of agrarian reform, there have been no changes. The promises made to the social movements, and signed by Lula, to settle 450,000 families have not been carried out. Instead, dependency on agricultural exports has continued, along with large-scale cultivation of transgenic crops. Hence the linked problems of landlessness and hunger still await resolution. Lula's flagship programme was "zero hunger", and to accomplish it agrarian reform was to be the main key. However, this programme has been reduced to a purely welfare level, with 'family aid' reaching a tiny part of the most socially excluded, but failing utterly to address the underlying problem or offer the remotest hope for the future of these people.

The reality is that Lula has allied himself with the financial elites and put the claims of the social movements which had supported him to one side. The profiteers, bankers, national and international creditors and the speculators are the only ones who would assess his performance positively. For them, his government has been excellent.

In spite of all of this, Lula won the last presidential elections. All opinion polls pointed towards this result, which was also expected by the various social organisations. "Lula is the most hated and the most loved," one MST leader told me before the elections, "and he'll get the vote of the broad masses." Apart from him, there was no better option. Nobody at present in Brazil offered an economic and social project which would have been viable for the least favoured classes.

In this context, the social movements in general, and the MST in particular, have opted for the "reconstruction and remobilisation" of society. This has nothing to do with discussing candidacies. Rather it has to do with advancing ideas for a new political project, and taking advantage of elections in order to debate democracy and the importance of organisation and struggle to the various movements. Alliances between the urban, rural and indigenous movements in order to unite and widen pressure on governmental institutions to get them to move towards the solution of their problems are seen as a way forward. The hopes of the poor are not in Lula. They are in the social movements which helped to make Lula (and which Lula helped to construct).

*Red Banner 27*  
March 2007