

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE LANDLESS WORKERS MOVEMENT AND THE LULA GOVERNMENT

A EXPERIÊNCIA DO MOVIMENTO DOS TRABALHADORES SEM-TERRA E O GOVERNO LULA.

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Abstract:

Based on fieldwork carried out in Southern Brazil, this article analyses the achievements, difficulties and contradictions of the MST's alternative project. It identifies the organizational structure of the MST as a major factor explaining the success of the movement. It highlights that mobilization and pressure on the state have also been instrumental to land distribution and the development of its settlements. It thus looks at the strategy that the MST had adopted towards participation in institutional politics and its alliance with the Workers Party in Southern Brazil and argues that this strategy and alliance will most likely change because of President Lula's cabinet composition and policy orientation.

Keywords: MST, land concentration, struggle for land, camps, settlements, organizational structure, mobilization, state, institutional politics, PT, Lula government

Resumo:

Baseado no trabalho de campo realizado no Sul do Brasil, este artigo analisa as realizações, dificuldades e contradições do projeto alternativo do Movimento Sem-Terra (MST). Identifica a estrutura organizacional do MST como a grande responsável pelo sucesso do movimento. Destaca a mobilização e as pressões sobre o Estado têm sido também meios úteis para a distribuição de terra e do desenvolvimento dos assentamentos. Observa a estratégia que o MST tinha adotado em relação à participação na política institucional e sua aliança com o Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) no Sul do Brasil, e questiona que esta estratégia e aliança mudarão, provavelmente, por causa da composição do gabinete e da orientação política do Presidente Lula.

Palavras-chave: MST, concentração de terra, luta pela terra, assentamentos, estrutura organizacional, mobilização, Estado, política institucional, PT, governo Lula.

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Resumen

Este artículo se basa en un trabajo de campo realizado en el sur de Brasil y analiza los logros, las dificultades y las contradicciones del proyecto alternativo del MST. Se identifica la estructura organizativa del MST como el factor principal que explica el éxito del movimiento. Se subraya que la movilización y la presión sobre el Estado por parte del MST han hecho posible la distribución de tierra y el desarrollo de los asentamientos. Por ende, el artículo se enfoca en la estrategia que el MST ha adoptado en cuanto a su participación en la política institucional y su alianza con el Partido de los Trabajadores en el sur de Brasil y argumenta que esta estrategia y alianza muy probablemente cambiarán debido a la composición del gabinete y de la orientación política del gobierno del Presidente Lula.

Palabras clave: MST, concentración de tierra, lucha por la tierra, campamentos, asentamientos, estructura organizativa, movilización, Estado, política institucional, PT, gobierno Lula

Introduction

This year, the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Landless Workers' Movement, MST) is celebrating 20 years of existence. In these 20 years, 221 571 families have gained access to land and a decent standard of living through participation in the movement. Currently, there are 112 656 families in 629 MST camps throughout Brazil (Carvalho, 2003: 8) preparing to occupy land which the state has the constitutional responsibility of distributing. Throughout these years, the MST has not only organized the struggle for land but has also taken on numerous tasks that go from child and adult education, to provision of basic health care, to training educators, agronomists, administrator of co-operatives and health care provider. Because of its results, its organizational strength and its activism in Brazilian politics, the MST is probably one of the most important and successful peasant movements in Latin America.

This article will present some of the findings of my three months fieldwork in Southern Brazil in 2003, where I visited MST camps and settlements¹. I will look at different aspects of the struggle of landless families organized in the MST, from the

¹ The MST's struggle for land has two stages. First, landless families temporarily live and prepare themselves for land occupation in camps (*acampamentos*) on the fringes of federal roads nearby *latifundios* subject to expropriation. Second, once these families win the land they occupied, they establish a permanent settlement (*assentamento*), divided in family or common lots, common area and buildings (school, health care clinic, co-operative, etc.). The people involved in land occupations are referred to as *acampados* and *acampadas* while settlers are referred to as *assentados* and *assentadas*.

In the 1940's and 1950's president Getulio Vargas tried in two occasions to incorporate rural workers in the corporatist state system but did not attempt to infringe further on the interests of the landed class with an agrarian reform (Houtzager, 1998: 137). It was only in 1963 that his successor, João Goulart, managed to codify rural labour rights within the Rural Worker Statute (*Estatuto do Trabalhador Rural*), but this time also promised an agrarian reform. It was opposed by the São Paulo oligarchy that, with other sectors of the Brazilian ruling class, sponsored the military coup of 1964 (Welch, 1999; Houtzager, 1998). During the military dictatorship, an authentic agrarian reform was cast aside in favour of a project of modernization of the countryside subordinated to the shift in the economic model. Agricultural production would be subordinated to the search for a new comparative advantage of Brazil in the world market. This new strategy led to the encouragement of mono-crops exports, the development of agro-business and the concentration of agricultural production (Maybury-Lewis, 1994; Scherer-Warren, 1988). The project called for the generalization of capitalist relations in the countryside and, at the beginning, was centred on the Land Statute (*Estatuto da Terra*) that was suppose to promote capitalist enterprise over *latifundio* as the privileged form or rural property (Houtzager, 1998). The *Estatuto da Terra* incorporated articles permitting the expropriation of rural properties that did not fulfill their social function, i.e. that were not put to productive use or that did not provide employment. It also established maximum size for landholdings and conservation criteria (Wright-Wolford, 2003: 35). But these clauses of the *Estatuto da Terra* remained without effect almost for the whole duration of the military dictatorship.

This modernization policy really took off after 1968 with heavily subsidised credits and below the market interest rates for agricultural production (Houtzager, 1998, as well as fiscal incentives to any company that invested in land (Cardim, Vieira and Viégas, 2003: 23). One of the consequences of these measures were that landowner used the money for many other purposes, including speculation, rather than agricultural production (Guimarães, 1982: 310-313). Another unforeseen consequence has been that large national and transnational corporations, the great majority of them not even from the agricultural sector, own large extensions of land² and have accentuated land

² A decade ago, a study that looked at the 46 largest *latifundios* in Brazil and grouped them by economic sector, found that companies from the financial sector owned 22, 133, 342 hectares of land, those from the industrial sector 19,991,211 hectares and those from the agricultural sector 6,277,169 hectares. In all these cases, the percentage of cultivated land in relation to the whole property remained very low: 17.16% for

concentration. In only 9 years, from 1967 to 1978, the amount of land in the hands of the largest landowners (top 5 per cent of all land owners) went from 65.3 per cent of all land to 71.6 per cent (Sparovek, 2003: 20). Simultaneously, another consequence of this modernization on Brazilian agriculture was its increased mechanization and the growth of cattle ranching, which in both cases diminish drastically the need for labour. Thus, between 1960 and 1980, 28 millions rural workers and peasants were expelled from the countryside (Sparovek, 2003: 24) to the major cities of Brazil, that in turn were unable to provide employment for these new comers.

Land distribution gradually began only with the democratic opening in 1983, when rural workers were in a better position to organize and pressure the state to implement an agrarian reform. In 1985, democratic forces victorious in the elections modified the Constitution to allow the expropriation of unproductive *latifundios*, but ever since, the state has preferred to distribute federal and state land or colonize the Amazon in order not to confront the privileges of the large private and corporate landowners. Few specialists agree on the numbers regarding land distribution. A recent FAO study (Sparovek, 2003: 2) mentions that 458 483 families were settled from 1985 to 2001. According to other sources, if we extend the period to the end of Cardoso's presidency (2002), land would have been distributed to 710 255 families. Sarney would have settled 90 000 families, Collor and Franco 35 6000 and Cardoso in his two terms (1995-2002) would have settled 584 655 families (Andrioli, 2003). The actual numbers seem to be closer to the first account. Indeed a recent independent study of the University of São Paulo requested by Cardoso's agrarian reform minister concluded that his government would have actually settled 328 000 families. Moreover, 67 per cent of the settlements projects were located in what is called the "Legal Amazon", making them more colonisation projects than agrarian reform projects by way of expropriation of large *latifundios*. Hence, land concentration was not reduced in the 1990's. On the contrary, according to statistics from the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA)—the federal agency responsible for agrarian reform—, the total amount of land in the hands of the 26 000 largest landowners passed from 80, 128 million hectares at the beginning of the decade to 178 million at the end of Cardoso's administration (Stédile in Amaral, 2003: 6).

Finally, the current context of neoliberal globalization, representing a new phase in properties owned by the financial sector, 18.12% for those of the industrial sector and only 14.42% for those

the expansion of the logic of capital to all spheres of life, is also having consequences on land concentration and agrarian reform. Within this movement, property relations play a crucial role, which diminishes the possibility for a profound agrarian reform in Brazil. The agenda pushed by business sectors and supported by states is to pass from national regimes of private property rights limited by a series of social and political prerogatives, to homogeneous regimes of absolute private property rights with little or no restrictions. The fact that all major commercial agreements (NAFTA, APEC, FTTA, WTO, etc) include clauses regarding investment rights is a case in point. The objectives of these clauses are to legally limit the intervention of the state, especially in respect its expropriation right, and to guarantee the absolute liberty and security for private property in whatever sphere of activity. Obviously, absolute private property rights in land represent a crucial element in this expansion of the logic of capital, for it is the physical basis for any type of natural resource exploitation. A traditional agrarian reform, based on the notion of social rights, social tenancy or state interventionism, is at odds with this objective. In fact the current trend with regard to land is toward the privatization and de-collectivization of land tenancy so as to push for the complete commodification of land. The underlying assumption behind this view is that only the generalization of private property in land can attract investments in the countryside, as long as private property enjoys enough legal guarantees of non-expropriation. To this respect, it is revealing that the current “market-friendly agrarian reforms” all favour the purchase of land over expropriation of *latifundios* or distribution of state properties (Bernstein, 2002). Not surprisingly, during his presidency, Cardoso distributed land through a World Bank financed project called *Banco da Terra*, where landowners freely sold land at market prices directly to landless rural workers or small farmers, who benefited from credits from the federal government (Martins, 2000: 37-38).

In sum, the MST struggle for land distribution, agrarian reform and democratization of society and the economy confronts centuries of entrenched power interests based on land concentration³, a recent trend of free market modernization of agriculture, and a global context of expansion of absolute property rights.

of the agricultural sector (Júlio José Chiavenato cited by Robles, 1998: 152).

³ The GINI index on land distribution kept increasing throughout the twentieth century. It went from 0.798 in 1920 to 0.826 in 1940, to 0.836 in 1960 to 0.857 in 1980. It is only in 2001, with 0.802, that it came back to level similar to that of the beginning of the century (Hoffman in Sparovek 2003: 20).

According to the great majority of studies, regardless of the methodologies used, poverty was reduced in the 1970's. However, studies that determine the poverty line around food baskets that take into consideration regional variations and distinguish between rural and urban areas, agree that poverty has not dropped but grown since 1980. A ECLA study evaluated that the poverty level remained constant at 45% of the population between 1979 and 1987, while another conducted by M.C Romão observed that it was highly fluctuant but on the rise starting from 24% in 1980, increasing to 42% in 1983, dropping again to 28% in 1986 and rose again to 35% in 1987 and 39% in 1988 (Rocha, 1997:11). These results were confirmed by another recent study requested by the International Labour Organization (ILO) that show poverty levels dropping significantly from 39.9% in 1970 to 24.4% in 1980, but then fluctuating between 41.9% in 1983 to 28.4% in 1986 to 35.9% in 1987 to 39.3% in 1988 (Singer, 1997). During the 1980's, this fluctuation coupled with a declining tendency was also perceivable in the real income of poor sectors of the population who by 1990 had seen their real income drop by 17% (Singer, 1997). The last decade has not been very different as the level of real unemployment in metropolitan areas has been on the rise. It was at 8.7% in 1989, 14.2% in 1994, 18.3% in 1998 and 19.5% in 1999 (Matoso, 2000: 13).

In this context, the struggle for land in Brazil, like in many other parts of the underdeveloped world, represents a popular response to the growing fragmentation of work and insecurity of the informal economy⁵ that puts the question of social reproduction of labour at the centre of the struggle (Bernstein, 2004). In other words, in the era of globalization, the struggle for land by popular classes is gradually becoming one of the ways to simply secure social reproduction. In the case of the MST, this is perceivable in the growing numbers of *favelados* (shantytown inhabitants), with no personal rural background, joining the movement⁶.

For MST's landless, the laws and the constitutional articles that permit expropriation of unproductive *latifundios* are not necessarily what justified their right to land. Its justification is much more anchored on a moral and political claim than a legal one. The

⁵ In 1990, 82.73% of the occupied rural population worked in the informal sector, while this sector provided work to 48.65% of the occupied urban population (Singer, 1997).

⁶ In the camp "Following Rose's Dream" in Julho de Castilho, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, camp representatives mentioned that 30 per cent of the inhabitants of the camps was of urban origin and without personal ties to rural life. According to an organizer of camp "Zumbi dos Palmares" in Pantano Grande in Rio Grande do Sul, this proportion reached 80 per cent of all camps inhabitants.

someone else's will, of being treated as an object and not as a person came back again and again. Gaining land rights was thus presented as a way out of the humiliation of unemployment and marginalization and was seen as a way to take their destiny into their own hands. Land is thus a way of regaining human dignity, associated with a productive life and also a demand for integration to a more just Brazilian society.

The Organizational Structure of the MST and the Making of its Militancy

A recent article (Wolford, 2003b) argues that the MST capacity to maintain high levels of participation is due to its ability to create an "imagined community" organized around ideas, practices, symbols, slogans and rituals; and, more importantly, to its ability to remain an effective mediator between the state and settlers. Although these factors lead to high levels of participation within the MST, I argue that this participation also derives from the maintenance of an organizational structure that encourages participation and creates not only an "imagined community" but real concrete "autonomous rural communities", which are easier to mobilize than the membership of other organizations.

Understanding the struggle for land in terms of universal human rights and humanistic values that establish limits to the capitalist functioning of the economy is probably the first step in the process of political consciousness of landless rural workers envisioned by the MST. But it is through the actual everyday experiences and practices in the camps and land occupations that landless families are transformed into an organized force of the poor. The occupation period constitutes a period of ultra-politicization (Romano, 1994) of everyday life, because almost all aspects of camp members' lives are dealt with through participation in different types of committees. In this regard the MST differs from many other organizations. Unlike what happens in many social movements, membership in the MST is not a part time activity. Being a *sem terra* means not only to be part of an organization but more importantly to live during a relatively long period of time in a community with its own norms, values, and objectives. This feeling of "belonging" to a community of *sem terra* takes form gradually through participation within the organizational structure of a camp and the movement in general.

The *núcleo* (nucleus), made of 10 to 15 families is the most basic unit of discussion and decision-making in a camp. These *núcleos* name representatives (always a man and

agrarian reform went to cover compensations and that this was due to the way tribunal handled land expropriation⁸.

Regardless of who is responsible for the lack of financial resources for agrarian reform and settlements, in their struggle to remain on the land, MST settlers are faced with a major challenge: having to create economic mechanisms that will generate secure sources of income.

The movement meets this challenge by securing in the first place the self-subsistence of its settlers. Where land is sufficiently fertile and allows for the cultivation of many types of agricultural produces, settlers are encouraged to reach this objective through the diversification of their production. In Southern Brazil, the great majority of settlers tend to combine production of a commercial crop, such as soy beans or wheat, with the cultivation of produces that constitute their basic diet such as beans, rice, maize and different kinds of tubercles. Most families also raise animals such as chickens and pigs and have a garden where they grow all kinds of vegetables. The many visits I made to settlements from different regions of São Paulo, Paraná and Rio Grande do Sul confirmed the result of the study conducted by Jurandir Zamberlam and Alceu Froncheti in the settlement Rincão de Ivaí in Salto de Jacuí in Rio Grande do Sul, which revealed that almost the totality of settler families had 3 meals a day and that their diet were much more varied than that of average peasant family (Zamberlam and Froncheti, 1997). But solving the problem of hunger is not sufficient to guarantee the subsistence of settler families. This is why the MST recommends to its members to choose a production that will guarantee a constant minimum income the whole year round, which becomes especially crucial between harvests. In the South, the great majority of families have invested part of the government loans for infrastructure (Procera) in the purchase of a few heads of cattle, mainly for milk production. This capacity for self-sufficiency is extremely important for settler families because the great majority of them are incapable of paying back their government loans due to the disadvantageous market prices for main commercial crops.

⁸ For example in 1997, out of the 900 million dollars spend on the agrarian reform, 830 million went to that purpose. In comparison, only 214 million went to credits for settlements (Sparovek, 2003: 28). One of the reasons for this has been the excessively high cost of compensations conceded by tribunal to landowners. For instance, in the North, compensations conceded by tribunals were 9.09 times higher than what INCRA had evaluated, in the North-East this proportion was 4.93, in the Centre-West 11.97, in the South-West 14.64 and South 1.2 (INCRA, 1999).

in Fazenda Primavera in Andradina in the state of São Paulo or in Fazenda Macali in Ronda Alta in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, where, after a few years, titles of usufruct were replaced by private property titles. This had negative consequences for the modification of traditional social relations in the countryside because the property titles facilitated the sale of lots or the rent to third parties and did not impede the process of concentration. For example, in Fazenda Macali I, out of the 70 original settler families in 1981, only 9 remained. In Fazenda Macali II, of the 38 original families, only 13 remained. Of these 25 lots sold, their owners occupied 6, the 19 remaining lots were property of absentee farmers⁹. The property titles, by commercializing the right to land in the settlements, impede the access to land to other landless families. In contrast, in the settlements where land was distributed through usufruct titles, the proportion of families that desisted, exchanged or illegally sold their lot is much lower. According to members of the MST, this proportion does not go over 10% of the settlers and, under the law, the exchange cannot be with someone that does not reside on their lot.

INCRA and the MST have realised the importance of impeding land concentration in the settlements and maintaining them open to the arrival of new landless families. Both have favoured usufruct titles over property titles. In respect to credit, for the MST, usufruct titles are even more convenient than property titles because they cannot serve as guarantee for a loan, protecting settlers from the possibility of losing their land in case of debt problems. In contrast, INCRA has recently modified its view in relation to land titles, offering settlers that have been settled more than ten years to replace their usufruct title for property titles. Considering the advantages of titles of usufruct rights, the MST has decided to oppose government's latest titling policy, seeing it as a way for the state to avoid its responsibility of assisting settlers (CONCRAB, 1998).

Opposition to the neoliberal orientation of recent state policies and political pressure for the implementation or improvement of particular programs have traditionally been characteristics of MST's political practice. This dual strategy has been possible because of the constant mobilization of its social base. But maintaining high levels of mobilization and participation in settlements is much more difficult to achieve than in camps. The first years of settlement are a continuity of the period of ultra-politicised period of occupation (Romano, 1994), but this period is only temporary because after that most of the

⁹ Information gathered during my fieldwork in June 2003.

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