

A Movement of Meaning:

Peasants Struggle for Land and Dignity in Brazil

BY JERLINA LOVE

The Landless Laborers' Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem-Terra or MST*) is the most important new social movement in contemporary Latin America with over 1.5 million participants. In Brazil, 1.6 percent of the landowners control roughly half of the land on which crops could be grown, and the MST is organizing nonviolently for land reform and a higher quality of living for the landless. So far the MST's land occupation struggle has gained re-appropriation of enough land to award more than 350,000 families land titles in 2,000 settlements. A further 180,000 encamped families currently await government recognition. In their effort to improve lives, the MST has worked to build cooperative living communities and farming communities, schools, and teacher training programs. Along with land occupation actions, these self-improvement projects are the backbone of the MST movement.

BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT

In Spring 1985, after 164 families won the titles to land in the southern Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, the MTS held its first national congress.

“The MST has vigorously struggled to persuade landowners to concede their unused land...and has achieved both land rights and rehumanization for the landless workers of Brazil.”

This event brought together 1,200 men and women from 23 states to build a vision and infrastructure for their new movement. At the conference, delegates laid out four basic goals: 1) to maintain a broadly inclusive movement of the rural poor; 2) to achieve agrarian reform; 3) to promote the principle that the land belongs to those who work on it and live from it; and 4) to create a just, egalitarian society and put an end to capitalism.

The MST, which is lead by poor and landless Bra-

zilians, has vigorously struggled to persuade landowners to concede their unused land through land occupations and has chosen to organize their resistance almost completely without violence. The movement has achieved both land rights and social rehumaniza-

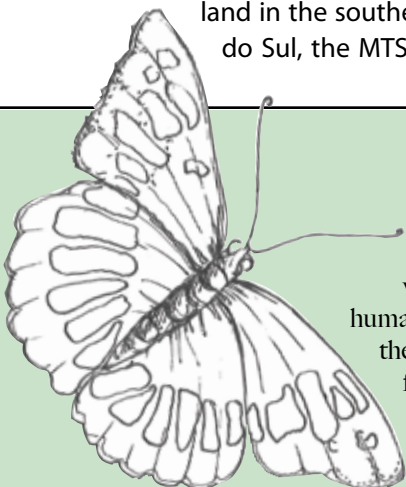


tion for the landless workers of Brazil. Brazilians of all classes are slowly beginning to recognize these masses of poor, landless people as inherently worthy. This is a significant step, considering Brazil's history of dehumanizing its poor, laboring class.

The MST is not the first organization to promote agricultural reform in Brazil but it has been the most successful. From 1950

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

Interconnectedness is an essential facet of life. This is a reality that is increasingly apparent in a world of globalization and climate change, where we must grapple with our perceptions of our place in the world as a species and our relationship to other life forms. Conventional knowledge is, for the most part, human-centric, but with a nonviolent worldview we can expand our knowledge to include our connection with the earth. For then we will see the humanity in all the intricate and interconnected parts of this earth. On the following pages we present you with an opportunity to contemplate your connection to a variety of different species.





Children at an MST camp, in the state of Minas Gerais .
(Photo by Joshua Thayer)

other country where people are eating lizards to survive.”

AWAKENING CONSCIOUSNESS

The MST has been fighting for land on behalf of those who have turned to stealing, selling cardboard and eating lizards to survive and has won against millionaire landlords in their struggle.

In the Amazon, where the devastation of settlers’ lives and the rainforest has been overwhelming, the internal transformation of activists has been critical in making the MST effective. In their book *To Inherit the Earth: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for a New Brazil* (2003), Angus Lindsay Wright and Wendy Wolford write,

“Their ability to make this stand [against deforestation and for land rights] will depend on the transformation of the larger society and of the people themselves... What Paulo Freire called conscientização, the awakening of consciousness, is surely the most important single thing in such an adaptive process... But it is not just the consciousness of... all the MST members in Brazil.... Humanity has to have its consciousness awakened...”

The MST has awakened both its members and sympathizers abroad to the sentience of the marginalized people, the significance of land reform and the value of the environment.

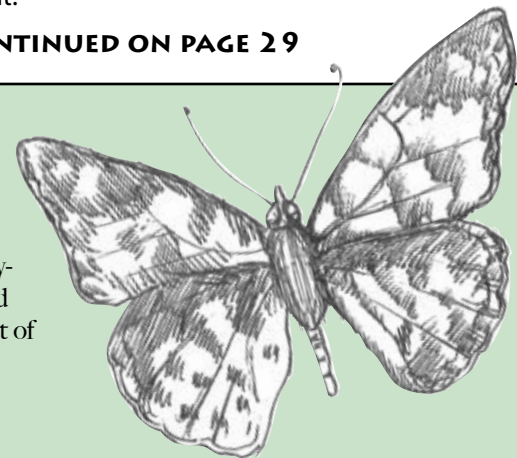
Fundamentally related to the development of this internal change is the MST’s promotion of co-operatives. Co-operative farms, living communities, credit unions and dairy plants have functioned as both a source of community building and economic efficiency. On several farms MST members have placed their houses together creating agrovilas and cultivate the land co-operatively. MST leaders believe co-ops and collective work are essential to “promote Christian and socialist values.” Co-ops also relieve farmers from the isolation they experienced as uprooted landless workers. Co-operatives are considered to be a form of what Gandhi called “constructive program,” or internal improvement.

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SPECIAL REPORT

The Butterfly Effect

“The idea of ‘the butterfly effect’ comes from the science of chaos theory. It suggests that everything is connected, to the extent that the beating of a butterfly’s wings in one part of the world may ultimately contribute to a tornado happening in another part of the world. It strikes most of us as a fanciful notion – but it is more true than we realise, particularly when it comes to the environment.” – *Worldvision Australia*



MST IN BRAZIL CONTINUED FROM P. 5

In *The Search for a Nonviolent Future* (2004) Michael Nagler elaborates:

“The central projects [of Constructive Programs] sought to weave back into the community the economically depressed, marginalized, or rejected, using the simple but potent concept of heart unity.”

While the MST seeks to develop “heart unity” — a form of unity among people that also celebrates their diversity — this has been a challenge at times because of the intense individualism that has developed as a survival strategy for the rural poor. Also, some sem-terra believe that land acquisition is a form of freedom and they do not want to take on the obligation of building community, unity or solidarity. Nevertheless, the MST has continued to promote agrovilas and various other kinds of co-operatives to create the unity and self-transformation among its members that enables the movement to be effective and sustainable.

CIVIL OBEDIENCE?

The MST has not only struggled to maintain their unity, they have also struggled with their commitment to nonviolence during their direct actions. During land occupations, police and hired gunmen often harass MST members. While their response to such harassment is generally free of violence, it is not always the case. Also, when the MST’s requests for land are not granted by the courts, they remove their settlements instead of continuing their struggle for justice “illegally.” Because of the mixed commitment to nonviolence among MST members when confronted by authorities as well as the decision not to engage in civil disobedience in the face of unjust court orders, we can only wonder how much more MST would accomplish with a more sophisticated and concrete “obstructive program” (nonviolent direct action to resist oppression). The MST’s constructive programs are dynamic and significant but the obstructive programs so far have failed to demonstrate the same sort of traction.

For the MST, the use of nonviolence has in many cases “succeeded” in getting land throughout Brazil redistributed and in improving the lives of MST members — but not in every case. In 2005, the MST lost a legal battle in Para, which left 10,000 homeless, and more than 64 people died in the struggle. But ultimately, the actions of the MST always work on a profound level by bringing to light the truths of interdependence and the value of life by planting seeds for the improvement of the lives of MST members and Brazilian society. They have triggered a social transformation where the poor are being rehumanized and empowered, while the wealthy are provided with opportunities to redistribute their land and improve the quality of life for everyone.

Jerlina Love is a graduate student in the African Diaspora Studies program at UC Berkeley with a love for peace, vegetables and dancing.

Resources:

MST: <www.mstbrazil.org>
Strong Roots (Raiz Forte): a documentary on the MST
Wright, Angus and Wendy Wolford. To Inherit the Earth: The Landless Movement and the Struggle for a New Brazil.
Oakland: Food First Books, 2003.

References:

1 Wright, Angus and Wolford, p. x 2 IBID, p.xv 3 IBID, p. 259-260 4 IBID, p. 86 5 IBID, p.183 6 <www.mstbrazil.org>