

The Landless Workers Movement

Report back from VI congress

May 2014



Photo: Nina Mida

Radical and inspiring, Brazil's Landless Workers Movement has changed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people since it was formed in the 1980s.

This year the movement marked its thirtieth anniversary with its sixth national congress in Brasília.

Sarah Reader attended on behalf of WDM, joining nearly 16,000 MST members and 200 international activists (mainly from other Latin American countries) to celebrate the movement's successes and learn about its new programme for 'popular agrarian reform'.

What is the MST?

With over 1.5 million members, the Landless Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra or MST) is Brazil's biggest social movement. It emerged as a response to the problem of land concentration in Brazil, where less than 3 per cent of the population owns two-thirds of the land and more than half of it lies unused.

Over 350,000 families now have legal ownership of small farms as a result of the MST's organising; but the movement goes beyond the simple redistribution of land. At the heart of the movement is the fight against the corporate takeover of food, and for a countryside which provides healthy food and a decent livelihood for all.

Occupying for change

Occupations of unused land have been a crucial part of the Landless Workers Movement struggle for agrarian reform. Some families spend more than ten years living in black polythene tents on a roadside, risking violence from police and armed guards. But the strategy has worked because the occupations force the government to enact a clause in the Brazilian constitution which allows land which is not performing its social function to be expropriated.

From polythene tents to settlements

Once the land has been expropriated, it becomes a legally recognised settlement and the MST activists are able to move onto the land and start building houses and farming. Although ecological farming and collective organising are part of the MST's vision for social change and it educates its



Photo: Ninja Media

Young members of the movement campaign against the closure of schools in the countryside at the Ministry of Education during the VI congress

members on the benefits of these, it does not impose this at a local level. MST members organise the struggle for their land themselves and have the right to farm it as they see fit.

The camp is the movement's struggle – through occupying, people break away from cultural norms, society and tradition and come together in the fight for land.

Irma Brunetto, MST activist at VI congress

I visited a settlement that was established in 2002. As you approached the settlement, there was nothing to distinguish it from the farmland around it, except for the stories of the people living there and how they came to be on the land.

The family I visited decided to make their farm completely organic in 2010. They grow a wide range of crops and grow them interspersed in their plot of land. Walking around the large area of land, I was given passion fruit, banana, and cashew fruit to try. They also grew coffee beans, pumpkins, oranges and several other types of fruit and vegetables. They sold their produce at a weekly farmers' market and to a government agency which provides food to favelas and hostels for homeless people.

The diversity of the crops grown in MST settlements is significant in a country which is increasingly being taken over by the vast 'green deserts' of single cash crop plantations such as soya and sugar cane.

"There's no such thing as a well behaved social movement"

The MST has achieved its successes through direct action. In addition to the occupations of disused land, protests have targeted major corporations such as the pesticide giant Syngenta and biotech firm Monsanto. Occupations have also taken place in energy companies and government departments to push for the allocation of services to MST settlements.

The first priority once the land is won is the struggle for schools, then the road, energy, credit and housing. The struggle for the new society is a bigger struggle than getting the land. When the MST was set up, there wasn't a politics for agrarian reform, education in the countryside or electricity for rural populations. At Irma's settlement, they got electricity after six years, but only because they occupied the offices of energy companies to demand it.

The importance of using mobilisations to keep up the pressure on the Brazilian government was demonstrated midway through the congress.

After three years of having been refused a meeting with President Dilma Rousseff, less than 24 hours after 15,000 activists marched to the presidential palace Dilma met with the MST's national coordinating committee in her office.

Popular agrarian reform

With the rise in power of financial capital and multinational corporations, the nature of the MST's struggle has changed. It has evolved to call for more than the simple redistribution of land. At the heart of its struggle is the fight against the corporate takeover of food, and for a countryside which provides healthy food and a decent livelihood for all.

At the congress the MST launched its new programme for a popular agrarian reform, calling for a co-operative model of farming which is free from toxic pesticides and



An MST farmer cuts the sugar cane he has grown on his legally-recognised farm won through occupation.



The newly set up MST camp Sarah visited

genetically modified crops. Like many countries, rural Brazil is increasingly being taken over by the vast 'green deserts' of single cash crop plantations such as soya and sugar cane, and with this, an increase in the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. This type of agriculture does nothing to improve the lives of small-scale farmers, and it serves only to line the pockets of multinational corporations like Monsanto and pesticide giant Syngenta.

The challenges faced by the MST are faced by small-scale farmers everywhere. Right now, the UK government is playing a significant role in pushing this model of agriculture in Africa. Through G8 initiatives such as the New Alliance for Food Security and Nutrition, the government is helping large corporations like Unilever take control of land, resources and labour in Africa. This will open up Africa to landgrabs, GM, toxic pesticides, corporate control of seeds and cash crops for export.

Educating for social change

Just 70km out of São Paulo, in a quiet village and surrounded by countryside stands the Florestan Fernandes National School (ENFF). I spent a few days at the school after the congress for an international 'Friends of MST' meeting.

ENFF was built in five years by MST members, who were sent from the camps and settlements from all over Brazil. It was inaugurated in 2005, and in its first five years around 16,000 activists from Latin American and African social movements passed through the school. The school offers a wide range of courses, from political philosophy and the political economy of agriculture, to the social history of Brazil and practical training on ecological farming and political organising. The school's library houses over 40,000 books, all of which were donated by political groups from around the world.

The school also plays an important role in the MST's support for social movements around the world. The school is a base for the MST's international brigades – people who are either from countries such as Cuba, Venezuela, Haiti and Mozambique spending time in Brazil, or MST activists who are going to these countries for educational and labour exchanges.

A visit to a camp

We'd been driving for nearly an hour along a dirt track when the camp suddenly appeared from the gathering dusk. As we got out of the car a group came to meet us, pleased to have visitors and keen to show us what they had constructed on the roadside in just one month. Many of the structures were still being built, but eventually the camp aimed to house 25 families. Each family lived in a black polythene and bamboo tent which they had tried to make as homely as possible. They didn't know how long they would be living there. People had left homes and jobs in the city to join the camp and fight for their piece of land.

A few families were preparing dinner on hand-built wood burning stoves. In the distance Brazilian forró music was pumping out of the stereo of a parked car. The temperature was cooling as the evening set in, but it was hard to imagine what it must be like living in tents during Brazil's hot summers with temperatures of well over 35°C.

The camp I visited was in the state of São Paulo. The families were hoping the land would be expropriated quickly, as the landowner was keen to sell the land and the government agency responsible for land distribution, INCRA, was already negotiating with them. They could then move onto their land, build houses and start farming.



The dishwashing station at the MST's VI Congress

The ENFF has inspired the setting up of agroecological institutes in other countries in Latin America. To date, there are institutes in Venezuela, Paraguay, Ecuador and Nicaragua.

As well as educating and training adult members of the movement through ENFF, the MST has prioritised education of all ages at a local level. Over 1,800 schools for different ages have been set up in settlements and thousands of adults take part in literacy courses. Education and training are central to the movement, and they use this to address sexism and other sources of inequality and prejudice too.

Globalise struggle, globalise hope!

The MST's struggle has not been without bloodshed and abuse. Since the start, MST activists have faced violence from landowners, hired security and the police.

On 17 April 1996 at Eldorado dos Carajás, the state military police opened fire on a peasant demonstration, killing 19 people and wounding 69. The perpetrators were not brought to justice and the repression and killing of those involved in peasant struggles continues. The 17 April has become the International Day of Peasant Struggle, when people remember lives that have been lost around the world.

The MST has also suffered from an aggressive national media campaign against them and faced demonisation by the likes of major daily newspaper O Globo.

In response, solidarity groups have emerged in Europe and the US. These have been crucial in spreading the story of the MST to activists in other countries. This year members of the UK's Land Workers' Alliance and WDM delivered a copy of the MST's programme for a popular agrarian reform to the Brazilian embassy on 17 April. Similar actions took place in Spain, Italy and the US.

Solidarity is the cement that constructs our movement... We need it to confront transnational capital and agribusiness and fight for another model of agriculture

Diego Moreira, a member of the MST's national leadership, VI congress

Friends of MST groups are also involved in opposing corporate control in their countries. The lesson they've learnt from the MST is that another world is possible, but it won't come about without a struggle. As João Pedro Stedile, one of the MST's founders, said during the congress: "There's no such thing as a well behaved social movement."



A mural outside the Florestan Fernandes school

What can you do

- Spread the story of the MST and inspire others in your area. You could organise a film screening or talk.
- Denounce the impunity of those responsible for murdering members of the movement and counter the aggressive media campaign against the MST.
- Follow 'Friends of MST' Facebook page for updates
- Help keep the Florestan Fernandes school running – you can donate at www.mstbrazil.org



Further reading

Cutting the Wire: The Story of the Landless Movement in Brazil by Sue Branford and Jan Rocha – a good overview of the origins and challenges of the movement, written in 2002

Friends of MST website: www.mstbrazil.org

ENFF – a school in the making – a 15 minute film about the Florestan Fernandes national school. Contact activism@wdm.org.uk to order a copy

Take action

To find out how you can support the Landless Workers Movement and campaign locally in your area, contact activism@wdm.org.uk



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World Development Movement, 66 Offley Road, London SW9 0LS
t: 020 7820 4900 e: wdm@wdm.org.uk w: www.wdm.org.uk