

Brazil's MST

Quiet revolution on the land

The well-known US philosopher and political activist Noam Chomsky has labelled the MST as “the world’s most important social movement”. **Shawn Hattingh** traces the development of this extraordinary landless workers movement and shows how its non-hierarchical structures have become a real threat to Brazil’s capitalist elite.

On almost every day for the last 25 years something remarkable has taken place in Brazil: somewhere in the country capitalist relations have been broken and turned upside down.

However, it has not been a guerrilla organisation or party cadreship that has been doing this. It has rather been thousands of groups of families and individuals that have come together through a unique platform, the MST (The Landless Workers of Brazil). These families have not been armed with guns, nor have they stormed parliament to seize state power and declare a workers’ government. Rather, they have been armed with spades and the only thing they have stormed is unused land.

At first glance, small groups of families occupying unused land may not appear to be very revolutionary or a major threat to capitalism. Yet, when you come to realise what the MST have been up against and what they have achieved, then you start to

believe that indeed groups of families and individuals are creating a revolution. Through the MST hundreds of thousands of people in Brazil are creating another world, which is defined by meeting people’s needs and not making profits.

BORN IN FIRES OF HISTORY

Brazil’s history, like most countries in the South, has been plagued by conquest and colonialism. The legacy that this left in Brazil is that a mere 3% of the population owned 70% of the arable land. Even worse than this, much of this land lies unused and is simply held by the rich for speculative purposes.

Even the land that is productive is not used to meet the country’s food needs. Rather land is used to meet the demand for beef, sugar and soy in Europe and North America. So while the elite own vast tracks of land, 25 million people in Brazil have no access to land. Furthermore, with food flowing out

of the country chronic malnutrition haunts the lives of Brazil’s poor.

By the early 1980s, however, people had started resisting this unjust system. By this time, thousands of land invasions had occurred in Brazil. Yet, these actions were mostly isolated from one another, and it proved easy for the state to deal with them. As a consequence, a group of activists who were influenced by liberation theology decided to organise an assembly in 1984 to bring together representatives of the people that had been involved in land invasions.

Part of the aim of the assembly was for people to share their experiences and to debate whether there was a need to form a movement to fight for agrarian reform. A few hundred landless people attended the assembly and decided that a movement should be formed to fight for land redistribution using further land occupations. The participants, however, felt that the movement should be independent from political parties, trade unions and the church and that it should be directed collectively by the participants themselves.

The participants also decided that seizing state power to bring about a ‘revolution’ was a failed model. Instead, the assembly decided that it was important to begin creating a new humane society through the movement’s actions and practices. With this, one of the most remarkable movements in history, the MST, was born.

MST FLOURISHES

Two and a half decades later, the MST has grown from a few hundred



MST meat workers on the Amazon Plateau.

people into a movement of over a million. Through the MST, thousands of groups of landless people from urban and rural areas have organised themselves to carry out collective occupations on unused land owned by the Brazilian elite.

MST people also use the country's constitution, which says that unused land can be redistributed, to pressurise the state to expropriate and hand over the occupied land to the MST. In this way, approximately 600 000 families involved in the MST have come to collectively acquire land. In all, the MST has occupied and won 35 million acres of land on which over 6 000 settlements have been built.

The MST land occupations are not just about attaining land, they are also used as a form of self education, which is aimed at transforming the people involved. The experience of collectively occupying land is used as a process to encourage new values of solidarity and selflessness.

Once people have occupied the land, a sense of solidarity is built through these people beginning to collectively farm to meet their own needs. So the occupied land, and the resulting production, is socialised. This solidarity economy, however, stretches beyond each occupied

parcel of land. The MST have established over 400 co-operatives that sell excess produce from collective farms to sympathisers overseas or in Brazil's cities. In this way, MST groups have created an alternative to the capitalist model.

The MST also collectively uses the money generated through the co-operatives, about \$50 million a year, to invest in social services for communities on the occupied lands. It is, however, the people involved in the MST that are trained to provide these social services to one another.

As part of this, each of the MST settlements has healthcare facilities that are run by community members. In this manner free healthcare is provided to everyone.

Added to this, the MST has established over 1 500 schools that provide free education to over 100 000 children. In each of the settlements there are also adult literacy classes. Recently, MST established a university, which provides tertiary education for free. Education is, therefore, central to the MST. It is aimed at encouraging the people to re-claim their dignity and develop confidence. Through this the people involved in the MST have come to realise that they are capable of creating a new non-capitalist society themselves.

NON-HIERARCHAL

The MST has fashioned a more equal system within the economic sphere, and it has also tried to create one within the political structures of the movement. The MST's structures are constructed to ensure that power within the movement remains at the base and is not centralised. The aim is to ensure that everyone involved in the movement can participate fully as equals.

The most important structures in the MST are the grassroots cells. Each cell consists of ten families. These cells are the power base of the movement.

In these cells people discuss the problems that are faced locally, nationally and internationally and they develop alternatives. This includes discussing issues around local production, the running of the settlement and the provision of social services. It also, however, includes debating and deciding on national campaigns aimed at international bodies such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Each cell makes use of facilitation skills to ensure that everyone participates. Each cell also elects two delegates, one man and one woman, who are mandated to take their cell's opinions, decisions and concerns to the next level of the MST, which are the brigades.

The MST brigades are made up of delegates from approximately 500 families or ten grassroots cells. The brigades are tasked with implementing the decisions and directions of the grassroots cells at a settlement level. Two delegates from each MST brigade, a man and a woman, are also elected to represent the brigade and hence the grassroots cells, at the next level of the movement, which are the state coordination levels.

Delegates at the state

coordination level are tasked with implementing the decisions of the grassroots cells at a state level. In turn, they also send delegates, based on a gender balance, to the national coordination level.

The national coordination level consists of 102 delegates from across Brazil. Their task is to implement the decisions of the grassroots cells at a national level. As such, their instructions come from the base of the movement. Such a structure, which allows for people's active participation, is aimed at ensuring that MST participants do not remain passive bystanders or foot soldiers that simply follow orders. Rather, the goal is for them to collectively shape their own destiny. Achieving this has perhaps been one of the MST's greatest successes, and sets it apart from any traditional political party or trade union in Brazil.

MST FACES REPRESSION

Due to its successes in achieving land redistribution, creating an alternative economy, and forging a new form of politics, the MST has faced a severe backlash from the Brazilian elite. This is because the elite view the MST as a massive threat to their interests.

In the past, and also in the present under President Lula's government, the MST has been subjected to widespread repression at the hands of the security forces. The landowning elite has also organised a paramilitary force to hound the MST. The result has been that over 1 500 MST activists have been murdered either by security forces or paramilitary thugs since 1984. Very few of these murders have been solved or brought to court.

The MST has not backed down. State repression, and paramilitary violence, has not deterred it. It has

continued to grow and has started to take on issues beyond land redistribution. Indeed, it has come to play a central role in resisting neo-liberalism and privatisation in Brazil.

More recently, it has been involved in confronting the Lula government's support for Monsanto, a company which promotes genetically modified crops, and which is attempting to acquire land for the biofuels industry. As part of this resistance, the MST has occupied Monsanto's buildings and land across Brazil.

As part of the MST's growth, it has come to play a major role internationally through its resistance to 'free' trade agreements and the WTO. Perhaps the high point of this resistance came in 2005, when the Bush administration was attempting to impose the Free Trade Areas of the Americas (FTAA) on Latin American governments at a Summit in Argentina. The MST played a key role in organising 50 000 activists from across Latin America to blockade the Summit. With the pressure from the protesters, the talks at the Summit collapsed and

Bush's dream of a free trade area stretching from Canada to Argentina was smashed.

CONCLUSION

The MST is one of the most vibrant social movements in the world. It has resisted free trade, neo-liberalism and inequality in Brazil and internationally. Through direct action, it has also ensured that land within Brazil has been redistributed.

Yet its greatest successes have been creating an economy based on solidarity along with implementing and practicing participatory politics within its own structures. Through this, people involved in the movement have reclaimed their own dignity, and have come to value notions of solidarity and equality. This has enabled people to collectively create a new society that moves beyond the misery of capitalism. In this way, the people in the MST have been creating a revolution every single day for the last two and a half decades. LB

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A woman resists state police who are using tear gas, riot gear and dogs while trying to expel 200 MST who had occupied unused land with bows and arrows.

Weird Pictures