



POPULAR AGRARIAN REFORM AND THE STRUGGLE FOR LAND IN BRAZIL



Dossier n° 27

Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research
April 2020

Cover photograph | March organised by the MST in 2018 to demand former President Luiz Inácio da Silva's release from jail. More than 5,000 landless workers marched over 50 kilometres in four days.
Júlia Dolce

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Today, 80,000 families who are members of the MST are living in encampments waiting to be granted their legal right to the land.
MST Archive

The land question is central to understanding political life and society in Brazil. The country has enormous landed estates, known as *latifundios*, which have their roots in the beginning of the Portuguese occupation of this part of South America at the start of the 16th century. The Portuguese seizure of this land and its conversion into large *latifundios* – together with the mono-cultivation of crops for export and the enslavement of human beings – established the roots of social inequality that persist to this day.

In 2017, the most recent census in Brazil showed that this structure of land inequality has not only remained in place over the years, but that land concentration has increased. Roughly 1% of landowners control almost 50% of the land in rural Brazil. Half of all rural landowners have holdings that are less than 10 hectares (a soccer field is about one hectare), but these holdings account for barely 2% of the total land. In other words, most holdings are enormous and are held by a small minority – the landowning elite.

The inequality in land ownership illustrates the scale of the expropriation that capitalism has engendered over the past centuries; it has had political, economic, social, and environmental consequences for Brazil's development. Land relations, which are expressive of a social order, are fundamental to shaping Brazil's inequality and its social potential. The idea of land encompasses not only territory but also people, natural resources and control over them, and development in its broadest sense.

On top of the archaic and unproductive *latifudios* have emerged the agribusiness behemoths. No longer is the struggle for land in Brazil

centred around the conflict over small parcels of land between the holders of *latifundios* and the poor peasants; it is now centred around the question of what Brazil's agricultural model should be. The giant agribusiness firms not only dominate enormous stretches of land, which they cultivate based on the principles of monoculture; they also poison nature, people, and animals with vast quantities of agrottoxins, leading Brazil to become the world's largest consumer of agricultural poisons. In contrast to this toxic approach to agriculture is the agroecological model, which is premised on a comprehensive system of production that puts human relationships at its core. In the agroecological model, the health, culture, recreation, and education of human beings is vital in the process of the production of agricultural goods. This model seeks to produce a range of healthy food, for instance, which must be grown in harmony with nature. The contest between toxic agribusiness and the agroecological model is at the centre of this dossier from Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research (São Paulo).

Key to the agroecological model is the concept of popular agrarian reform, which proposes the full-scale reorganisation of landholdings, and which will be discussed in this dossier. First, however, we will provide an overview of the history of the struggle for land in Brazil. This history is key to understanding the dynamic of the popular movements that have developed the class struggle against the toxic agribusiness model and in support of a coherent agroecological alternative. In the second part of the dossier, we will discuss an agrarian reform settlement organised by the Movement of Rural Landless Workers (MST), which paints a concrete picture of a different conception of and model for agrarian life.

This dossier is published in April due to the significance of this month for the struggle for land in Brazil. On 17 April 1996, in the state of Pará, the military police attacked and killed twenty-one landless rural workers and wounded sixty-nine others. The anniversary of what is known as the Massacre of Eldorado dos Carajás is now commemorated as the International Day of Struggle for Agrarian Reform. This story condenses the reality of land concentration, the impunity of landowners endorsed by the State, the extreme violence used against landless rural workers, the lack of a policy of agrarian reform, and the radicalisation of rural workers in their struggle for a dignified life. This dossier is our homage to the ongoing struggle for land.





The Peasant Leagues (*Ligas Camponesas*) were among the first organisations in rural Brazil to adopt agrarian reform as a political line. Their primary slogan was 'agrarian reform by law or by force'.

Artist unknown

Part I

The Struggle for Land in Brazil

The structure of landholdings in Brazil is rooted in the historical form of the *latifundio*. The concentration of private property in large estates has defined the capitalist relations of production for most of Brazil's history and has shaped the character of its dominant class.

In its classical form, capitalism emerges out of the violent separation of producers from their means of production in order to force them – on pain of starvation – to sell their labour power as a commodity. The emergence of capitalism as the dominant mode of production led to the greatest expropriation of the peasantry in history. Severed from the possibility of autonomously meeting their most basic human needs, the damned of the earth emerged at the factory gates and at the gates of the large landholders, selling their labour power for wages and producing goods so that the capitalist factory and farm owners could accumulate more and more profit. This process of disenfranchising and disciplining the workforce created the conditions for the development and consolidation of capitalism. The same kind of process took place in Brazil, where the capitalist class violently expropriated the peasantry as it sharpened its hold on the diverse range of arenas for accumulation, be it in the sphere of agriculture, industry, or finance.

This process of pillage erased the rich forms of cultural expression of the peasantry, denied them access to education and health as basic human rights, and destroyed their sovereignty, their self-determination as a people, and their sense of self-worth. In reaction to this, diverse processes of popular resistance developed in Brazil. All efforts of organised resistance were met with violence, including massacres and genocide. This story of violence, however, is largely erased from the history books.

Indigenous peoples would not accept the regime of slavery imposed by the Portuguese colonisers; they resisted, and their resistance was also met with extreme violence. It is estimated that of the 2.5 million indigenous people who lived in the area that the Portuguese would later call Brazil, by the 1600s less than 10% had survived the carnage. Despite a historiography that erases centuries of resistance, the struggle of the indigenous peoples left a residue of resistance in the Brazilian consciousness. It is impossible to forget the statement from the indigenous leader Sepé Tiaraju, who died as he said with great feeling, “This land has a keeper!”

The story of African resistance to enslavement, colonisation, and violence has also played a defining role in the shaping of Brazilian consciousness, history, and society. Roughly 4.9 million Africans were wrenched from their lands and brought to Brazil to be enslaved on the *latifundios*. No other country in the world – not even the United States – brought so many enslaved people to work the land. Not long after their arrival, Africans began to revolt, their voices echoing from hill to hill. Those who escaped from the agricultural plantations created *quilombos*, territories of freedom that

were organised collectively, where African cultural traditions could flourish. As the hegemony of slavery plantations declined in the early decades of the 19th century, *caboclos* – or Black and indigenous peasants – became the protagonists of struggles and revolts against large landholders. As in the *quilombos*, they took over authority and implemented popular governments in their villages and towns. But these assertions of popular authority did not escape the State-led assault that burnt down their villages, executed their leaders by firing squad, and crushed the gains made by the people.

The experience of these and hundreds of other struggles over the century matured and developed into deeper and stronger organisational forms, such as the Peasant Leagues (*Ligas Camponesas*) and the Landless Farmers' Movement (*Movimento dos Agricultores Sem Terra* or MASTER). These organisations advanced the struggle for agrarian reform and social transformation through land occupations and encampments between the 1940s and the 1960s. However, the military dictatorship that lasted for twenty-one years (1964–1985) destroyed these organisations, thereby emptying out the ability of workers to organise their power. It was only at the end of the 1970s and into the 1980s that workers were able to rebuild their organisations and to begin again to conduct struggles.



The MST embraced land occupations as their main method for building power. Once the land had been occupied, an encampment was created. When the land was won, the families would receive plots of land that would make up the settlement.

Sebastião Salgado

The Return of Popular Struggles

The military dictatorship was unsustainable, which enabled diverse sectors of society to begin to wage struggles against it. It was in this period that various political organisations of the working class emerged, notably the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* or PT) and the United Workers' Central (*Central Única dos Trabalhadores* or CUT). In addition, groups that had become illegal – and therefore dormant – reasserted themselves, such as the National Union of Students (*União Nacional dos Estudantes* or UNE). These organisations and the struggles that they enabled and brought together grew slowly, eventually changing the correlation of the balance of forces and leading to the fall of the dictatorship.

The situation was no different in the countryside. One of the main contradictions that tumbled out of the Green Revolution was the expulsion of millions of workers from the countryside. Squatters, renters, wage labourers, sharecroppers, and those evicted for the construction of dams were the social groups that created hotbeds of resistance against the dictatorship and the landowners. For them, the land occupations emerged as the main way to contest the *latifundio* and the dictatorship.

In 1984, the Landless Workers' Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* or MST) emerged out of these experiences. At its core, the MST has three main objectives:

1. The struggle for land. This corresponds to the immediate struggle of the landless to acquire a piece of land.
2. Agrarian reform. Without an agrarian policy from the State that supports land reform and land rights, any land acquisition will only be temporary and those on the land will be threatened with expulsion.
3. Social transformation. There can be no long-term solution to the deep crisis of the landlessness without a complete reconfiguration of the power relations in society, namely a transformation of the social relations of production and the hierarchies of society.

The MST embraced land occupations as their main method for building power. The occupations have a dual function. First, they question the way in which land as private property is used to disenfranchise the majority of society – in stark contrast to communally-held land used for the public good. Second, they denounce the fact that land is not carrying out a ‘social function’ as prescribed by the post-dictatorship 1988 Constitution, which outlines that all property must meet certain criteria, such as that it must be productive, it must respect environmental regulations, and it must follow labour legislation. If these criteria are not met, the land can be appropriated in the name of agrarian reform. As part of the struggle led by the MST, roughly 350,000 families have acquired land and an additional 80,000 families live in encampments spread throughout the country that are still struggling for their legal status.

Over the thirty-six years since the foundation of the MST, the struggle for land has gone through several different political moments, each moment met by popular struggles with different strategies and tactics appropriate to the class configuration and the power relations of that period. In the early years, the primary confrontation was between the peasants who had been expelled from their land and the *latifundiários*, the large landholders. The Brazilian countryside in this phase was composed of archaic, backward, and unproductive *latifundios* that used violence as their primary means to protect their enormous troves of private property. During the re-democratisation period of the 1980s, the MST expanded across the country, organising large occupations of *latifundios* led by thousands of landless families. Two key slogans propelled the struggle for land – ‘without agrarian reform, there is no democracy’ and ‘occupation is the only solution’. It was through the occupation of parts of the *latifundios* by peasant families that the first settlements emerged; these settlements, where the families now lived and worked the land, became a material argument for agrarian reform.

As this wave of democratisation grew, the owners of the *latifundios* created the Democratic Association of Ruralists (*União Democrática Ruralista* or UDR). The UDR was to rapidly become the weapon used violently by the large landholders against the MST as well as to lobby and pressure the federal government to act against the peasant movement. During the 1990s, when Brazil’s governments had adopted the neoliberal policy framework, the UDR – along with the State – went on a rampage against the landless and the MST. People suffered violent repression at peaceful demonstrations as well as the arrests and imprisonment of key organisers and

the attack of the civil rights of the secretariats related to agrarian reform – including the tapping of their phones and the invasion of their offices.

The violence unleashed by the *latifundiários* and the State, as well as the unproductivity of the *latifundio* form, increased the appeal of agrarian reform in society. The landless struggle came to be widely recognised as a legitimate action. It was in this period that the MST carried out several land occupations, organised its bases for resistance and self-defence, and organised the occupied land around the collective production of food in cooperatives. This struggle went from the occupied land to the streets, with state-wide marches and demands for agrarian reform at the federal level. During this period, the movement also strengthened its organisational capacity and sharpened its political line.

The consolidation of the neoliberal project marked a step backwards for the working class in Brazil. Nonetheless, agribusiness firms had not yet fully penetrated the countryside. The MST took advantage of this to organise its encampments and settlements. The movement carried out its first national march in 1997 to denounce the neoliberal project, demand justice for the victims and survivors of the Eldorado dos Carajás Massacre of 1996 and hold a dialogue with society. The movement grew rapidly – with international support – and emerged in this period as a key pillar of the Brazilian left.

Classic Agrarian Reform and the Transformations of Capitalism

The problems of national sovereignty and social equality cannot be addressed without a debate around the agrarian question. The emergence of capitalism from the 18th century had a marked impact on agricultural production, although the ways in which agriculture transformed varied across the world. What happened in Europe, for instance, was not entirely replicated in Brazil. However, it is useful to track the ‘classical’ story first, which gives us a template for the operations of capitalism in agriculture in order to then develop that story further in the case of Brazil.

From the 18th century to the Second World War, there was a broad policy to reorganise landholdings from one part of the world to another. This massive redistribution of land dispossessed the peasantry and created large farms for landowners and for capitalist agriculture. This concentration of land took place alongside the development of the industrial revolution, which found it necessary to integrate the agrarian economy with the strategies of capitalist development. The industrial revolution drew in masses of dispossessed peasants and artisans, who were now forced to sell their labour power at the factory gates. A complex economy developed that was based on the exploitation of labour and the internationalisation of capital and markets. The agrarian question was a crucial

element for the subordination of labour and natural resources to capitalist development.

Two central and related elements frame the agrarian question within the history of capitalism. The first is the push by the industrial bourgeoisie to supplant the old landowning rural classes, whose unproductive – in capitalist terms – use of the land was a hindrance to the accumulation dynamic of capitalism. The second is the assertion by industrial capital to set aside the logic of archaic feudalism and put its own capitalist logic at the centre of social development. The industrial bourgeoisie drove an agenda to bring the commercial logic of industrial capitalism into the fields, but also to ensure that the State's economic policy would be shaped around the needs of industry rather than the needs of agriculture. The accumulation of capital became centred around industrial development; the creation of a cheap workforce and an abundance of raw materials became necessities for the economy as a whole.

However the 'democratisation' of the land that followed – namely the relative loss of power of the landlords – did not benefit the peasantry. Instead, the outcome was that the agricultural sector – even its medium and small-sized farms – would be subordinated to provide raw materials for the growing industrial sector at lowered prices. The delivery of cheapened food to cities allowed industrial firms to pay lower wages, since the cost of social reproduction had been suppressed by the weakened place of agricultural producers in society. As agricultural land became more productive, peasants were displaced to become factory workers, while those who remained were consolidated into an expanding consumer market.

The revitalisation of the countryside's economic capacity took place at the cost of its subordination to the city, and in particular, to industrial capitalism. It was in this context that many countries across the world conducted capitalist agrarian reform. Most European countries went through this process, though this was not a European story alone. In Japan, almost three million people became landholders as a consequence of its land reform, while in Turkey plots above 500 hectares were expropriated, and in Italy the State expropriated land with compensation paid to landowners, developed infrastructure in the countryside, reclaimed degraded land, and built houses for peasants. In each of these cases, the peasantry was subordinated to the logic of capitalism, the benefits of reform absorbed for capital accumulation – not for the well-being of the peasantry.

The process of agricultural production began to be defined by the capitalist mode of production. The fear of unemployment and the speed of production began to be determined less by the lash (as had been in the case in slave plantations and in feudal estates) and more by the time-discipline of the managers. Capital defines what to produce and how to produce it; capitalist firms define the depth of commercialisation and the compensation received by the various levels of fieldworkers. Peasants no longer had any semblance of control over the means of production. Indeed, the peasantry in most parts of the world lost not only the means of production; it also lost the centrality of its cultural forms.

Capitalist dynamics entered rural areas with their own cultural logic; they encroached upon and denied peasant culture's ideas of production and consumption, especially the growing and eating of

food. A transformation of social rules took place, which replaced the organisation of social life around cooperation and social integration with individualism and dependence on the capitalist market. In this sense, classical capitalist agrarian reform was part of the policy of the bourgeois State and was carried out to benefit the dominant class of that time, the industrial bourgeoisie.

Despite many similarities, several key differences separate the case of Brazil from the transformations of capitalism and agriculture seen in Europe. For instance, in Brazil there was no fundamental separation between the rural oligarchy and the industrial bourgeoisie; they were intimately linked class fractions, and the emergence of the power of the industrial bourgeoisie did not take place by defeating the rural oligarchy. Land concentration was not an obstacle to capitalist development in Brazil. On the contrary, there was unity between the *latifundio* and industrial capital, an alliance between capital and State-mediated land ownership. The high concentration of land at low rates of productivity nonetheless forced a rural exodus that created a significant reserve industrial army whose presence held down wages. The harshness of the rural economy subsidised industrial production and the accumulation of capital by the industrial bourgeoisie.

Unlike in Europe, in Brazil there was no effective national policy for agrarian reorganisation. Instead, an agrarian tripod developed: *latifundios*, heavy mechanisation, and agrochemicals that were organised around the US model of agribusiness known as the Green Revolution, which began in the 1970s but intensified over the next two decades. The model that emerged from the Green Revolution

was entirely premised on capitalism's interests, with the peasantry merely a factor of production.

In the 1990s, as the Green Revolution intensified in Brazil, the country's agricultural landscape underwent significant structural transformation. Notably, there was a shift in the way that the production of agricultural commodities was organised. The key element here in terms of the agrarian question was the emergence of the neoliberal model and the strengthening of agribusiness firms over agricultural production and the distribution of agricultural goods, edging out small and medium-sized landowners. The archaic landowners who owned large tracts of land allied themselves with the other fractions of the bourgeoisie – those who dominated transnational agricultural corporations, financial firms, and institutions of the mass media. The hold that these landowners had on the land was undiminished; they now provided their vast acreage and their domination over the workforce to the international market through this agribusiness ensemble – corporations, banks, and the media.

As the capitalist system has entered into a serious crisis of profitability over the past few decades, the agribusiness sector has searched for ways to maintain or increase profits. These methods include the intensification of environmental destruction, the expansion of the agricultural frontier over forests and common land, the deepened ferocity of mineral extraction, and the consequential increased harshness towards the workforce, who saw not only the demands upon their bodies increase, but also watched the common lands disappear.

As agribusiness becomes more complex and deepens its hold on the political economy, popular agrarian reform has become a real and necessary alternative. The features of popular agrarian reform move in a radical direction, towards the rejection of capitalist control over the world of agriculture – including land – and towards the reorganisation of agriculture and the environment and the needs of people and nature rather than profit.



Agroecology - which is at the centre of popular agrarian reform - prioritises the production of healthy and diversified food that is produced in harmony with the environment and made accessible for consumption by the people - not for the export market.

Wellington Lenon

Popular Agrarian Reform

Since the relations of production in the countryside have been radically transformed by the consolidation of agribusiness, it is no longer appropriate to fight for an agrarian reform of the classical time. The MST has, therefore, been in a process to redefine its agrarian programme and its strategic actions.

Capital faces a deep structural crisis that has made access to land relatively impossible within the framework of the current system and has narrowed the margins of democratic participation. This means that genuine agrarian reform has to pivot the existing power relations away from the concept of private property. The hegemony of finance capital over industrial capital has led to the demise of any appetite for agrarian reform driven by the bourgeoisie; new ways of accumulating wealth have been invented that do not necessitate any land reform programme or programme for the democratisation – even in a limited way – of the countryside. The same land that was once the centre of the dispute between the landless peasants and the backward and unproductive landowners is now desired by agribusiness, which is willing to set aside the old rural classes for its own requirements.

The struggle for genuine agrarian reform, therefore, implies that the peasantry will have to confront capital – notably to confront agribusiness – whose face is the enormous transnational corporations that are responsible for the depletion of natural resources (including

through the excessive use of agrottoxins and genetically modified seeds). The consequences that this destructive model have on the environment are gradually being felt by the majority of the world's people, particularly those who live in the big urban centres. Water scarcity and contamination as well as the poisoning of food are two barometers, but even more alarming is the evidence of capitalist-induced climate change and the urban crisis. There is an intrinsic relation between the rural and urban crises.

Reality forces us to restructure the fight for agrarian reform, to move our agenda from classic agrarian reform to popular agrarian reform. The shift would be from demanding the right to land for those who work on it – a central demand of the 1980s and 1990s – to demanding the right to the collective production of healthy food for the entire population, a demand that would give a universal character to agrarian reform. Agrarian reform would then become a programme in the interest of society as a whole – not only for people who work the land or who would like to work the land. The strength of the peasantry in the countryside is insufficient to alter the correlation of forces; they require key allies in the cities who would join the fight for a popular agrarian reform not only in solidarity with the peasantry but equally in the interest of society.

Today, the archaic owner of the *latifundio* is no longer the sole target of the struggle over land. The landowner has become a key ally of the agricultural corporations, the financial system, and the mass media. It is the latter that has disseminated the view that only large agricultural corporations are capable of productively using the land to advance the interests of society. Indeed, the archaic and

unproductive *latifundio* has been ‘modernised’ and is now much more productive – but this productivity benefits the interests of agribusiness and not society as a whole. As a consequence of this, popular agrarian reform develops a strategy of resistance to the agribusiness model and points to new forms of struggle that both contest the foundations of agribusiness and propose alternatives for the future that are grounded in effective actions for change in the present.

The agribusiness model is founded on the production of commodities for export. This is the entire focus of production, which is why this form of agriculture is not concerned with the destruction of the environment, as evidenced by its use of agrotoxins as well as soil depletion, groundwater pollution, food contamination, and the extension of capitalist agriculture into forests and onto common lands (including flood plains).

An agroecological approach, on the other hand, prioritises the production of healthy and diversified food produced in harmony with the environment that is made accessible for consumption by the people – not for the export market. This approach develops an economic model that distributes income and that allows people to remain in the countryside rather than be driven to urban areas out of necessity. Popular agrarian reform develops agroindustries in the countryside that are under the control of workers who live in cooperative settlements.

The concept of popular agrarian reform does not only involve the production and organisation of resources. It involves the



A work collective in the *Herdeiros da Terra* encampment in Rio Bonito do Iguaçu, Paraná, where roughly 1,100 landless families have occupied the land since 2014.
Wellington Lenon

refashioning of social relations – including the reconstruction of gender relations and the confrontation of machismo and homophobia, for example – and the demand for access to education in rural areas at all levels. The social transformation proposed by agrarian reform also includes the building of autonomous forms of cooperation amongst workers living in the countryside while developing political relations with the urban masses.

Many initiatives already exist in this direction, such as the development in agroforestry, the cultivation of native seeds, the growth of a locally-controlled processing and agroindustry sector, the expansion of cooperative-run fairs, and the enlargement of scientific research and technical training towards the development of new agricultural technologies.

Given the complexity of the issues and the challenges before us, it is important to point out that it was not only the changes in capital that drove the MST to reformulate its agrarian strategy. The genesis of the change in strategy came from the necessity to transform society that emerged from the landless families who live on encampments and settlements. It is out of their experiences in building new political and organisational cultures that the concept of popular agrarian reform matured. The project of popular agrarian reform that emerges out of these experiences is not restricted to the countryside; it is a broad demand for a new vision for the country as a whole, with Brazil's working class as a key ally of the landless peasants.

Part II

Conquista na Fronteira: A History of Struggle, Cooperation, and Organisation

If you had to choose a word to define the *Conquista na Fronteira* settlement ('Conquest at the Border') in the municipality of Dionísio Cerqueira in the state of Santa Catarina, that word would be cooperation.

Forty-six families live in the 1,198-hectare settlement that they expropriated as part of the agrarian reform implemented in 1988. For them, the notion of cooperation and the collective is fundamental, but so too is the other pillar of their struggle: organisation. The history of the *Conquista na Fronteira* is inseparable from the history of the MST in the region of Santa Catarina. The families who live in the settlement today are the same families that occupied the *latifúndios* in 1985, only a year after the MST was formed.

Irma Brunetto, a resident of the *Conquista*, is among those who helped shape the settlement. During the three years that the residents were living under a black tarpaulin, waiting for their legal right to the land to be granted, the MST carried out grassroots organising work with the families as they began to work the land; the process enabled people to think about the politics of their land occupation and about collective production. 'Since the beginning,



Community garden in the *Conquista na Fronteira* settlement, which is responsible for producing all of the vegetables and fruit consumed by the residents.
MST Archive

we have been working on our relationship with the land, such as how we carry out cooperation among ourselves; we did this without having much of an idea, since all of that was part of the initial process', says Irma.

When the residents developed an understanding of their new home, they realised that the best way forward was to develop collective production. 'When we saw the geography of the area, we realized that 40% of the land was hilly. We realised that dividing it into small pieces wouldn't work', Irma remembers.

If each family took an individual lot, one group would benefit greatly, with flat areas and plenty of water, while others would be at a great disadvantage, with access to stony areas. Thus, the idea of collectivising the land and the production was developed, something that they had already been worked on under the tarpaulins.

Cooperation

The residents of *Conquista na Fronteira* set up the *Cooperunião* ('Cooper-Unity') cooperative in 1990, two years after the formal settlement was established. The cooperative is the heart of the organisational structure of the settlement for the families who live on the land and is an example of the many cooperatives of the landless workers in Brazil.

The members of *Cooperunião* are divided into work teams. Some of these are for the growth of subsistence food, others are for reforestation, yet others are to tend the cattle and poultry, and then there are teams that manage the administrative and social work for the settlement. Once a year, the families hold a planning process to go over what they must produce as well as the finances of the settlement. The key issues are discussed in base groups and then approved by the General Assembly. Their decisions are then executed over the next twelve months, until the next process starts. 'From the beginning, we adopted an organisational structure and created an internal regime. The first goal was to produce food to be able to eat and sell because we had been living in an encampment for three years, during which time we were not able to meet all of our needs. We also started a more long-term process with the objective of industrialising our production and adding more value to our produce', says Irma.



National Agrarian Reform Fair in the city of São Paulo. The annual event brings together more than 200,000 people over four days and has become the MST's main channel to dialogue with society. Roughly 420 tons of a variety of 1,530 types of different products are available at the fair.

Joka Madruga

The democratic consultations resulted in the creation of a large-scale and diversified production process. Currently, the main product of the settlement is milk, which is sold to *Cooperoeste* ('Cooperwest'), another MST settlement in the municipality of Chapecó, which processes the milk and sells it under the brand *Terra Viva* ('Living Land'). The animals at *Conquista na Fronteira* are fed by a pasture rotation system known as Voisin Grazing or Rational Intensive Grazing (PRV), an agroecological alternative for animal breeding. The animal feed is produced in the feed factory located in the settlement.

While milk is the main output for the settlement, it is not the only agricultural activity. The settlement produces grain and yerba mate, breeds pigs, cattle, bees (for honey), and poultry (for eggs), and has twelve dams to breed fish. The residents of the encampment are repairing the old poultry refrigerator that has been with them since 1997. When it is expanded, they hope to be able to slaughter 3,500 chickens per hour.

There is also a garden that produces the vegetables for the residents of the settlement. The families have the right to pick up vegetables three times a week. 'They are distributed according to what is available. Nobody goes there just to take the vegetables they want. The people who decide this are the people who are responsible for taking care of the vegetable garden. But you always leave with your bags filled', explains Irma. This production guarantees the subsistence of the residents of *Conquista na Fronteira*. 'We have an extraordinary diet made up of meat, eggs, and milk, and food that is

organic and made without poison. We buy very little from the market', says Irma. Next to the vegetable garden, there is a tree nursery that contributes both to reforest the area degraded by the *latifundio* and to beautify the land next to the homes. Reforestation is a key part of the plan for the settlement; now, 40% of the settlement is woodland.

Renumeration for work is based on the number of hours worked by the members of the settlement. At the end of every month, the hours worked by each person are added up, and the total income of the cooperative is then divided up based on the hours worked.

Education and Health

Conquista na Fronteira is more than a cooperative to produce goods for both subsistence and sale. The well-being of the people who live on the cooperative is essential: notably, their education and health. From the start of the struggle, education has been a priority. ‘We fought to build a school’, says Irma, ‘before we fought to build our won houses’. It was due to the demand of the families from the earliest time of the settlement that the municipal school – *Construindo o Caminho* (‘Building the Way’) – was built.

Since 1990, when the school was opened, the question was raised about the character of the education. It was not enough to provide basic literacy; there was a need to integrate students into a pedagogical process that was compatible with the demand for popular agrarian reform. ‘We wanted a different education and we were perfecting it within the Paulo Freire method’, Irma says. The school goes up to the fourth grade and the teaching process is carried out with a central theme. The children are responsible for the management of the school; as in the cooperative, they make decisions together and define the rules for the functioning of the school and the activities that will be developed.

The idea of collective organisation is not only central to the school, but also for the community leisure and health sectors. Health care is a key part of the settlement and incorporates herbal medicine into its public health practices.

The pedagogical approach of the school – the curriculum and the form of organisation of the school – has made it a target of the right-wing party that governs the municipality. They have tried to close the school. The children, however, occupied city hall. The school, says Irma, ‘is a symbol of resistance; that is why they want to close it, because it is a significant experience. They know that we are forming consciousness’.



With ten classrooms, a cafeteria, an administrative office, and a library, the school at the *Herdeiros da Terra* encampment has over 200 students from elementary school to high school, as well as roughly 24 teachers.

Wellington Lenon

Challenges

Conquista na Fronteira is now thirty-one years old. It has made many advances, but there have also been many challenges. The settlement, says Irma with serenity, ‘was built amidst many contradictions. One cannot say that it is a bed of roses’.

One of the greatest challenges is keeping the youth in the countryside, since the majority of young people end up going to the city when they reach a certain age. ‘We have the challenge of keeping the youth here, of improving income, of maintaining the spirit of solidarity and cooperation. In a society that is as individualistic as ours, we swim against all the tide’, says Irma.

Irma, who has been at *Conquista na Fronteira* for three decades, says that she and her comrades hope that the settlement will be less the exception and more the rule – but this can only happen if popular agrarian reform establishes itself on a national scale. ‘Many times, we end up reproducing the logic of agribusiness in our settlements. But our great point of resistance is our dialogue over agroecology, cooperation, and solidarity. That is what gives us joy, make us feel alive, and keeps us standing. The theme of popular agrarian reform challenges society on many levels in a productive way. It is a way of explaining healthy food, agroecology, social life, and showing that the countryside is a good place to live’.





MST march that took place during the movement's 6th National Congress in 2014. The marches are among the movement's primary instruments of struggle. Mídia Ninja





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