



# Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST) of Brazil

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Sem-terra, the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST), burst onto the political scene in the 1980s. It was a response to a decade or more of rapid change in Brazilian agriculture.

Increasing use of machinery, fertilisers and pesticides and hybrid seeds to increase yields benefited those farmers who could afford the inputs and keep up with the bank loans. A few benefited, millions lost out; small peasant farmers went bankrupt in their thousands.

Between 1985 and 1995 this process speeded up with the numbers employed on the land falling from 23 million to under 18 million. Neither was moving to the cities a viable option - jobs in manufacturing also fell by 34 per cent between 1991 and 1997.

The MST grew out of this crisis on the land and a series of land struggles aided and organised by local priests influenced by liberation theology. In 1984 they set up a national organisation to organise mass occupations of land under the slogan "Agrarian reform by law or by force". Much of the land they occupied was lying unused or was owned by landlords with dubious titles.

The MST's tactic was to organise hundreds of landless families to seize a large farm or piece of land, demand the state agrarian reform ministry give the settlers the land and defend the occupations against forcible eviction.

The land occupations were hugely successful in placing land hunger and rural poverty under the national spotlight. It exposed the enormous disparities in landholdings. Brazil's richest 88,000 farmers own 20 per cent of all registered land in the country and account for 60 per cent of all farm income. At the same time millions of small farmers are on the verge of bankruptcy and hundreds of thousands of rural workers are completely landless.

In the 1980s and 1990s serious clashes took place, especially in the state of Para, east of the Amazon basin. In 1996, 19 sem-terra supporters were killed by local police who opened fire with machine guns, injuring many others. President Cardoso was forced to condemn the actions of the police.

Today sem-terra has about a million members. It has forced the government to recognise many of its occupations and built over 800 farming settlements controlling five million hectares of land; an area equivalent in size to three quarters of the Irish Republic, but still only one per cent of Brazil's registered land.

The MST worked with the CUT, with the left wing trade union, providing joint training schools for organisers. It also co-operated closely with the PT especially during the 1989 election when Lula spoke at mass MST rallies and promised a PT government would carry out radical land reform. The defeat of the PT was a severe blow to the movement and it suffered considerable repression under the Collor government of the early 1990s.

As the MST has grown and consolidated it has developed into a cross between a peasant/rural workers' movement and a political party - heavily influenced at times by the politics and agrarian policies of Cuba. Its MST settlements have posed concretely what policies it will adopt in relation to land question. After a failed experiment to collectivise its farming settlements on the Cuban model in the 1990s, the MST has fallen back on self-organised co-operatives based on the peasant model.

With Cardoso's success in opening Brazilian agriculture to the world market and the growing grip that multinationals like Monsanto have over key sectors of Brazilian agribusiness, such a strategy is utopian unless it is linked to a real struggle to expropriate the major landholdings and monopoly agribusinesses and place them under the control of a government of the workers and small farmers. To develop and provide a decent living for the rural masses Brazil's agriculture needs and agrarian revolution not a retreat back to self-sufficient peasant communities.

The MST has become increasingly critical of the PT as the Workers Party has moved right, suspecting rightly that a PT government will try to renege on its promises of a radical land reform. In the midst of the election campaign the MST

provocatively occupied president Cardoso's estate - an occupation that was immediately condemned by Lula. The MST has correctly demanded that any PT government immediately proceeds with mass re-distribution of land. If the PT leadership prevaricates the MST should launch a new wave of land occupations and appeal to the mass base of the unions and PT to support it.

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