

The Reality of the Brazilian Countryside

Landless Movement (MST)

Unlike the United States, where homesteading laws encouraged common folk to own small farms, Brazil has always leaned toward large landholdings, or latifundia. Colonial land policy favored large grants to a few well-placed families. During the Empire, land laws practically forbade small landholdings. More recently, the 1964 military coup occurred as rural tensions and calls for land reform intensified. The military dictatorship curtailed serious land reform, but it never extinguished the essential conflict between landlords and rural workers. Shortly after democracy's return, therefore, a dynamic new organization, the Landless Movement (MST), began challenging Brazil's historical pattern of rural development. The following description of rural life and the accompanying manifesto appeared on the MST's Internet sites in 1998.

In light of the characteristics of agricultural development occurring in the country, it can be affirmed that serious agrarian problems exist in Brazil that need a solution.

However, this situation is characterized as a problem only by the working class. For the dominant elite, for those who benefit from this type of development, agrarian problems do not exist; on the contrary, it represents a greater opportunity for profit and well-being.

Land ownership in Brazil is concentrated in the hands of a minority, characterizing one of the highest indices of concentration in the world. About 1 percent of the owners hold around 46 percent of all land. And the concentration of land brings concentration of the means of production (machines, improvements, etc.), economic power, income, and political power in the rural environment. This is reproducing a society permanently in conflict between a minority of owners, and an ample layer of the population that has its labor more and more exploited.

The manner in which the land is utilized does not represent the inter-

ests of society as a whole and, much less, of the workers. The enormous potential that these available natural resources represent is not employed for the economic progress and well-being of the entire population. The overwhelming majority of lands are idle, badly utilized, underutilized, and destined for extensive cattle grazing, or simply, for speculation and reserve wealth. The best lands are destined for monoculture exports, such as sugarcane, coffee, cotton, soybeans, and oranges. Meanwhile, the production of basic foods for the internal market is practically stagnant.

As a result, there exists a poor distribution of agro-cattle production, and the Brazilian population is not fed according to the basic necessities. Thus, 32 million people go hungry every day, and another 65 million are fed less than the necessities.

The migration of rural populations to urban agglomerations is a natural and constant process in all societies, and accompanies civilization. However, in the Brazilian case, the velocity and volume of people who have to migrate from their rural communities of origin is appalling, being expelled from the countryside and having to search for cities as the single possibility for survival.

There is also an intense internal migration in which thousands of families are dislocated from one region to another in search of work. And more than 500,000 people migrated to Paraguay, Bolivia, and Argentina in search of rural work. Today, the majority of them wish to return to Brazil.

The conditions of work, and the relationships of domination and exploitation imposed especially on the rural wage earners, are an affront to human dignity. Many wage earners are treated like slaves. The labor and social rights established in the Constitution are completely disrespected, and unknown by the workers themselves.

The salaries paid in the rural environment are always below the minimum requirements of nutrition.

The labor conditions in the establishments using family-based production are also inhuman, involving children and the entire family, in shifts that reach up to fourteen hours daily.

There was an improvement in living conditions for the rural population in some regions, especially in the South and Southeast. But the immense majority of the rural population continues on the fringes of the benefits of economic progress and the advance of productive forces. The social indicators in the rural regions concerning the consumption of

electric lighting, electric appliances, levels of literacy, infant mortality, level of education, number of doctors, and income per capita are alarming and equal to the poorest regions in the world.

Among the people who live in the countryside, those who most suffer the wretched living conditions are, without doubt, the women and children. The women perform a double work shift, dedicating themselves to domestic activities and labor in production. The majority receive nothing for their labor. They do not participate in the decisions about the family economy. The women are who most suffer a lack of health care for themselves and their children.

The result of the concentration of landownership, the means of production, production, income, and economic power by a minority that dominates the rural environment translates into a political regime of permanent exploitation and domination of the rural workers, submitted to all types of injustice and discrimination. Democracy, liberty, and the rights of citizenship are unknown to the immense majority of rural workers.

There is also an ideological and cultural domination by the elite over the workers that projects antisocial values, ridiculing the local culture, creating a situation of prejudice and discrimination against the values cultivated by the workers.

The means of mass communication and the alienating character of the practice of some religions contribute to this cultural domination.

Manifesto from the Landless to the Brazilian People

1. We are landless. We are workers and dream of a better Brazil for all. But in Brazilian society, the right to a dignified life is currently denied to the people.
2. Our situation has historical causes in the exploitation of the people by the greedy elite. And now it has been aggravated by the neoliberal economic policy of the FHC [Fernando Henrique Cardoso] government.
3. We have been suffering persecutions, false accusations by conservative politicians, the government, and the latifundia owners. But we are firm. Our cause is just. For that reason, our movement grows and has the support of society.
4. We will continue mobilized, utilizing all forms of pressure possible.

Struggle is the weapon of the poor. And it is legitimate.

5. We fight for agrarian reform in order to work, produce, and guarantee abundant food on the table of every Brazilian.

6. With agrarian reform, we are going to improve the living conditions of everyone. The people need low-cost food, better wages, education, shelter, and health. We want to reconstruct Brazil without unemployment, rural flight, and youth thrust toward crime and prostitution.

7. Do not delude yourselves with the propaganda from the FHC government. The policy that would benefit foreign capital and the financial system is that which generates unemployment, the bankruptcy of national industry and agriculture. And it is the responsibility of that government.

8. We are going to vote against the government in these elections. We are going to vote for candidates who might have firm positions in favor of the people's interests. We do not want alms, but rights and dignity.

9. We want a better Brazil. A Brazil for all. With attention to the people's basic necessities, with the democratization of land, wealth, and power. Where there might be hope, a future for our people and pride in constructing a nation for Brazilians.

10. Workers, intellectuals, small entrepreneurs, retirees, housewives, and students, everyone, we need to unite in order to construct a new project of development for Brazil. A PROJECT FOR THE BRAZILIAN PEOPLE.