

“Marching As To War”: A letter from Brazil to South Africa about Landlessness, Agrarian Reform and Social Movement Struggles against Neoliberalism¹

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“Marchando como para uma Guerra”: Uma Carta do Brasil para África do Sul sobre os Sem Terra, Reforma Agrária e as Lutas dos Movimentos Sociais contra o Neoliberalismo

Resumo: Este trabalho utiliza a Marcha Nacional pela Reforma Agrária do Movimento dos Sem Terra (MST) como lente para analisar a luta dos movimentos sociais contra a política neoliberal do governo Lula e sugere lições para ativistas na África do Sul. Ao focalizar na Marcha Nacional, este trabalho salienta a importância da marcha como uma ferramenta estratégica do MST, e a situa num contexto histórico, filosófico e tático. Este trabalho afirma que a importância que o MST dá para a formação política e a construção organizativa, a sua habilidade de construir fortes alianças rural-urbanas, e a sua visão estratégica de ir além das lutas corporativistas pela terra para levantar reivindicações populares nacionais é fundamental para entender a sua consistente capacidade para mobilização, bem como o seu status como um ator vibrante contra-hegemônico na política nacional do Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Reforma agrária, Movimentos sociais, MST, Neoliberalismo, Projeto popular

“Marchar como para una guerra”: Una Carta de Brasil a Africa del Sur sobre los Sin Tierra, Reforma Agraria y las Luchas de los Movimientos Sociales contra el Neoliberalismo

Resumen: Este trabajo utiliza la Marcha Nacional por la Reforma Agraria del Movimento de los Sin Tierra (MST) como lente para analizar la lucha de los movimientos sociales contra la política neoliberal del gobierno Lula y sugerir lecciones para activistas en Africa del Sur. A centrar en la Marcha Nacional, este trabajo salienta la importancia de la marcha como un ferramiento estrategico del MST, y situa ésta en un contexto historico, filosofico y tactico. Este trabajo afirma que la importancia que el MST da a la formacion politica y la construccion organizativa, su habilidad para construir fuertes alianzas rural-urbanas, y su vision estrategico que le permite ir mas alla que una lucha corporativista por la tierra y para levantar reivindicaciones populares nacionales es fundamental para entender su consistente capacidad de mobilizacion popular y su estatus como actor vibrante contra-hegemonico en la politica nacional de Brasil.

Palabras-clave: Reforma agraria, Movimientos sociales, MST, Neoliberalismo, Proyecto popular

“Marching As To War”: A letter from Brazil to South Africa about Landlessness, Agrarian Reform and Social Movement Struggles against Neoliberalism

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Abstract: This paper utilises the Brazilian Landless Movement's (MST) National March for Agrarian Reform as a lens through which to analyze the social movement challenge to the Lula government's submission to neoliberalism and suggests lessons for movement activists in South Africa. In focusing on the national march, the paper highlights the importance of marches as a strategic weapon of struggle for the MST, and situates this in historical, philosophical and tactical context. This paper asserts that the MST's stress on organisation building and political education, its ability to forge strong rural-urban alliances, and its strategic vision in moving beyond narrow corporatist struggles for land to take up broader national popular demands is fundamental to understanding the MST's consistent mobilizing capacity and its status as a vibrant counter-hegemonic actor in Brazilian national politics.

Keywords: Agrarian reform, Social movements, MST, Neoliberalism, Popular project

Introduction

In October 2002, Luis Inácio 'Lula' da Silva won nearly 53 million of the 83 million votes cast to become Brazil's first working class president. After years of neoliberal rule, Lula and the Workers Party (PT) came to office on a far-reaching platform of government sponsored social change. Lula promised strong developmental-state-style intervention to counter Brazil's unenviable income and land inequalities: the minimum wage would be doubled and 10 million jobs would be created while housing, literacy, sanitation and land reform were to be prioritised. There was also great excitement within the international left: Lula's election and the class tensions within Brazil seemed to offer a platform from which to create alternatives to neoliberalism. The British historian, Eric Hobsbawm, captured this sentiment and went so far as to say that "The PT's [and Lula's] victory is one of the few events at the beginning of the 21st Century that gives us hope for the rest of the century."²

The hopes generated by Lula's election have a familiar ring for South Africans. In April 1994, Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress (ANC) were similarly elected into office on a popular mandate to eradicate the socio-economic legacy of over 300 years of colonialism and apartheid-capitalism. The Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) promised housing, electricity, potable water, sanitation services, and the redistribution of 30% of white owned agricultural land to black South Africans within five years. In South Africa, almost 80% of agricultural land is controlled by whites. The ANC's adoption of the neoliberal Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) strategy effectively undermined a redistributive agenda and anointed the market, on grounds of efficiency, as the principal arbiter of resource distribution questions.

On coming to power, Lula and the PT not only continued but actually deepened the neoliberal agenda of the previous administration. Lula followed the International Monetary Fund (IMF) structural adjustment recipe with alacrity, severely cutting social and infrastructure budgets to meet debt payments. Like Mandela and the ANC post-1994, Lula and the PT called on popular movements to be patient, arguing that the Brazilian state could not be transformed overnight and that the conservative economic policy was temporary. In so doing, the PT and the Lula government demobilized popular forces while simultaneously reinforcing the "liberal ideology of private property and the business class as the principal protagonists of society" (Almeida 2005) or, to use Patrick Bond's description of the neoliberal Mbeki administration in South Africa, Lula talked 'left' but walked 'right.'³

After an initial period of perplexity popular movements started to challenge the Lula government's submission to the TINA syndrome: that 'There Is No Alternative' to neoliberalism.

² Hobsbawm cited by Branford, 2003, pg. 7.

³ For the rapid shift from the social democratic RDP to the neoliberal GEAR programmes in South Africa, see Bond (2000).

This paper analyzes one of the social movement challenges to the Lula administration's conservative turn by centring on the Brazilian Landless Movement's (MST) National March for Agrarian Reform, which took place in May 2005. In focusing on the national march, the paper highlights the importance of marches as a weapon of struggle for the MST, and situates this in historical, philosophical and tactical context.

This paper locates the national march in the context of the Lula government's fiscally restrictive economic policies and proceeds to outline the political demands of the national march document, arguing that the strength of the document lies in the fact that it goes beyond narrow corporatist demands for agrarian reform to take up broad national-popular demands. This paper asserts that it is precisely because of the MST's broad strategic outlook, its strong emphasis on organisation building and political education, its leadership praxis, and its ability to construct strong rural-urban alliances that explains the MST's consistent capacity for mobilization and its status as a vibrant counter hegemonic actor in Brazilian national politics.

The National March for Agrarian Reform

A reforma agraria se faz no campo, mas se conquista na cidade –
MST slogan

(You make agrarian reform in the countryside, but you conquer it in the cities.)

Marches always represent the disposition to struggle, of moving forward. They demonstrate the extreme degree of sacrifice by men, women and children, who challenge themselves to walk hundreds of kilometres for an ideal: to see land shared. – MST 2005 National March for Agrarian Reform postcard

On 2 May 2005, over 12,000 members and supporters of the Brazilian Landless Movement (MST) left the city of Goiania and embarked upon a 17-day, 230 km, 'National March for Agrarian Reform' to the federal capital, Brasilia. The sea of marchers waving their red MST flags and banners were calling not only for agrarian reform, they demanded radical changes in the Lula government's neoliberal economic policies. In its 21 year history, marches have been an important ingredient in the MST's growth from a small regional movement in southern Brazil into the largest, most organized and dynamic social movement in Brazilian history. The central objective of these marches was to take the demands of the landless to, and win the support of, the population in local towns, provincial capitals and the national capital. The building of links with urban sectors of society has allowed the MST to overcome the 'isolation' of rural struggles and win popular support for agrarian reform.

The MST has drawn inspiration from many historic marches ranging from Gandhi's salt march, Martin Luther King's civil rights march on Washington DC, Mao Tse Tung's Long March, and the 1924-27 Prestes Column 25,000 km-long march across Brazil against elite domination of the rural and urban poor. Of the many marches that the MST has undertaken, three are distinctive and were shaped by the particular conjunctures of their time. In October 1985, the newly born MST carried out its largest land occupation at the time as 2,500 families occupied the 9,500 hectare Fazenda Anoni estate in the southern Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul. Two years later, however, the plastic tent camp of over 7,000 people had still not been settled on land. The MST was at a crossroads: patiently wait for the government to fulfil its promises or march on the state capital, Porto Alegre, and pressure the government to settle the families? The MST decided on the latter. After marching 450 km over 27 days, the marchers were welcomed by 10,000 Porto Alegrenses and given the keys to the city by the mayor. The march was instrumental in placing

land reform on the national agenda, in the settlement of the Fazenda Annoni families, and served as the launch pad for the growth of the MST into a national movement.⁴

The second major march took place in another difficult conjuncture. During the mid-1990s, the neoliberal Fernando Henrique Cardoso administration --after failing in its efforts to co-opt the MST-- utilized the full arsenal of the state machinery (the judiciary, intelligence agency, the police and the media) to vilify, criminalize and repress the MST and its strategy of occupying unproductive farms. Scores of MST members were arrested on trumped up charges of murder.⁵

In addition to state violence, large landlords utilized hired guns to harass and inflict violence on the landless. In this climate of impunity it was not surprising that on 17 April 1996, 19 MST members were killed and a further 69 wounded (many shot in the back) by the military police while on a peaceful march on the highway at Eldorado dos Carajas, in the northern state of Pará, protesting unfulfilled government promises. In response to this repression and violence, the MST went on the offensive and in February 1997 commenced a two-month national march for 'Land Reform, Employment and Justice,' to the centre of political power in Brasília. During this march, one thousand three hundred MST members left from three corners of Brazil and covered 1500 km to arrive in the nation's capital on 17 April 1997: the first anniversary of the Eldorado dos Carajas massacre. A year after the massacre, none of the military police officers involved had been arrested – a fact not lost on the march. The reference to unemployment was a clear allusion to President Cardoso's trade liberalization policies that forced thousands of family farmers off the land, to the job losses associated with the mass privatization of state enterprises, and to the high interest rate policy which was bankrupting factories and leading to rising unemployment. The MST thus demonstrated how local struggles for agrarian reform are connected to the broader struggle against neoliberal policies. More importantly, though, the march went beyond the simple demand for land reform by raising popular demands of the urban working class.

Enroute to Brasília, the marchers were warmly received by residents of small towns who wanted to know more about the lives of the *Sem Terra* (the landless) as MST members are popularly referred to. The *Sem Terra* were invited to address schools and churches to explain the purpose of the march, to talk about life in their plastic tent camps, and of their struggle for a better life. As the marchers converged onto Brasília they were warmly welcomed by over 100,000 people. The march, which was widely covered by the print and electronic media, sparked the popular imagination. A poll taken during the march showed that over 80% of Brazilians supported agrarian reform and that the Cardoso government had not done enough to promote agrarian reform and combat rural violence. Popular support for land reform and the *Sem Terra* forced President Cardoso to back down from his efforts to criminalize and repress the MST.⁶

The MST national march to Brasília during May 2005, unlike the 1997 one, did not take place in a context of repression but one of cooptation and unfulfilled promises from a government that had declared land reform a priority. It was offensive rather than defensive and had as its objective changes in the Lula government's neoliberal macro-economic policy, which was undermining the land reform programme. To understand the significance of the 2005 March, it is necessary to briefly situate it in its political context.

The Context to the 2005 March: The Workers Party (PT) and Lula in Power

⁴ On the Fazenda Anoni occupation and the MST's spread into a national movement, see Fernandes (2001) and Stedile and Fernandes (2001).

⁵ For a detailed analysis of the tactics utilized by the Cardoso administration to criminalize the MST, see Comparato (2003).

⁶ The march connected with more than 300,000 people. Millions more were reached via national television and the print media, as numerous stories and interviews spoke to the harsh realities of rural life. For more on the 1997 march to Brasília, see de Almeida and Sanchez (2000), Branford and Rocha (2002) and Stedile and Fernandes (2001).

When Lula, a former metal worker, was voted in, he had a mandate and a pledge to undo a decade of neoliberal rule. He had broad popular support from the working class, the middle class and sections of the national bourgeoisie, all of whom had to a lesser or greater extent been squeezed by neoliberal policies. But Lula not only gave continuity to but actually deepened the neoliberal agenda of the previous administration. The Lula government voluntarily increased the primary budget surplus target of 3.75% of gross domestic product (GDP) that was initially agreed to with the IMF to 4.25% to gain the confidence of the markets. The IMF imposed primary budget surpluses are generated to service interest payments on Brazil's debt. To meet the self-imposed target of 4.25%, the Finance Ministry drastically curbed public spending. In 2003, rigid monetary and fiscal measures led to the economy contracting by 0.2%, resulting in rising unemployment, declines in worker income, and reductions in family consumption. During its first two years the Lula government spent R\$273.459 billion (roughly R546 billion in South African currency) just servicing interest payments on public debt.⁷ Instead of tackling Brazil's social debt, Lula religiously prioritized debt payments to bankers.

As in South Africa post-1994, Lula and many of the non governmental organization (NGO) and social movement activists who entered government called on popular movements to be patient, asserting that the conservative economic policy was temporary. Instead of promoting and reinforcing popular mobilizations in support of a transformative agenda, Lula and the dominant, moderate tendency in the PT have via a "discourse of patience" demobilized popular forces while simultaneously reinforcing and privileging the business class as the major protagonists of society.

While most movements were caught in a state of paralysis and confusion, the MST -- despite its close ties to the PT-- was among the first popular movements to assert its autonomy and challenge the Lula administration's conservative turn. In late 2003, the MST and other rural movements marched on Brasília to demand the official launch of the National Plan for Agrarian Reform (PNRA). The drafters of the PNRA stated that there was sufficient unproductive land (liable for expropriation under the Brazilian constitution) to settle one million families over four years. In addition, the drafters proposed a set of agricultural credit and infrastructural policies to ensure the success and sustainability of the PNRA. The government, however, scaled back the original PNRA by only agreeing to settle 400, 000 families by the end of 2006.⁸ In 2003, the government settled only 36,800 families of the 60,000 PNRA target and in 2004 only settled 81,200 families of the planned 115,000 (Scolese 2005). All rural movements contested even these figures, arguing that many of the families included in these statistics were already on the land and merely had their tenure status legalized and thus should not be included as being settled. The MST asserts that less than 60,000 families were settled during 2003-2004.

The May 2005 'National March for Land Reform' thus took place at another challenging moment for the MST. The Lula government's embrace of neoliberalism undermined the PNRA targets. To ensure that the primary surplus target of 4.25% to service debt was achieved, the Finance Ministry announced R\$15 billion (approximately R30 billion) worth of spending cuts in the 2005 budget. The agrarian reform budget allocation of R\$3.7 billion (R7.4 billion) was cut by R\$2 billion (R4 billion). In 2004, when the agrarian reform budget had suffered a similar fate, the MST embarked upon a massive month-long national campaign of popular actions (land occupations, marches, occupations of government buildings and road blocks), which the corporate media dubbed *abril vermelho* or 'Red April' in a naked attempt to conjure images of disorder and transgressions of the rule of law, with the implication that they needed to be severely repressed. The MST appropriated and incorporated 'Red April' into own struggle lexicon and went on to occupy 127 unproductive farms throughout Brazil, the highest number ever for a single month. As it became apparent that the moderate tendency in the Worker's Party (PT) and Lula had fully converted to a neoliberal agenda that prioritized debt payments over meeting PNRA targets, the MST started preparing for its biggest march onto Brasília.

⁷ <http://www.bacen.gov.br/?SERIEFINPUB>

⁸ The scaled back version of the PNRA can be accessed at http://www.mda.gov.br/arquivos/PNRA_2004.pdf.

The 2005 'National March for Agrarian Reform' and a Popular Project for Brazil

Like the 1997 march, the 2005 'National March for Agrarian Reform' goes beyond narrow corporatist demands for land reform to posit national popular demands. It called for an economic policy to resolve the social problems of the Brazilian people. To this end, the MST mobilized a broad rural-urban coalition that included affiliates of the Via Campesina-Brazil (e.g. the Small Farmers Movement, the Movement of People Affected by Dams and the Movement of Peasant Women), indigenous movements, the church (e.g. Pastoral Land Commission and Rural Pastoral Youth), and urban movements (e.g. the National Union of Students, Movement of Occupied Factories, the Homeless Workers Movement, the Unemployed Workers Movement, Grito dos Excluídos, the Coordination of Social Movements, the Marcha Mundial das Mulheres, and cultural organizations), and *quilombola* communities. Quilombolas are the descendants of runaway slave communities who are also struggling to win legal recognition to land they are living on or laying claim to lands from which they were dispossessed.

The extensive list of demands contained in the national march document --"Proposals of the MST, the Via Campesina, and the Social Movements to the Lula Government" --ranged from meeting the PNRA target of settling 400,000 families by the end of 2006; the implementation of a program for the installation of agro-industries on land reform settlements; and the provision of a special new credit for agrarian reform.⁹ For the MST, the transfer of land is insufficient. It needs to be backed up by inputs, credit, infrastructure, technical assistance and access to markets to ensure the feasibility of the agrarian reform programme. The proposals also strongly critiqued the government's economic policy and demanded that the primary surpluses be invested in public education, healthcare, housing, sanitation and other social and infrastructure needs of the country rather than paying bankers. One of the principal objectives of the national march according to Fatima Ribeiro, a member of the MST leadership, is to make clear to the Lula government that "We will not accept that the R\$2 billion [R4 billion] for land reform be destined to pay interest on debt (cited by PASQUALINO, 2005)."

With the almost religious preoccupation of repaying debt, Lula's administration encouraged the expansion of agro-exports to generate foreign exchange. Lula took to heart former president Fernando Henrique Cardoso's advice that Brazil had to "export or die" and, in so doing, gave continuity to an exclusionary agro-export model: the colonial sugar and coffee plantations with their oppressive social relations gave way to vast 'modern' soy farms. The two states that experienced the most rapid growth of soy production are Mato Grosso and Pará. However, instead of bringing 'modern' social relations to the countryside, agribusiness in these two states simply reproduced the oppressive and exploitative practices of the past: they have among the highest indices of land grabbing and land conflicts, assassinations of rural workers, and of slave labor. During the week in which Brazil was celebrating 117 years of the abolition of slavery, a representative of 'modern' agribusiness in Pará, Lima Araújo Agropecuária Ltda, was fined R\$3 million (R6 million) for maintaining 180 workers under slave conditions. According to the ILO and the Pastoral Land Commission, Brazil has about 25,000 people working under conditions of slavery.¹⁰

The sheer scale of land grabbing and soy expansion has also had devastating environmental consequences. A study by the National Institute for Spatial Research (INPE), released in May 2005, reported that 26.130 square km (roughly the size of Haiti) of the Amazon was deforested during 2003-2004. INPE satellite images showed that deforestation was highest where agribusiness, especially soy plantations, was expanding most rapidly (LEITE, 2005). Mato Grosso, governed by the world's largest individual soy producer, Blairo Maggi, was responsible for more than 50% of deforestation. In its drive for profit, agribusiness expansion onto indigenous

⁹ The march proposals can be accessed at <http://www.mst.org.br/informativos/especiais/marcha/propostas.htm>.

¹⁰ For comprehensive statistics on rural conflicts, slave labor, and rural assassinations in Brazil, see CPT (2004). For details in English, see Social Network for Justice and Human Rights (2004).

reserves has led to violent conflicts over land which is undermining indigenous ways of life. For example, in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul indigenous reserves constitute little islands in a sea of soy plantations. The Guarani Cuiá people had always lived in a dispersed manner on vast tracts of land, but with the advance of agribusiness they were forced onto smaller areas. The concentration of large numbers of Guarani Cuiá on small areas has led to extreme levels of destitution and has been the principal reason for increased levels of chronic malnutrition and infant mortalities. During the first three months of 2005 --and in the midst of the extreme wealth of the agro-export elite— thirty indigenous children died of malnutrition related illnesses (CARIELLO, 2005).

Thus, there is little that is 'progressive' or 'modern' about agribusiness in Brazil. Many of the tools employed in the growth of agribusiness are reminiscent of the tactics utilized during earlier periods of unbridled capitalist accumulation: domination of indigenous peoples and cultures, the use of slave labour and land grabbing, expulsions and violence. In addition, the 'success' of the agro-export sector is also predicated on massive subsidies, export incentives and infrastructure support provided by successive governments. In 2003, a tiny agribusiness elite received R\$39 billion (R78 billion) in subsidies, while the family agriculture sector which comprises millions of families and produces over 60% of Brazil's food crops only received R\$7 billion (R14 billion) in support. Additionally, while agribusiness was the recipient of state largesse under Lula, governmental agencies working with indigenous communities had their budgets cut.

The MST national march proposals thus call for the protection of indigenous peoples and cultures and the demarcation of their lands; the protection of the Amazon and its biodiversity; and, the passage of a law that will allow for the expropriation and redistribution of all farms that utilize slave labour. For the MST, the struggle is against an agribusiness dominated agricultural model that is bent on restructuring and transforming family agriculture into an appendage of the agro-export sector. The march thus forms part of the MST's strategy of accumulating forces in society to challenge an agribusiness model which prioritizes exports over meeting domestic food needs and that further concentrates income and land in fewer hands. While Brazil has 'grown' into one of the world's largest exporters of beef, poultry, soy, sugar, coffee and oranges, it is importing staple foods (e.g. beans and rice) in which it was self sufficient.

The MST through the global peasant movement, the Via Campesina, opposes World Trade Organization attempts to liberalize agriculture in the interests of agribusiness, arguing that food is a basic human right that can only be attained in a system where food sovereignty is guaranteed. Food sovereignty, according to the Via Campesina, is "the right of each nation to maintain and develop its own capacity to produce its own basic foods respecting cultural and productive diversity. We have the right to produce our own food in own territory. Food sovereignty is a precondition to genuine food security" (DESMARAIS, 2002, p.104). The MST is therefore not only marching against the monoculture of agribusiness which undermines the food sovereignty of the Brazilian people, but also against the Lula government's neoliberal policies which promotes and 'cultivates' the agribusiness model of agriculture.

The march proposal also called for an audit of the foreign debt --as determined by the Brazilian Constitution-- so that the people know how much they have paid thus far, renegotiate its value since the debt has been paid many times over, and direct these resources to education and other social areas. The document also called for a doubling of the minimum wage to redistribute income and stimulate the domestic economy; reduce Brazil's exorbitant interest rates (among the highest in the world) which favours the speculative financial sector over the productive sectors of the economy; the democratization of the mass media; and demands that the government not sign the Free Trade Area of the America's (FTAA). For the MST (2005a) the fight to defeat the FTAA is crucial since it is "through the FTAA [that] we will arrive at the complete denationalisation of agriculture, and the impracticality of a national development project, a necessary condition for the viability of land reform."

The popular movements involved in the march decided to take their demands to the people and to dispute the rightward shift of the Lula government. As Joao Pedro Stedile, a MST leader, put it a year earlier:

The most important issue is to alter the correlation of forces in the government and in society so that the government is convinced to change its economic policy and utilize agrarian reform and changes in the agricultural model as an instrument for the implementation of a new economic policy that has as its core solutions to the social problems of our people (STÉDILE, 2004, p.8).

The initial 10,000 members of the MST marching on May 2, 2005 swelled to 12,000 with the entry of sympathizers and members of other movements when the march left the city of Goiânia enroute to Brasília. Simone Domingo, who left her three children behind to participate in the march, said "I think the [march] is good to improve things, so that we can have land to work and live with our children."¹¹ Felipe Alves da Silva, a student who is camped with his family in Goiás, says "I am going to ask Lula to fix the roads and schools." As is the characteristic practice of the MST, the national march also had the pedagogic role of raising and deepening political consciousness through study, debate and reflection.

Marching, Studying and Debating the future of Brazil

Over the 17-day period, the march started at 6 am to avoid the blazing afternoon sun of the planalto region, stopped to have lunch, rest and recharge the batteries for the afternoon study and debate sessions. Each participant received a set of booklets covering a diverse set of topics related to the national and international political economy: the capitalist project for the restructuring of agriculture via agribusiness, Transnational corporation (e.g. Monsanto) control over seeds via genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and its implications for family agriculture, the FTAA, the environment, the privatization of water, the national political conjuncture under the Lula government, and the MST's vision of a popular project for Brazil.

A number of public intellectuals and politicians from the major left political parties were invited to address the 12, 000 marchers via the 10,000 radios that were loaned to the MST by the World Social Forum organizing committee. An itinerant radio station, *Brasil em Movimento FM 88.5*, was especially created for the march by the Brazilian Association of Community Radios. The 20 km radius of the frequency allowed for broadcasts to be transmitted to local communities along the path of the march.

Adelar Pizetta, the MST's national coordinator for political education, speaking on the importance of radios in facilitating political education during the march, noted that: "If it was not for the radio, we would not have been able to realize political activities for such a large contingent of people. It was a learning process for all of us to perceive that the radio could play such an important role in political education" (MST, 2005b). One of the MST marchers from the north-eastern state of Paraíba, Maria de Nazaré Nascimento, who is camped for two years waiting to be settled states that "I am very happy to have participated in this work of the March. I am learning a lot during the periods of political education." To ensure that those MST members who can't read are not left out of the study and debate sessions, the 600 group leaders facilitated the reading and explanation of the key points of the booklets. The MST's popular method of learning and solidarity gives practical content to a powerful phrase by one of Africa's forgotten revolutionaries, Amílcar Cabral (1979): "Let those who know a little more teach those who know a little less. We must learn from life, learn among our own people, learn from books and the experiences of others, but always learn."

The division of the 12, 000 marchers into 600 small discussion groups draws on the practices of ecclesiastical base communities (CEBs) promoted by liberation theologians of the Catholic Church. The CEBs are spaces where small groups or *nucleos* of individuals can debate and reflect on the social realities of their communities and organize to change them. Liberation

¹¹ O *Globo* 15/05/2005.

theologians did not see the poor as victims who needed charity and compassion, but as actors who could through organization and struggle become the protagonists of their own liberation. The organizational structure of the MST has its roots in the practices of the CEBs. For example, an *acampamento* (land camp) or *assentamento* (land reform settlement) of 100 families would be divided into 10 nucleos of 10 families with two coordinators, a man and a woman, to encourage greater participation by women.¹² Other members of the *nucleo* participate in the education, health, communication, security or political education sectors. This active participation in the organizational structures of the movement has allowed for the dialectical process of teaching and learning that Amilcar Cabral so beautifully described. And, through this process of participation-learning, the *Sem Terra* (the landless) are transformed into active citizens who see their demand for land as a right, not a hand out. In much the same way, the *assentados* (settled families) are not content with the land that they have conquered. With the support of the *acampados* (camped families) they continue to mobilize to conquer agricultural credit, infrastructure, and market access for their produce. The *assentados* provide material support (food, tents etc.) and practical support by going on land occupations with the landless families. This solidarity between the landless and settled families and the participation-learning process are central to understanding the organizational cohesion and continued growth of the MST.

The MST continues to maintain strong links with progressive sectors of the Church, particularly the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT). The CPT has been a tireless supporter of rural struggles and played an instrumental role in the founding of the MST and in the training of the MST's early leaders. The MST has taken forward the liberation theology utopia that 'there must be an alternative' to injustice and social exclusion and that this utopia can be achieved through a process of organization building that promotes participation, learning and reflection.

During the 2005 march to Brasilia, the National Catholic Bishop's Conference released a public letter supporting the objectives of the marchers. In addition, more than 100 nuns and priests participated in the march while a number of Bishops visited the march to demonstrate their solidarity with the *Sem Terra*. Leonardo Boff, one of Brazil's most famous liberation theologians, wrote an article in a major national newspaper, *Jornal do Brasil*, describing his experience of marching with the landless. He concluded the article by succinctly describing the spirit of the march:

I was thinking to myself that surely Marx, Lenin and Mao would never have thought of a type of revolution that made such a happy synthesis between struggle and study, between marching and festivity. A movement that incorporates poetry and music will be unbeatable. The MST gives us signs that a new humanity wants to emerge (BOFF, 2005).

This synthesis between struggle and study that Boff so movingly describes is critical to understanding the political praxis of the MST. Indeed, the stress that the MST places on political education and on developing its own 'organic intellectuals' has been fundamental to the growth and consistent capacity for mobilization of the MST over its 21 year history. Many of the local, regional and national leadership have participated in, planned and led land occupations, and maintain an organic link with the *acampamentos* and *assentamentos*. The MST leadership praxis is persuasively described by the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci:

If the relations between intellectuals and the people-nation, between leaders and led, is the result of an organic participation in which feelings and passion become understanding and thence knowledge ... then and then only is the relation one of representation (SIMON, 1982, p.100-101).

¹² The *acampamento* is comprised of plastic tents to house the occupying families and is set up immediately after the occupation of an unproductive farm. The *assentamento*, by contrast, represents land that is officially transferred to the occupying families by the government.

The presence of and the continuing development of its own 'organic intellectuals' has enabled the MST to ideologically engage with political parties, while stubbornly maintaining its autonomy. This ideological clarity and organisational autonomy has allowed the MST to invite representatives of the major left political parties to address the marchers without fear of being co-opted by political parties. If there is an aspect of the MST's practise that holds strong lessons for popular movements in South Africa and elsewhere it is the importance given to organisation building, political education, and organizational autonomy in relation to political parties.

Besides political education, *Radio Brasil em Movimento*, was also fundamental in facilitating the logistics of the march, allowing for communication and organization in real time. The march simply reaffirmed the role and potential of free community radio stations as a fundamental tool in the democratization of corporate controlled media. The march also highlighted the importance of socializing cinema, theatre and the media.

Democratizing Cinema, Theatre and the Media

The MST inaugurated its pilot project --'Cinema on the Land'-- to take cinema and theatre to the countryside during the march. During the evenings, documentaries on the history of the MST and the struggle for land were projected on to massive screens, generating animated debates afterwards. One of the documentaries shown, *Raiz Forte* (Strong Root), describes how MST militants recruited landless and agricultural workers to join the MST and go on occupations of unproductive farms in the states of Pernambuco, Bahia, Pará and Paraná. The Motorcycle Diaries and two documentaries on Lula, *Entreatos* and *Peoes*, among others, were also shown.

Entreatos covers Lula on the campaign trail during the 2002 presidential elections making a series of promises to the Brazilian people. In the debates and discussions after the screening, many of the *Sem Terra* were scathing in their comments. Deivid Moura, who hails from Mato Grosso and had never seen a movie or documentary before, criticized Lula's unmet campaign promises: "Lula from the movie is one, while Lula as president is another." Joanilson Santos, a member of a MST land reform settlement in the north-eastern state of Sergipe was even more critical, saying "Lula told all those lies to deceive the Brazilian people." Joao dos Santos Souza, also from Mato Grosso, describes the harsh practical consequences of Lula's unfulfilled promises: "For the last 6 ½ years I am living in a plastic shack and have still not been considered for the land reform program. I passed a big part of my life listening to Lula say that land reform was the salvation for all of Brazil's problems. From what I'm seeing, the president changed his opinion."¹³ This level of critical consciousness is not very common in rural Brazil where clientelist and patronage politics are still the order of the day. The MST's political education programs on Brazilian social reality in the *acampamentos* and *assentamentos* and the personal experiences and insights of MST members have led to the emergence of a critical political consciousness that challenges the notion that 'there is no alternative' to market rule. The land occupations that knock down the fences protecting large unproductive farms (and hence of capital) is testament to the alternatives that the *Sem Terra* are creating. By 2002 MST members had conquered nearly 5 million hectares of unproductive farmland (BRANFORD and ROCHA, 2002, p. xii). Over the 17 day march, the MST symbolically enacted its principle weapon of struggle –the land occupation—by occupying and setting up their tent camp city of 12,000 enroute to Brasília.

Throughout the march, the MST's national theatre brigade, Patativa do Assaré, held a series of plays that spoke to the nation's social problems. After the marchers converged onto the Finance Ministry buildings in Brasilia there was a *mistica* performance showing the Ministry as the representative of bankers and agribusiness. Later, Patativa do Assaré enacted the objectives of the march: one actor portrayed the Minister of Finance, Antonio Palocci while the other artists

¹³ Deivid Moura, Joanilson Santos and Joao dos Santos Souza cited by Francisco, L. Lula nos enganou, diz sem-terra apos ver documentário. **Folha de São Paulo**, São Paulo, 15 maio 2005.

represented popular movements who demanded an economic policy that would meet the needs of the Brazilian people.

The corporate media was scornful of the march. Rubens Ricupero (2005), former secretary-general of Unctad, writing about Gandhi's salt march in India commented that "The [MST's] national march takes place under the most implacable malice of almost the entire media." This was not surprising since the media, as the representative of capital, bristles at the MST's slightest challenge to the sacrosanct institution of private property. For the MST land is a common good that should serve society, not a tiny landed elite. The media also reported the political education sessions as indoctrination while the MST's defence of family agriculture was described as archaic. What the media found most surprising was that the march had daily theatre presentations, music, poetry, and cinema as if this was abnormal. Gilmar Mauro, a MST national coordinator, pointedly describes this deep seated elitist prejudice:

It seems that in Brazil the poor cannot speak of cinema, like theatre, discuss the economy. It is as if these subjects and fields are the 'exclusive property' of those who have money, those who study. For us, however, communication and culture are extremely important tools of education for the people, of opening up a dialogue with society, and it is for that reason that we invest in these areas. On the other hand, we have huge concerns over the future of our country, and it is this that the march tries to bring to the public (cited by Glass, 2005).

The other favourite question of the media was: how did the MST fund the march? Again, the media found it incredulous that most of the food to feed the 12,000 marchers came from the MST's land reform settlements; that MST members, despite having little, donated cows, goats, sacks of maize or rice which were sold to support the march and pay for the hiring of buses that took many of the *Sem Terra* on the two to three day journey to Goiania.

The march was also made possible through the solidarity of the church, national and international movements. According to the MST, it would not exist without solidarity and that it depends on the "Solidarity of the Brazilian people to sustain its struggles, its dreams." It was this spirit of solidarity that made the march such a success: MST members from all the states volunteered to cook the meals that fed the 12, 000 marchers while others volunteered to work in the health unit, in the accommodation unit that set up and dismantled the tents every day, and the education units that taught at the itinerant school.

Final Considerations: "Nothing begins, nor ends: it continues"

The 17-day march was a massive school of learning and sharing experiences, of debate and study, of building and deepening local, national and international solidarity, and a valorisation of Brazil's rich and diverse cultural traditions. The march was a demonstration of the organisational capacity of the MST. And, in taking their demands and proposals for change into the citadels of power, the 12 thousand women and men from all corners of rural and urban Brazil demonstrated that they are not passive victims, but active shapers of their own history. They are making history at a time when its end has already been declared.

The *Sem Terra* march was also a contestation of ideas, a challenge to the monoculture of the neoliberal ideology. This is refreshing in a historical moment in which most left political parties have been domesticated by the neoliberal onslaught and reduced to mere electoral marketing agents devoid of ideology. In times of 'market democracy' politics has been reduced into a market for votes rather than as a means for popular participation and intellectual empowerment enroute to the transformation of society. And, when the left comes to power (e.g. the PT and the ANC in South Africa), it calls on popular forces to be patient while consistently meeting the demands of capital. One of the great qualities of the MST – and one that would certainly please Antonio Gramsci-- lies in its sharp understanding of and application of counter-hegemonic politics. It was

not surprising that politics (cultural activities, study and debate) was at the heart of the march since the MST is keenly aware that the hegemony of the dominant classes is based on economic domination as well as intellectual and cultural leadership.

The MST's consistent emphasis on accumulating forces and on taking its demands to the masses is part of its vision of a *projeto popular* for Brazil. The *projeto popular* resembles Gramsci's 'war of position' of a long, slow process of building alliances with other forces in civil society. The MST is thus making an important contribution to the formation of a counter hegemonic bloc. The 2005 National March for Agrarian Reform was a practical manifestation of counter-hegemonic politics. The MST took forward its slogan -- "You make agrarian reform in the countryside, but you conquer it in the cities"-- by building a strong rural-urban coalition. Moreover, the march proposals went beyond narrow class demands to take up broad national popular demands of Afro-Brazilians and indigenous peoples, of environmentalists and the unemployed, of the urban working class and the national bourgeoisie.

The *Sem Terra* march posed key questions to the Brazilian people: Why should government policies support an agricultural model that uses slave labor and violence, that further concentrates land and income, and that expels tens of thousands of rural workers who will end up swelling the already overcrowded urban slums? Why despite the massive increase in agro-exports are children still dying of malnutrition? Why should Brazilians accept a neoliberal economic model that generates surpluses of billions of dollars just to service debt while there is a shortage of housing and underinvestment in public education, healthcare, and land reform? These are some of the burning questions that MST militants, along with those of other movements, will be raising when they engage in the *consultas populares* (popular consultations) with the Brazilian people.

As Caldart (2004), writing on the MST, observed "Nothing begins nor ends: it continues." The National March for Agrarian Reform was not the beginning of the struggle for agrarian reform and against neoliberalism, nor will it be the end; rather, the 2005 march constitutes the continuation of the struggle for agrarian reform and a popular project of social transformation for Brazil.

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