Landless Workers Movement (MST) Brazil

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The Landless Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra, or MST), for many years the largest and most active social movement in Brazil, organizes unemployed and landless farmworkers to take over idle, absentee-owned farmland. It challenges landowners and authorities and agitates for a broad agrarian reform. It grew out of land occupations beginning in 1978 in Brazil's southernmost state of Rio Grande do Sul, led by activists from the Catholic Church's Christian base communities and some Protestant churches under the inspiration of liberation theology. The movement was formally founded in 1984 near the end of a 21-year military dictatorship. It acts nationwide in a huge country with a great variety of local social, economic, and agricultural conditions, so its practice varies from place to place. Typically, however, the movement's collective action can be described in three phases: occupation, camp, and settlement.

Occupation. Brazilian law provides that agricultural land that is not being farmed productively can be expropriated and redistributed to those who will farm it. Brazil's vast size, unequal land distribution, rural poverty, and oligarchical domination assure that there is ample idle land and a large number of poor rural people seeking to work it. But the state does not typically initiate expropriation of eligible farmland. Instead, it only responds to direct action.

Though there are several competing occupation movements, the MST is by far the largest. It targets a property that appears to meet the criteria for expropriation, either because it is not being farmed productively or because the owner's title is fraudulent; it also occupies public land. The movement recruits occupiers from among the rural (and sometimes the urban) poor. Several hundred families enter the targeted property at night and set up makeshift housing. They then seek to get the property expropriated. Joining a land occupation entails a high commitment, as occupiers leave their entire life behind and face discomfort and repression for a payoff that is uncertain and at best distant.

The occupation of a privately owned farm sets in motion a process of conflict among several parties: the occupiers, the landowner (and possibly allies on both sides), and various governmental authorities, including police, courts, and the federal agrarian reform bureaucracy. Typically, the landowner goes to court to get the occupiers evicted. An eviction may be peaceful or violent depending on negotiations between the occupiers and the police (Hammond 2009).

Camp. Evicted occupiers may be resettled on a different property, either state owned or already expropriated for agrarian reform. More often they erect a camp (*acampamento*) of shanties or tents nearby and wait for a decision on expropriation; if the camp is on public property they are usually safe from another eviction. The rural landscape is marked with dense groups of tiny shacks covered in black plastic where land occupiers are waiting it out. Expropriation usually requires a long legal process. Living in the camp for months or even years, occupiers undergo an intense process of politicization and discipline.

Settlement. If they win, the payoff is high: they get the property, create a settlement (*assentamento*), and farm the land, usually by some combination of individual and collective production. Successful settlements provide families a very good living compared to the rural poverty from which they come. Some even diversify production and sell their farm goods to multinational corporations to be marketed under nationwide brand names.

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Weaker settlements struggle to survive or are abandoned.

The settlers create not only a farm enterprise but a community. They build houses, supported by government credit. The movement establishes schools in its camps and settlements. The MST gives high priority to educating the settlers – who are generally poorly educated and often illiterate – and their children. The settlements provide work for men and women, and contribute to the movement's national mobilizations.

Though occupations are organized locally, the MST has a national presence. From its founding it has followed a militant strategy emphasizing the extralegal tactic of occupation to force expropriation and disruptive demonstrations in towns, cities, and the capital, Brasilia, rather than relying on more moderate, institutional forms of political pressure (Hammond 1999; Fernandes 2005). In many areas of the country police and privately organized goon squads have conducted violent raids on settlements. But the MST also takes full advantage of opportunities in institutional politics, most importantly to get land expropriated and win legal title, as well as enjoying government benefits like agricultural credit. The movement promotes a maximal program: each expropriation is viewed as a step toward a general agrarian reform of all *latifundios* (large agricultural property usually worked by seasonal wage labor) and, in the long run, socialism (Wright & Wolford 2003: 315–330). It is the most active land reform movement in Latin America and one of the leading national organizations behind *Via Campesina*, the international peasant movement.

Its practices are derived from Leninist and Christian base community principles, combining democratic centralism (Harnecker 2002: 271) and grassroots assemblies. Some have claimed that the MST organization is very democratic (Veltmeyer & Petras 2002), while others argue that it is highly authoritarian (Navarro 2007). According to Branford and Rocha (2002: 121), the MST has strong national leaders but the bases have a voice and relative autonomy.

That a rural movement in today's Brazil can maintain a high level of mobilization and be (relatively) successful at winning land must be counted as surprising. The country is heavily urban, with a capital-intensive and highly productive agricultural sector that drives poor peasants off the land; though redemocratization spawned a vigorous wave of popular mobilization after years of repression, moreover, the cycle of protest soon peaked for urban movements, many of which – notably the women's and community health movements – were co-opted into nongovernmental organizations implementing government policies. The MST, on the other hand, has maintained an independent, militant posture. Nor has it become too closely identified with the institutional left; though it supports Workers Party (PT) candidates and sometimes runs its own candidates on the PT ticket (and occasionally other parties' tickets) for local office and parliament, it was highly critical of President Lula for reneging on the Workers Party's historical commitment to agrarian reform and favoring large-scale agribusiness instead.

The fact that the MST stays mobilized despite fluctuations in governmental response can be attributed in part to its offering participants a chance at a valuable selective incentive in successful land occupations (Ondetti 2008: 226–227), and in part to the fact that the settlements have become vibrant communities that provide a base for ongoing politicization and mobilization of participants. The MST cultivates identification and commitment through political education and solidarity rituals such as artistic performances.

SEE ALSO: Agrarian movements (United States); Direct action; Grassroots movements; Peasant movements.

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