

# Landless Workers Movement: The Difficult Construction of a New World

By Raul Zibechi | September 26, 2006

“Breaking down the fences of the large estates was not as difficult as fighting the technological packages of the transnationals,” Huli recounts as he sits in his kitchen and pours hot water into the *mate* we share while his son romps around the house. He says the campesinos of Brazil’s Landless Rural Workers’ Movement (MST, for the Portuguese initials) dreamed for years of reclaiming their land, believing that it would solve all their problems: food for their children, a dignified life of hard work on the farm, education, health, and housing. However, the reality would prove much more difficult, for surprises they had never imagined lay ahead.

Huli Zang is part of one of the 376 families that make up the *Filhos de Sepé* (Sons of Sepé) settlement, a 6,000-hectare (23-square mile) municipality in Viamao, 40 kilometers (25 miles) from Porto Alegre, the capital of the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul. The settlement, established in February of 1999, is divided into four sectors where the land is organized into what the landless call an *agrovila* (agricultural village): the houses are grouped together in one area rather than on each campesino’s parcel of land.

This arrangement ensures the houses, built solidly out of wood or brick, have access to electricity and potable water, with the byproduct that daily life for the campesinos is much like that of the average city-dweller. Huli’s house has a gas stove as well as a wood stove, a refrigerator, television, and computer. There is a route connecting the housing area to the nearest town, Viamao, as well as the individual parcels, each one an average of 17 hectares.

The settlement sits next to a 2,500-hectare (10-square mile) wildlife refuge called *Bañado dos Pachecos*, home to thousands of species of

birds, fish, and mammals. The area is irrigated by the surrounding marshland, which makes it suitable only for cultivating rice, although next to each house settlers have enough space to grow vegetables and fruit trees, and nearly everyone raises chickens and a milk cow or two. This allows some degree of self-sufficiency as far as food is concerned.

Within the settlement MST operates one of its Training Centers, which can house 120 people with its array of bedrooms, communal bathrooms, meeting rooms, Internet computer labs, and dining hall. During the month of August, some 80 activists from half a dozen countries participated in a seminar delivered each year by the Latin American Coordinating Agency of Campesino Organizations (CLOC). The 1,800-person village also has a school where 230 children attend.

### Land and Rice

Before resettling to their current location, the landless campesinos lived for nearly four years alongside Brazil’s highways in hovels made of black canvas, enduring extreme cold during the



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winter and suffocating temperatures in the summer. Negotiations with authorities gave them access to the land they live on now, which is the biggest settlement in the state. A testament to the settlers' will to create a new world for themselves, and not just have a strip of land to cultivate, is the fact that they decided to create an *agrovila*. Several settlements have built housing on each individual parcel of land, a choice that creates almost insurmountable political and social problems. Not only is it almost impossible to deliver water and electricity to all the inhabitants (due to large distances between houses), but community living is almost out of the question, thus heightening the campesinos' individualism and blocking any attempt to create a different type of society.

Any visitor that manages to arrive at an *agrovila*, with its simple, picturesque homes, sown plots of land, colorful flower arrangements, and domestic animals grazing and cackling in the sun, sees a bucolic setting, where everything runs smoothly. Nothing could be further from the truth. The *Filhos de Sepé* settlement faces its share of problems, mostly derived from the global crisis of the small farmer competing with the powerful expansion of agribusiness pushed by large multinational corporations.

One of the initial problems precipitates from the very choice to create an *agrovila*. Frequently, individual parcels end up far away from the housing areas, sometimes as much as 10-13 kilometers (6-8 miles). "This causes some families to quit farming altogether and instead lease their land to other settlements," says Huli, who doesn't shy away from questions. In order to address this problem facing the *agrovila*, over the last few years MST has implemented a new design for the settlements. Units consisting of

15 to 20 families are grouped together and the land is lined up in triangles with the vertex of each coming together in a central area. This way the homes are all near each other and the parcels of land are relatively close to the residential area. This of course reduces the density of the settlements from an average of 100 families to what has been termed a "housing nucleus," which does not exceed a total of 20 families.

But perhaps the gravest problem is their dependence on multinationals that impose a style of farming based on the heavy use of agricultural toxins. "Monsanto brings us technology packages, herbicides and pesticides, in other words poison, and then they supply the rice. Over the course of time, we went from depending on the landholding elite to depending on the multinationals that own the technology. We can only conclude that in spite of our efforts, we have not moved forward, that we struggled for years to be in a new state of dependence, and all the while we are poisoning our own families and the people who consume the rice we produce," say Huli.

## **A Struggle Without End**

In order to escape these constraints, the settlers have opted for agroecology. In the settlement, 1,600 hectares (6 square miles) are farmed "conventionally" (that is to say, with pesticides), but after an intense internal debate, the community decided to have a small nucleus of families cultivate organic rice. Last year, 29 families cultivated 120 hectares (almost half a square mile) without chemicals and formed the Association of Rice and Fish Producers. Because they operate where there is an abundance of water, they have been able to produce fish, diversifying their production. That year, they produced 6,000 bags of organic rice and

the production was sold for school lunches in the city of Viamao, governed by the Workers' Party. This year, 35 families are participating, and they are hoping to grow 150 hectares and produce 10,000 bags.

They have discovered that growing organic rice is not only profitable, but its productivity per acre is exactly double that of rice farmed with chemicals. They have recovered and implemented an old campesino tradition of preparing the land with ducks. "Ducks eat up all the herbs, clean the land much better than an agrochemical toxin could, and in addition they leave it fertilized with their waste. We leave the ducks there over a period of months and they do all the prep work. Later, when it is time to sow the rice, we remove them and either sell them or eat them," Huli relates with a huge smile. Farming organically gives them their own seeds and supplies, so to produce they don't depend on markets, and in addition they are improving the health of both the producers and the consumers.

Now, however, they face the problem of certification. In Brazil there are only three businesses that can certify organic origin, and they are all linked to multinationals. "Once more we are bumping into the same enemy," Huli continues. But what angers them the most is that the "certifier" will only visit the settlement once a year, charges them thousands of dollars, and does not inspect the cultivation process, a fact that allows any "organic" producer to use chemicals while still receiving the organic label. To address this unexpected problem, the movement is addressing the possibility of creating a "community certification" team, which would allow them to bypass dealing with the multinationals.

In addition, the settlers complain that the state and federal governments do not provide credits

for agroecological production. In short, they face a whole chain of problems, and each time they overcome one, they run into a new problem that is ultimately the same: the control of large multinationals over agricultural technologies that allows them to exploit the campesinos. The development and control of new technologies by multinationals has made possible a new type of oppression. While the campesinos no longer lack the means of production, control over work schedules, and labor methods, the multinationals' dominance is of an "immaterial" sort, seated in the control over knowledge and the market in order to maximize profit accumulation. Huli explains how the price of rice continues to fall, so that 1,600 hectares of rice is not even enough for the settled campesinos to survive off the land.

### Sepé Tiraju

On February 7, 1756 the *Guarani* Indian Sepé Tiraju was killed in combat by Spanish and Portuguese troops in the city of Sao Gabriel (in the southern part of Rio Grande do Sul). The 1750 Treaty of Madrid, signed by the two countries, decreed that all Indians belonging to the *Guarani* Reductions (seven towns laid out by Jesuits and built by the indigenous people) must abandon their homes and move to the banks of the Uruguay River, territory that today belongs to Argentina.

A Portuguese-Spanish army of 3,500 soldiers armed with cannons, the best equipped for their day, confronted the Indians armed with spears and arrows. Three days after the death of Sepé, on February 10, nearly 1,500 Indians were dead. In spite of the abolishment of the treaty in 1761, it had accomplished its goal: the *Guarani* Reductions—described by Voltaire as "a triumph of humanity" for their successful cooperative living, artistic endeavors such as music, publication of books, and development of astronomy and meteorology—were destroyed. This year, the landless and other social movements commemorated the 250-year anniversary of the fall of Sepé in combat as part of a retrieval of the most notable experiences of different worlds existing on the same continent.

Before leaving the settlement, we ask him what sources of income the *Filhos de Sepé* campesinos have. There are three: family vegetable gardens, rice, and work in neighboring

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municipalities, where the women are employed as cleaners and the men as construction workers. “What percentage of your income comes from these types of work?” we ask. Huli cannot avoid a look of sadness: “Unfortunately, the bulk of it comes from cleaning and construction. That’s the way it is.”

The struggle for land turns out to be much more complicated than anyone could have imagined. Perhaps the biggest triumph of the landless is that the campesinos have remained on their settlement rather than adding themselves to the burgeoning belt of poverty seen in Brazil’s big cities. The rest is a struggle that is permanent, interminable. It is more complicated than the struggle for land, since capital has shown its capacity to transform itself to control the mechanisms of domination, in this case

less palpable, almost invisible. This will take persistent training and learning, which have become indispensable tools in the struggle.

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## RESOURCES

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