

# 5th Congress of Brazil's Landless Movement Creating the Bases for a New World

By Raúl Zibechi | August 23, 2007

The largest social movement on the continent, and one of the most important in the world, held its 5th Congress in mid-June 2007 in Brasilia. Despite successful mobilization of masses of people and significant media impact, under Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's government the movement faces strong challenges to activate its base against new enemies, such as agribusiness.

Agrarian reform will no longer be the principal demand from the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST), Brazil's Landless Rural Workers Movement. "The agrarian reform proposal that drove MST's struggle for 20 years has run its course. We need a new model of agrarian reform," according to João Pedro Stédile, an MST leader.<sup>1</sup> He explains: "Classical agrarian reform was developed in European countries, the United States, and Japan after World War II. It involved combining agrarian reform with the development of national industry to create an internal market. Brazil missed four historical opportunities to establish this sort of agrarian reform."

The MST believes that agrarian land redistribution could have occurred: at the end of the 19th century with the abolition of slavery; or during the "Revolution of 1930," which led to industrialization; in 1964, with the rise in social struggles that were interrupted by the military coup; or at the demise of the military regime in the mid-1980s. The problem, Stédile adds, is that during the 1990s, "Brazilian elites abandoned the national development project" and accepted the neoliberal model that subordinates the country to finance capital."<sup>2</sup> Economic elites ignored national industrialization and embraced the external market, and agrarian reform is no longer functional in the economic system.

This was the central dilemma for the 5th MST Congress. To make agrarian reform viable, first the neoliberal model that is advancing in Brazil under the administration of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva must be rejected. The recent agreement between Lula and George W. Bush for the production of biofuels proved to the MST that it can no longer count on Lula to support its goals. Stédile sees Lula's second term, which began in January 2007, as likely to be even more conservative than his first (2003-2006).

## Turn Toward the Environment

In contrast to previous congresses, this one had fewer representatives from Lula's Workers Party (PT), and Lula was not invited. Although less than a year before, the MST had called to support Lula in the second round of the presidential election, relations have never been worse. The first leftist government in Brazil's history not only failed to accomplish the agrarian reform expected by the landless, it also supported agribusiness by approving transgenetically modified crops and promoting biofuels.

"Agrarian Reform for Social Justice and Popular Sovereignty" was the theme of the 5th Congress. MST believes its main enemy now is agribusiness linked to multinationals, which wrests land and resources from the type of family agriculture that assures sufficient food for the national population. The organization proposes five steps: democratize ownership of the land; reorient agricultural production by turning toward the internal market and away from the external market preferred by multinationals; develop new agricultural techniques that do not harm the environment; spread education among farm workers; and develop small agroindustries to create employment.

The resolution approved by the 5th Congress synthesizes the old and new objectives defined by the movement. Among the new directions is the struggle against agribusiness and the multinational corporations that control "the seeds, production, and agricultural commerce," such as Monsanto, Syngenta, Cargill, Bunge, Nestlé, BASF, Bayer, Aracruz, and Stora Enso. This list reveals the names of the new enemies of rural farmers: enterprises that force farmers off their land by planting large tracts of transgenic soy beans or trees. The document reflects a



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shift in the movement this year, which began to strongly criticize “agrofuels” after Bush’s visit with Lula. The MST Congress demands that this production “come under the control of farmers and rural workers,” in order to preserve the environment and establish “the energy sovereignty of each region.”<sup>3</sup>

Criticism of agribusiness multinationals implies a shift toward environmental defense that places the MST in a different position than before. Its decision in favor of ecology represents a deepening of its criticism of the agrarian model and the type of society prevailing in Brazil and throughout the world—so-called neoliberalism. It also allows the MST to strengthen ties with urban movements. Without a new agro-ecology model, Stédile points out, the only future options for farmers are “favela slums, Family Welfare Social Support, or working for foreign companies in agribusiness.”

## Ethanol in Brazil

Over the past years landless farm workers have observed, and suffered, important changes in agriculture and in rural areas. There was the extensive expansion of monoculture, first with transgenic soy beans and then with sugarcane. The best lands are dedicated to these crops, which prevents the development of family agriculture. But these same crops are destroying entire areas of the country. It is estimated that in a few years “Los Cerrados,” a high plain ecosystem between Brazil’s Atlantic coast and the Amazon jungle, will be completely overtaken by monoculture, and its biodiversity destroyed. The next step is the conquest of the Amazon, the planet’s lungs, which is being devoured by forestry businesses.

In tandem, experts predict the rapid transference of land to foreign hands. The financial magnate George Soros will invest US\$800 million in ethanol distilleries through its local subsidiary, Adecoagro. The Cargill Group bought 63% of Cevasa, the largest ethanol plant in Brazil. Global Foods in the United States will invest a billion dollars to construct ethanol plants. These are just the basic data. Of the largest 500 companies involved in agribusiness in Brazil, six are state-owned, 388 are Brazilian, and 106 foreign-owned. But of the largest 50, 28 are foreign and only 22 Brazilian, according to the June 2007 issue of *Exame* magazine.

This is the fundamental problem faced by farmers and the poor in Brazil. Large multinationals are investing in one of the richest agricultural areas in the world in order to increase their profits. Even worse is that the State, through its National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES), finances these large companies and facilitates the construction of the infrastructure they need. The Lula administration’s Program to Accelerate Growth foresees the investment of US\$9 billion over the next four years to build 46 biodiesel plants, 77 ethanol distilleries, and 1,150 kilometers [690 miles] of fuel pipelines with BNDES financing.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of all this, Stédile says in an article in *Folha de São Paulo* that the movement focus is on “a democratic agricultural model that guarantees access to work, land, water, and seeds for all.”<sup>5</sup> As an example of an undemocratic model he points to Lula’s first four years in power, during which the State transferred US\$300 billion to the financial sector, because Brazil’s interest rate is the highest in the world.

## An Alliance of Underdogs

“We are not positioned to win this battle for the preservation of the environment if we cannot involve Brazilian society as a whole,” says Gilmar Mauro, an MST leader.<sup>6</sup> The South, for example, is facing the serious problem of forest monoculture for the manufacture of cellulose paste, which is advancing upon agricultural lands. “People must understand that each eucalyptus tree consumes 30 liters of water per day during its first seven years, when it is harvested. The consequences will be devastating to the environment. Humanity is in danger, and that is what we want to discuss with people. While we are concerned about our land, the establishment of a new settlement, natural resources in the whole world are being destroyed,” says Mauro.

The MST is clear that the enemy it faces today is much stronger than the traditional individual large landholder, with more resources and better relations with states and politicians. The MST is up against the alliance of three types of transnational capital: oil companies, automotive corporations, and agribusinesses. But one of the problems is that many people truly believe that biofuels are positive and that the monoculture of sugarcane, eucalyptus, and soy is necessary. That’s why now is the time to launch a great debate to start creating a proposal for a different type of society.

## The World's Largest Movement

*The "tent city" built in Brasilia housed 17,500 men and women rural workers over four days, June 11-15, as well as delegates from 21 farmers organizations and 31 countries throughout the world. The logistical effort to receive them, house them, and secure food and transportation was gigantic. For those days, living "landless style" brought the miracle that many things were accomplished with very few resources. Forty percent of the participants were women.*

*The organization that today is the MST took its first steps in 1979, under the military dictatorship, with the first occupation of lands in Rio Grande del Sur. The first Congress was celebrated in 1985 during the transition to democracy with the theme, "Without Agrarian Reform, There is No Democracy," with slightly over a thousand delegates. The second, in 1990, raised the message, "Occupy, Resist, Produce," and the third, in 1995, "Agrarian Reform, Everyone's Battle." In 2000, just before the elections that gave Lula his first victory, the MST held its fourth Congress, emphasizing "Agrarian Reform: For a Brazil Without Large Estates."*

*The movement has 5,000 settlements that occupy slightly more than 22 million hectares [55 million acres], on which two million people live. Also, there are more than 150,000 landless workers camped in plastic huts along highways, struggling to obtain land. At the 1,500 settlement schools the men and women teachers came mostly out of the movement and teach based on a "pedagogy of the land" which, in broad terms, could be defined as Paul Freire's popular education adapted to settlement reality.*

*Besides a school, each settlement has community spaces for adult education, healthcare, and religious services for diverse beliefs, although the immense majority professes Catholicism in a rural version linked to liberation theology. Production is quite varied and is adapted to the possibilities of each settlement. The best organized try to combine family-based production, to assure a certain food sovereignty, with cooperative agroindustries involving swine, poultry, and cattle, as well as dairies, mills, and the processing of fruit, coffee, sugarcane, vegetables, and flour.*

Landless farm workers are fiercely fighting for the democratization of communications media, and the Congress Resolution proposes that "each community in the interior have its own popular communications media, such as free community radio stations." The emphasis on communication is part of their plan to strengthen their linkage with other social movements and build "a Popular Assembly in the municipalities, regions, and states." The MST envisions alliances with urban movements, aware that it must have a strong presence in cities to succeed.

The Congress began to elaborate a new agrarian reform proposal. It maintained that successes over the next

years will be measured not by the amount of land occupied or the number of families settled, but by the ability to build a broad rural and urban social movement, in which young people play a major role. Marina dos Santos, a movement coordinator, clearly defined this stage: "We face the challenge of finding new forms of struggle other than land occupation. A new type of action is required that responds to this new wave of capitalism in rural areas. We must protest the fact that this model does not respond to the needs of the majority of people. We need other methods to promote a dialogue with society."<sup>7</sup>

As an example, on March 8, 2006 and 2007, thousands of women carried out symbolic actions against multinational agribusinesses in order to show society at large what is readily apparent only to specialists: that a small group of companies rules over their lives by controlling geographical space, biodiversity, and technology. The underlying theme is no longer land, in the sense of gaining a few acres for poor farmers, but a model of development different from the current one. To discuss and design that model it will be necessary to "build unity among social movements."<sup>8</sup>

Another important new aspect of the Congress was the support received from Mexico's Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). Over the past two years both movements endeavored to reduce the distance between them. A message of support signed by Subcomandante Marcos states that the landless workers "have our hand in friendship, our affection and respect, but also our admiration," and he highlights the "decision and firmness" shown in their struggle for land. The Congress closed with a festive air, but everyone was aware that the movement faces great difficulties and uncertainties about its own future during the last years of Lula's administration.

For that reason, the opening speech read by Marina dos Santos reminded participants that the future of the MST depends on the education received by children in the settlements. "If our plan is for one year, we'll plant grain; if we have a two-year plan, let's plant trees. But if our plan is for a lifetime, we must educate and train people."<sup>9</sup>

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## END NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Evelyn Guilherme interview with João Pedro Stédile.
- <sup>2</sup> Idem.
- <sup>3</sup> See the 5th Congress Resolution at the MST website: [www.mst.org.br](http://www.mst.org.br).
- <sup>4</sup> Oficial report, "Biocombustibles en Brasil. Desarrollo y financiación del BNDES" [Biofuels in Brazil. BNDES Development and Financing].
- <sup>5</sup> Joao Pedro Stédile, "Reforma agraria por justiça e soberania popular" [Agrarian Reform for Justice and Popular Sovereignty].
- <sup>6</sup> Verena Glass, "MST prioriza alianças políticas, diálogo com a sociedade e sustentabilidade" [MST Prioritizes Political Alliances, Dialogo with Society, and Sustainability].
- <sup>7</sup> Marina dos Santos interview.
- <sup>8</sup> Osvaldo León citing a MST national coordinator, Neuri Rosseto, "MST presenta nueva propuesta de reforma agraria" [MST Presents A New Agrarian Reform Proposal].
- <sup>9</sup> Marina dos Santos, opening speech at the 5th Congress.

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*Raúl Zibechi is an international analyst at Brecha, a weekly journal in Montevideo, Uruguay, professor and researcher on social movements at the Multiversidad Franciscana de América Latina, and adviser to grass-roots organizations. He writes the monthly "Zibechi Report" for the CIP Americas Policy Program ([www.americaspolicy.org](http://www.americaspolicy.org)). Translated by Maria Roof.*

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