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The Politics of the MST

Autonomous Rural Communities, the State, and Electoral Politics

by
Leandro Vergara-Camus

Examination of the politicization of landless people in the encampments and settlements of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra (Landless Rural Workers' Movement—MST) in Brazil suggests that the movement's success rests on the fact that it generates relatively autonomous rural communities organized around autonomous political structures that facilitate mobilization. These communities persist because their members, by protecting their right to land from full commoditization, ensuring an adequate production of food, and avoiding the full monetarization of their subsistence needs, are able to mitigate the effects of the market. In addition, in order to secure the survival and development of its settlements, the MST has integrated participation in institutional politics into its mobilization strategy. However, because of the nature of President Lula's policies, the continuity of the traditional alliance between the MST and the Workers' Party is bound to become a major issue.

Keywords: *Landless Rural Workers' Movement (MST), Land struggle, Politicization, Encampments, Settlements, Mobilization, Autonomy, Workers' Party*

Brazil's Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra (Landless Rural Workers' Movement—MST) is one of the most important and successful peasant movements in Latin America today. Since its creation in 1984, the MST has been instrumental in the struggle of hundreds of thousands of poor Brazilian families to gain access to land and a decent standard of living through land occupations. Even though the MST has traditionally coordinated only between 25 and 50 percent of the land occupations, the 902,048 families that were granted land between 1988 and 2007 owe a lot to its development of a very successful political strategy around land occupations and social mobilization. At the end of 2007 there were still 69,769 families in 532 encampments throughout Brazil, 289 of which belonged to the MST (DATALUTA, 2008), preparing to occupy land that the state has the constitutional responsibility of distributing.¹ Throughout the years, the MST has not

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only organized the struggle for land but has also taken on numerous tasks that range from child and adult education to medical care and the training of educators, health care providers, agronomists, and co-op administrators. In other words, in a context of profound economic and social crisis, the MST is providing a concrete alternative for poor families in the countryside and the cities.

As in many other parts of the underdeveloped world, the struggle for land is taking the form of a response by the popular classes to the growing fragmentation of work and the insecurity of the informal economy, which has intensified with the implementation of neoliberal policies (Bernstein, 2004; Bryceson, 2000; Moyo and Yeros, 2005). In Brazil today, the struggle for land in the countryside and the city has gradually become one of the ways to secure subsistence and move away from social marginalization. However, in the case of the MST, this dramatic struggle for citizenship has not stopped when families gain access to land but has been channeled toward much broader struggles that challenge the way the popular classes relate to politics, the state, and political parties. Although it is widely known that the MST has collaborated closely with the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party—PT), surprisingly little has been written on the subject, especially considering the fact that the MST has gone much farther than simply supporting or participating in the party. In the southern states of Brazil, the region where it has been present for the longest time, some of its members have won local elections under the PT banner while remaining committed to the movement (Meszaros, 2000: 15; Wright and Wolford, 2003: 321). Based partly on fieldwork in southern Brazil in 2003, this article explores how partisan politics fit into the overall MST strategy of politicizing landless people, a strategy that privileges participatory democracy at the community level and pressure-group mobilization at the state level.

Certain scholars link the success of the MST to its combining direct action with institutional-legal pressure (Hammond, 1999: 485; Meszaros, 2000: 9). In this article I argue that its success and resilience rest also on the fact that through its struggle for land it generates relatively autonomous rural communities organized around autonomous political structures that promote the politicization of its membership and facilitate mobilization. In turn, these communities persist because their members, by protecting their right to land from full commoditization, ensuring adequate production of food, and avoiding the full monetarization of their subsistence needs, are able to mitigate the effects of the market. I use the term "relatively autonomous rural communities" to highlight the fact that these communities are not completely independent from the "outside world." They have ongoing relationships with various actors locally, nationally, and internationally. Moreover, MST settlements benefit from state funding and programs, and the MST also works with and receives donations from national and international solidarity groups and nongovernmental organizations. However, the way in which it is able to determine or negotiate the kind of external intervention in their member communities justifies the use of the term "autonomy."

The next section elaborates on the theoretical orientation of my work. Thereafter, the article argues that the politicization that happens in encampments and settlements is the basis of the MST's strength. It continues by turning

to the struggle to remain on the land and presents the strategies through which MST settlers seek to secure their survival. Since pressuring the state for funding and favorable policies has been one of these strategies and has generated experiences of participation of MST members in municipal and state politics, in the last section of the article I focus on the MST strategy with regard to participation in institutional politics. Considering that Lula's government has not yet fulfilled the promises it has made to landless people and small farmers, I conclude by raising the issue of a possible shift in the MST's traditional alliance with the PT and the political challenges it could represent.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, CIVIL SOCIETY, AND THE STATE

Since the early 1990s, some researchers working on new social movements have emphasized the emergence of "new forms of doing politics," the construction of "new forms of social power," and the shift in strategy from a focus on the conquest of state power toward a "search for autonomy" or an "alternative society" (Calderón, Piscitelli, and Reyna, 1992: 24, 28). Others have highlighted that one of the main goals was the "transformation of the dominant political culture" (Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar, 1998: 9) and the development of "a project of a new sociability" (Dagnino, 1998: 52). Compared with movements 25 years earlier, which had "strong state/political orientations," new social movements were "searching for their own cultural identities and spaces for social expression, political or otherwise" (Calderón, Piscitelli, and Reyna, 1992: 23). Regardless of theoretical perspective, analysts observed that these social movements shared a profound distrust of the state and political parties and were reluctant to collaborate with them. However, some observers could not but caution against hasty generalizations, stressing that social movements, although suspicious of manipulation and jealous of their autonomy, did not always shy away from political parties (Hellman, 1992; 1995; Dagnino, 1998: 56; Petras and Veltmeyer, 2001).

My analysis of the politics of the MST and its relationship to the state and to political parties is inspired by Antonio Gramsci's (1975: 577) notion of the extended state, which distinguishes political society from civil society in an attempt to grasp the complexity of class power in liberal democratic capitalist societies. In Gramsci's work, political society is constituted by state institutions such as the government, the legislative bodies, the judiciary system, and the administrative apparatus of the state. I will use the term "institutional politics" to refer to political activities that are carried out within these institutions. In contrast, civil society is constituted by institutions such as the school, the Church, the mass media, and the voluntary civic organizations that produce and reproduce bourgeois culture and values. This distinction leads Gramsci to rethink the role of the political party. For him, the party plays the role of an initiator and promoter of a revolutionary counterhegemony, leading or accompanying popular struggles and articulating, giving meaning to, and diffusing the hegemony of the subaltern classes (Gramsci, 1971: 328). Accordingly, the party is expected to be active not only in political society but also in civil society, contributing to the emergence of politicized citizens who

are capable of governing themselves. The party carries out a function of education, political formation, and empowerment of its militants and individuals in general, for it is one of the institutions in which the exercise of popular power is learned (Gramsci, 1975: 428, 447).

Gramsci's understanding of the state and the role of the political party is useful for analyzing the strategies of Latin American social movements, especially those, such as the MST, that aim at fundamentally transforming social relations of domination. It allows examination of the actions undertaken by social movements to politicize their membership and transform social relations within their organizations and in civil society at large and those conducted on the terrain of institutional politics. The Gramscian conception of the state also coincides with the politics of the MST, which uses social mobilization to effect change in state actions, policies, and programs.

LIFE IN THE ENCAMPMENT AND THE MAKING OF THE MST'S MILITANCY

Winning land is at once the end of a long and very difficult journey and the beginning of another one: the struggle to remain on the land. After a long conversation with Jacir Suárez, an MST settler in the Pirituba settlement in Itapeva, in the state of São Paulo, I asked him, "Would you sell your land?" This was his answer:

For me, land was always someone else's. I think it's because of that that I didn't value it. After conquering a piece of land, I value land. Before I would have sold my land. Not today. With the struggle, all that I have I do because we conquered land. Land is the beginning of everything. Who could have told that everything starts under a plastic tent?

This plastic tent represents one of the symbols of the struggle of the MST, since encampments made of hundreds of these tents can be seen on the fringes of federal and state highways all over Brazil. It is under these tents that landless families, men, women, and children, live and organize for many years while they occupy unproductive latifundia to force the state to expropriate their owners.² Life in these camps is very harsh. Braving all kinds of weather and illnesses, people must make ends meet with limited food, fuel, and drinking water. On top of that, in many locales they face constant intimidation and violence from gunmen paid by landowners. Families live under these conditions year-round without any guarantee of achieving their goal of agrarian reform. What can explain this perseverance and dedication?

The geographer Wendy Wolford (2003b: 501) argues that the capacity of the MST to maintain high levels of participation is due to its ability to create an "imagined community" organized around ideas, practices, symbols, slogans, and rituals but, more important, to its ability to remain an effective mediator between the state and settlers. These high levels of participation also derive, however, from the maintenance of organizational structures that encourage politicization and mobilization. Participation in these political structures creates not only an "imagined community" but also "real relatively

autonomous communities" that are easier to mobilize than the membership of other organizations.

The sociologist Wilder Robles (2000: 679) has underlined that for the MST "the first step toward overcoming systematic social exclusion was to establish community-based political units." According to Robles, the movement viewed these units as "autonomous spaces where the poor and the oppressed learn how to organize and educate themselves against exclusionary power structures." It is through the everyday experiences and practices in the encampments and land occupations (*ocupações*) that landless families are transformed into a politicized and organized force of the poor. The encampment period constitutes a period of ultrapolicization (Romano, 1994: 257; Fernandes, 2005) of everyday life, because almost all aspects of residents' lives are dealt with through participation in various types of small committees (Almeida and Ruiz, 2000: 16, Fernandes, 2000: 184–185). However, the MST differs from many other organizations in that it controls an actual territorial space.

To capture this particularity of the MST, Bernardo Mançano Fernandes (2005) has developed the concept of "socio-territorial movements." He argues that "territorialized movements are those that are organized and act in different places at the same time, made possible by their form of organization, which permits the spatialization of the struggle for land" (2005: 326). Socio-territorial movements, in their struggle against capital and proletarianization, also use the space they control as "a space of political socialization" (321) in which they create and re-create themselves through the experiences of their members. Indeed, being a *sem-terra* means not only being a member of an organization but, more important, living for a relatively long period of time in a community with its own norms, values, and objectives. This feeling of "belonging" to a real, geographically circumscribed rural community that is linked to a broader *sem-terra* community takes form gradually through participation first in the organizational structures of an encampment and later in those of a settlement and in the movement in general.

In an encampment or a settlement, most political decisions are made by the grassroots membership in consultation and coordination with regional, state, and national leaderships. In many interviews that I conducted the narration of the various times *acampados* had to move from one property to another was a common feature. In all cases, people remembered the discussions and negotiations with state and police officials with respect to the terms and details of their displacement. Although highly institutionalized, encampments and settlements maintain an important degree of local autonomy.

The negotiations, discussions, decisions, and actions undertaken during the period of encampment make up a concrete and practical process of politicization and empowerment (Fernandes, 2000: 174, Hammond, 1999: 482) that interferes with the bourgeois hegemony within civil society that seeks to depoliticize social and economic problems. Through their various political experiences either within or outside the encampment and later in their settlement, MST members, by solving problems and planning actions, learn to mobilize and organize. As they become aware of their rights and pressure, negotiate with, or confront state authorities from the various levels of government, they learn to question the state, demystifying it and, as it were,

depriving the king of his royal robes. One observes here that the MST plays the same role that the political party does in Gramsci's (1975: 428, 447) thought. By empowering landless people, it is an educator in class power, citizenship, and self-government for the subaltern classes. Therefore, if we recognize the class character of the MST experience of construction of popular power, the politicization happening in MST's encampments is the beginning of what new-social-movements scholars call "new forms of doing politics" or "the transformation of the dominant political culture" (Calderón, Piscitelli, and Reyna, 1992; Alvarez, Dagnino, and Escobar, 1998).

THE STRUGGLE TO REMAIN ON THE LAND

If the conquest of land comes only after a very long and extremely difficult struggle, remaining on the land is also far from an easy task. Becoming a settler means, first and foremost, the beginning of the battle to secure survival within the very hostile market controlled by agribusiness. Even researchers from the state Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária (National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform—INCRA) recognize that this battle is fought with almost no real help from the government (Cardim, Vieira, and Viégas, 1998: 24).

In their struggle to remain on the land, MST settlers are faced with a major challenge: creating economic mechanisms that will generate permanent sources of income. The movement attempts to meet this challenge by focusing in the first place on the self-sufficiency of its settlers and where possible the diversification of agricultural production. The proportion of agricultural production that is geared toward household consumption, although generally small in relation to total output, represents an enormous difference from the food scarcity that many poor people experienced in the city or in rural towns. Indeed, most settlers interviewed underscored food self-sufficiency as one of the fundamental advantages of conquering land because it allowed them not to have to depend on money to cover that fundamental need. Thus, at least in this respect, by blocking the monetarization of subsistence needs and thus the full commoditization of social relations access to land helps to mitigate the effects of the market.

Nonetheless, for MST settlers self-sufficiency can only represent a first step toward the sustained development of settlements. The movement has tried to reach this objective by forming cooperatives and creating agro-industries (MST, 1991) and by developing new collective forms of organizing production (Martins, 2000: 38–39; Singer, 2002) that contain attractive elements of an alternative model of sustainable development. However, experiences of cooperation have not been easy to sustain and have now been adapted to the settlers' overwhelming preference for family farming.³ Thus, for the MST as for many other peasant movements in Latin America, it has proven much more difficult to generate alternative forms of production than to maintain politicized autonomous rural communities.

The current context of market liberalization in Brazil, which has resulted in constant price fluctuations and put small farmers in competition with highly subsidized agribusinesses, is very adverse to small farmers. In the coming

years, the main objective of the MST will probably continue to be pressuring the state for agrarian reform in order to see the small-farmer sector grow in size and security (Stédile in Amaral, 2003: 6). But the difficulties of current settlers also bring to the fore another imperative: sustaining political mobilization for government agricultural credits and technical assistance.

Mobilizing against neoliberal state policies and pressuring for the implementation or improvement of particular programs are traditional tactics of MST political strategy, but maintaining high levels of mobilization and participation is much more difficult to achieve in settlements than in encampments. The first years of settlement retain a certain continuity with the "ultra-politicized period of the occupation" (Romano, 1994) because settlers constantly have to pressure the state to provide the needed infrastructure (roads, schools, electricity, etc.). However, once most of the settlement's infrastructure is in place, individual preoccupations often start to replace more collective ones. Settlements, in contrast to encampments, which to a certain extent function at the margins of the capitalist economy, are much more integrated into the logic of capitalist society (Abramoway, 1994). One of the main challenges for the MST is therefore to keep its decision-making and representation structures in the settlement functioning so as to facilitate mobilization when required.

The extent to which this challenge can be met will vary according to the experience and internal dynamic of each settlement. Wolford (2003a: 210) observed that in some settlements the settlers gradually came to see the MST as a union, "a service organization that represented the settlers rather than a social movement of which they were members." Although this tendency can be observed in older settlements where the struggle for land was characterized by more informal and personalist leadership, it is difficult to argue that this is a general trend. In the settlements where the decision-making and representation structures have remained active, the MST is not simply a mediator between its members and the state. Even if the state provides most of the financial resources, contrary to Wolford's (2003b: 513) assertion that "once MST members receive land, the government becomes their landlord, creditor, educator and overseer" the state is not the ultimate overseer in the settlement. On many issues, the MST settlers themselves are the overseers, deciding on questions that range from the pedagogy adopted in their schools to the type of health care philosophy they prefer to the type of technical assistance they want (Martins, 2000: 38).

Government programs are not implemented from above but have to be negotiated with the settlement and the MST. For instance, the settlement Fazenda Anoni in Sarandi, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, fought for many years to have the state finance the construction of a primary school.⁴ Once it was approved, the state wanted the school to function according to the programs and norms of the Ministry of Education, while settlers wanted to implement the program and pedagogy that the MST had developed in encampments and settlements over years of struggle (Caldart, 1997). After months of negotiations with the state secretary of education, the settlers won many of their demands. Their pedagogy was accepted as long as they also covered the objectives of the Ministry of Education, and a certain number of teachers were selected from the settlement. The current program of the Chico

Mendes school follows Paulo Freire's precepts and emphasizes rural life, linking theory with practice, among other things, through the maintenance of a small plot on which students grow all kinds of vegetables. The governing body of the school is made up of a series of committees in which students have as much representation as teachers and parents.

As this example shows, MST settlers participate in and maintain relatively autonomous communities that set their own priorities and determine the ways to reach them in assemblies and later negotiate with the state to implement programs that will meet their objectives. In general terms, it could be said that beyond the "normalization" of political life that characterizes settlements, the political structures in MST settlements tend to foster relatively high levels of participation and mobilization of the militancy that allow them to confront the state. However, the financial dependence of settlements on the state has meant that, in order to influence state policies or simply have a voice in traditional spaces of political power, the MST has had to find a way to enter the field of institutional politics.

THE MST AND INSTITUTIONAL POLITICS

In Brazil as in other countries of Latin America, peasant movements have historically had all kinds of difficulty creating alliances with—while maintaining their autonomy from—the state, political parties, populist politicians, and the Catholic and Lutheran churches (Welch, 1999: 222–227, 308–316, 328–331). This difficulty reached its peak when, in the aftermath of the military coup of 1964 and the subsequent brutal persecution of communist leaders and other progressive rural activists, rural unions became the "distributional arm of the state" in the countryside by providing rural workers and small farmers with a series of state services (Houtzager, 1998: 117–122).

In the 1980s, toward the end of the military dictatorship, when some political space opened up and the democratization of rural unions resumed, the question of alliances with political parties and politicians resurfaced. Because MST members shared similar political experiences with the new unionism movement that led to the creation of the Central Única de Trabalhadores (Unitary Confederation of Workers—CUT) and the PT, the question of how to articulate the struggle for land with the electoral politics of the PT figured prominently in internal discussions. From its founding in 1984 to the present, the MST has emphasized both the importance of participating on all fronts in civil society (rural workers' unions, small farmers' organizations, churches, coalitions against neoliberal policies) and political society (government agencies and political parties) as well as the need to maintain its autonomy from each of these institutions (Wright and Wolford, 2003: 41; Fernandes, 2000: 83–93; Almeida and Ruiz, 2000: 26). Although officially the MST did not call for unconditional support for a single party, the great majority of its members, along with many other Brazilian social activists, saw the PT as the political voice of social movements (Keck, 1989).

Most of the mobilizations of the MST (for land, credits, housing, education, health care services, infrastructure, etc.), carried out within civil society, confront or pressure state institutions directly and raise the issue of institutional

politics. Who controls a particular government has made a significant difference in the way pressures from the MST have been dealt with. For instance, the first wave of settlements in the early 1980s in the state of São Paulo benefited from some support from Governor Franco Montoro (1983–1987), and more recently the PT government of Olívio Dutra in Rio Grande do Sul (1998–2002) found innovative ways to accelerate land expropriation and direct more financial resources toward that end. The movement has nevertheless been very cautious in its political strategy with respect to institutional politics.

Nationally, the MST has chosen not to run its own candidates for political office or have its leaders accept government positions, while at the municipal and state levels every local MST can decide its own position with respect to institutional politics. By and large, MST militants have worked alongside PT candidates during electoral campaigns, and some MST members have been active in the party. But the MST has explicitly rejected the idea of becoming organically linked to the PT. For many MST leaders, as well as for the grassroots membership, collaboration with the PT should not be allowed to divert the movement from its mobilization strategy, especially when the PT is in government. For example, Armando da Silva, of Fazenda Macali in Ronda Alta, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, echoing the sentiments of many other settlers, was unequivocal: “When government is ours, it’s worse. The MST stops organizing protests. When government is from other parties, we go out to protest, to demand credits. When it’s ours, we are scared; we let them resolve things for us. We need to continue pressuring.”

In the case of some older settlements in southern Brazil, in order to have more influence and presence locally settlers have decided to get directly involved in local politics under the banner of the PT (Wright and Wolford, 2003: 321). Elected MST settlers have occupied seats in municipal councils of Paranacity, in the state of Paraná, as well as in Ronda Alta and Pontão, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. In Sumaré, in the state of São Paulo, militants have been elected mayor. In Rio Grande do Sul, two well-known peasant activists, Dionilson Marcon and Frei Sérgio Gørgen, have been elected on the PT ticket as representatives to the state legislature.

Although the decision to present leaders on the local PT ticket is discussed and agreed upon collectively by each settlement or the regional and state MST, these peasant leaders serve not as representatives of the MST but as individuals. Their actions are nevertheless closely followed and monitored by the settlers, and sometimes they have to give a percentage of their salary to the MST. This is the case because the movement sees political representation as a way of amplifying its influence in Brazilian civil society. These MST members-turned-politicians work as public spokespersons for agrarian reform and related social issues. Judith Strozaki, a national MST leader, stresses that participation in local and state politics has to be in line with the overall mission of the MST, which is “to organize the poor in the countryside and in the city.” The idea behind this is that a political representative has better access to the media and ability to intervene in public debates and attract attention to protests, rallies, and meetings. In Gramscian terms, participation in institutional politics should serve the objectives of mobilization and organization in civil society. But, as the same national leader points out,

experience has shown that political representatives are so busy with other issues that they end up "administering the institutional machine and are left with very little time to organize the people."

In contrast to the peasant movements of the predictatorship period, the MST has clearly remained autonomous from the state and political parties. It seems to have been able to set the terms of its alliance with the PT and has even tried to find a way to use institutional politics as part of its mobilization strategy. However, the manner in which the MST has decided to deal with the issue of participation in institutional politics appears to be a conjunctural one.

Indeed, the recent presidency of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has raised new issues regarding the MST's strategy toward the PT and institutional politics. In terms of policy, this contradictory alliance has translated into some favorable political measures affecting small agricultural producers: credits for small farmers have doubled and been made available before the harvest, debts have been renegotiated and partially cancelled, and marketing guarantees, such as minimum prices for cash crops, have been extended. With respect to the land issue, however, Lula's record is timid at best. Although he has reaffirmed his sympathy for the land struggle, his administration has failed to fulfill the expectations of landless people and even his own promise of settling 400,000 new families, regularizing the status of 500,000 more, and facilitating purchase through credit for an additional 150,000 (Oliveira, 2006: 8). According to official numbers, Lula's agrarian reform has accelerated the pace of land distribution by settling on average 81,430 families per year, while the former president, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, had settled on average 65,548 families per year (Fernandes, 2007: 17). However, some analysts contest these numbers and their significance. Ariovaldo Umbelino de Oliveira argues, for instance, that of the 245,061 families allegedly settled in the first three years, only 89,927 were settled on new settlements, representing a mere 34.2 percent of the government's goal for these years. The remaining families were families whose right to land was regularized or recognized or who benefited from the relocation program for a hydroelectric dam (Oliveira, 2006: 21). Fernandes (2007: 17), acknowledging Oliveira's analysis, adds that Lula's agrarian reform also represents a step back in relation to land concentration, since only 25 percent of the families have been settled on expropriated private land. This limited commitment to agrarian reform and the slow pace of land distribution raise questions with regard to the capacity or willingness of Lula's government to carry out a vast and well-financed agrarian reform. For many members of the MST, it also raises the question whether supporting Lula and the PT all these years has been worthwhile.

CONCLUSION

The MST has grown because it has achieved concrete results. It has helped settle thousands of families on the land and fought to obtain resources for the various needs in those settlements (agricultural credits, technical assistance, elementary and secondary education, health clinics, etc.). It has been able to make those gains because, by controlling a geographic space, it has

built relatively autonomous rural communities (encampments and settlements) made up of politically active members organized around their own political structures, which are linked to those of other communities at the regional, state, and national level. Through their participation in these political structures beginning with the period of encampment and land occupation, MST members become politicized and active citizens who are easier to mobilize and can confront the state on specific issues. Thus, the MST plays for landless people the role that Gramsci attributed to the communist party with respect to the working class and that the PT embodied with respect to popular sectors until the early 1990s.

However, creating alternative forms of organizing agricultural production has been much more difficult than generating and maintaining a politicized and participatory membership. In the context of neoliberal policies of commercial liberalization (reduced and targeted credits that favor the interests of agribusiness), the future for peasants or small farmers is bleak. With the relative failure of collective work and cooperatives and settlers' preference for family farming, the MST's approach to the challenge of agricultural production still depends on its experience in political organization and mobilization. Its objective is thus to mobilize enough landless rural workers and small farmers to force the state to distribute a substantial amount of land, provide resources for settlements, and support small farmers. At the same time, this mobilization, as the MST has come to realize over time, needs to be complemented with strategic participation in institutional politics alongside the PT. Lula's second term will be determinant for the future of this dual strategy.

For Lula's reelection bid in 2006, the MST remained silent throughout the campaign, giving its support to Lula only a few days before the second-round vote. This attitude is telling of the ambivalence with which it approaches Lula's second term. The composition of the new cabinet does not promise any significant change with respect to that of his first four years. In the light of its achievements and setbacks under an "allied government," the MST must address some serious questions. If agrarian reform is not accelerated or agricultural policies do not change substantially, will the MST want to maintain its alliance with the PT? Will the slow pace of land distribution push it to reconsider its relation with the PT and even its strategy toward institutional politics? If disillusionment with Lula's policies generates new divisions within the PT, the participation of MST members in the PT will become more delicate. Will it be appropriate for members of the MST to compete in local elections under the PT banner? Can the MST stay on the margins of the new Partido Socialismo e Liberdade (Socialism and Liberty Party—PSOL), recently created by members of the PT expelled during Lula's administration?

Moreover, if there are no major shifts in Lula's policies, the disillusionment of the MST membership with the results of years of actively supporting him may initiate reflection on the limitations of the movement's strategy with regard to institutional politics that could have important consequences for the future of the movement. Whatever the result of this reflection, the MST's long experience of struggle, which has allowed it to create and maintain autonomous rural communities, will most likely be at the heart of it.

NOTES

1. The MST's struggle for land has two stages. First, landless families temporarily live and prepare themselves for land occupation in encampments (*acampamentos*) on the fringes of federal roads near landed estates that meet the requirements to be subject to expropriation. Second, once they have been successful in their occupation, they are given the land they have occupied, and a permanent settlement (*assentamento*), divided into family or common plots and common areas and buildings (school, health care clinic, co-operative, etc.), is created under the supervision of the state. The people involved in land occupations are referred to as *acampados* and *acampadas*, while settlers are referred to as *assentados* and *assentadas*.

2. Because of the numerous legal instances a landowner can appeal to in order to contest and postpone expropriation, a landless family may live in one or many of these encampments for a period of two to four years or more.

3. In 1997, according to the agrarian reform census, the overwhelming majority, 94 percent, of MST settlers tilled their land as family units and only 6 percent produced as a collective or combined family farming with some kind of cooperation (Singer, 2002: 115).

4. The majority of the time, children go to school in nearby towns, and the struggle is more about having the municipality provide school buses from the settlement to the school.

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