

Land, Cooperation, and Socialism

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Brazil's Landless Workers' Movement (MST) is Latin America's largest social movement, having struggled for decades for a people's agrarian reform and social justice in Brazil. Since its foundation in the early 1980s, the MST has combined land occupations, cooperative work, political education, and internationalism to challenge the country's highly concentrated latifundia system and resist the expansion of agribusiness. The movement has developed a model of collective struggle rooted in solidarity and mass mobilisation, organising hundreds of thousands of families in rural Brazil. When MST occupies a tract of underutilised or idle land, it first establishes an *acampamento* (encampment). An *acampamento* is a direct-action method of pressuring the government to redistribute land in keeping with Brazil's agrarian reform laws. During this period, the movement organises political education, collective work, and self-governance.



If the struggle succeeds, the *acampamento* will transition into an *assentamento* (settlement), now recognised and legalised by the state, and therefore more stable. Like *acampamentos*, *assentamentos* are collective projects, even if the families in them maintain individual parcels. In an *assentamento*, the land cannot be bought or sold. It technically belongs to the state but is managed by the collective or by what could be called the commune. *Assentamentos* are also self-governed, administer much of their own justice, and self-manage their educational processes. In short, both *acampamentos* and *assentamentos* express a high degree of communal control over their production and day-to-day life.

Beyond the struggle for land, the MST works to confront broader capitalist dynamics by embracing agroecology, cooperative production, and political education. All these are elements of what the movement calls a “people’s agrarian reform.” The idea of the “people’s agrarian reform” is that, in a world where financial capital and multinational corporations dominate agriculture, it is not enough to secure land for the landless. One must also develop an alternative model of production and life, embodying socialist and ecological principles.

In this interview, João Pedro Stedile, a key spokesperson and founder of the MST, discusses the movement’s emphasis on collective struggle and solidarity, the challenges of organising cooperative production, and the evolution of the MST’s goals in response to the changing capitalist economy. He also examines the MST’s strategy of building alliances between the rural and urban working class and its engagement with international struggles, particularly with the communal movement in Venezuela.

At a time when capitalism is deepening both inequalities and ecological destruction, the MST’s experiences and proposals offer valuable insights into the building of a socialist future

—C. G. & C. P. M.

Cira Pascual Marquina and Chris Gilbert: Since the early days of the MST in the 1980s, the organisation has focused on agrarian reform and made the collective occupation and use of the land a key part of its project. Can you explain why the organisation emphasises collectivity and cooperation? What kind of communities—with what values and practices—are created before, during, and after occupying the land?

João Pedro Stedile: The MST has drawn on two key concepts from the historical experience of the working class in general and campesinos in particular: mass struggle and solidarity.

We believe that only mass struggle can achieve social conquests and effectively organise people. If you want to change your life, you have to take part in mass struggle because that is where real strength lies: in the people. As an organising force, mass struggle is more effective than the motive of collective work alone. That is why in our movement’s grassroots work we link mass struggle with political power.

Our strength does not come from our arguments or ideas; it comes from the number of people we can mobilise. From the beginning, we have adopted a method that involves everyone—children, youth, men, women, and elders. The whole family must participate in a land occupation for it to succeed. A land occupation is a collective mass action that must generate enough force to create conflict and compel the national government, the state, to enforce the agrarian reform laws.¹

¹ ↪ The MST relies on two key legal frameworks to support their land occupations and push for a people’s agrarian reform. The first is Brazil’s 1964 “Estatuto da Terra” (Land Statute/Law), which defines principles of land tenure, emphasising productivity, and establishing mechanisms for the expropriation of unproductive land. The second is Brazil’s 1988 Constitution, particularly Articles 184 and 186, which authorise the government to expropriate land that fails to fulfil its “função social da propriedade” (social function of property). This social function is defined by rational and adequate use, environmental preservation, and benefits to both owners and workers. Such legislation provides a legal foundation for a people’s agrarian reform, enabling unproductive lands to be expropriated and redistributed to landless rural workers.

The second concept that is woven into the fabric of our movement is solidarity, which we see as a civilisatory principle of human reason. Human beings can only truly realise themselves and find happiness through solidarity, which is ultimately mutual aid. What does this mean? To occupy land and change my life, I must join with others in an act of solidarity as an equal. At the same time, these collective actions also generate broader solidarity from society and the working class toward our struggle. That principle has defined our movement from the beginning.

Another important challenge is organising production after the people reclaim the land and form what we call an *assentamento* in Brazil. Initially, there was a strong political will to develop agricultural production collectively. However, both our experience and that of *campesinos* in general have shown that cooperative work in agriculture can be quite difficult. Each *campesino* interacts with nature differently, following their own work rhythms and schedules. Some rise early to start their tasks, while others sleep in and begin later in the day. Some bring their children to the field, while others do not. Over time, our lived experience has taught us that when it comes to cultivating the land, collectivisation does not always work.

Since organising *campesino* labor [in the fields] collectively proved challenging, we shifted our focus to cooperative structures in other areas of production. For example, the MST has established cooperatives to acquire farm machinery or manage the commercialisation of agricultural goods, including processing plants and storage facilities. We have advanced to the stage of cooperative agro-industrialisation, developing enterprises for milk production, cold chain supply, and more. Agro-industrial production is complex, requiring diverse tasks to be carried out with precision and collaboration—for instance, in food processing and distribution. This is where our cooperative efforts are now concentrated.

CPM and CG: The contradiction between town and country changes over time, resulting in peasant producers or campesinos experiencing different forms of oppression. Today, financial capital and multinational corporations dominate small producers even when they possess their own land. The response must be therefore an agrarian reform that is comprehensive and multifaceted. It must include reclaiming land, (re)appropriating science and technology, promoting cultural and social life in rural areas, developing agroecology, achieving food sovereignty, and defending the rights of nature. How does the MST engage in these areas, and why does it turn to cooperative or communal solutions?

JPS: Throughout the twentieth century, most countries operated under the hegemony of industrial capitalism. For industrial capitalism, it was convenient to integrate *campesinos* into the market, which is why land reforms were implemented in most industrialised nations of the Global North. We call these “classic” agrarian reforms because they were the first; they involved expropriating large estates and redistributing land to *campesinos*. Those *campesinos* were then integrated into the internal market. They consumed what was produced by industry and also produced for agroindustry.

While these classic agrarian reforms played a significant role in the development of productive forces, they also represented an alliance between the industrial bourgeoisie—who opposed the *latifundia* and the rural oligarchy—and *campesinos* who needed land to work. However, as you pointed out, since the 1990s, the hegemonic sector of capital has shifted from industrial capital to financial capital and its multinational corporations that dominate the world market and, by extension, agriculture. Unlike the previous model, which maintained an alliance with *campesinos*, there is a new mode for exploiting agriculture, which is known as agribusiness. It is big capital’s way of dominating agriculture as

a whole. It involves large-scale monoculture, widespread use of genetically modified seeds, intensive mechanisation, and widespread use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides.

Faced with this new capitalist model, the campesino bloc had to rethink its project, which could no longer focus exclusively on land tenure. Instead, it would have to address the reorganisation of agriculture in general. New programs, not just focused on defending the small producer, began to be developed. We call our program the “people’s agrarian reform,” but in other parts of Latin America it is called “integral agrarian reform,” or, when a more political focus is wanted, “radical agrarian reform.” These are just names. However, the important thing is that the program is now different. We have to think about agriculture as a whole and respond with new paradigms. At an earlier time, land reforms in favor of peasants, as exemplified par excellence by Emiliano Zapata’s reform during the Mexican Revolution, had a huge influence all over Latin America. Nevertheless, the project cannot be just about distributing the land; it has to be about responding to the needs of the whole people. So now our aim is to address the needs of the pueblo as a whole, and we have to do it with new paradigms. In Zapata’s time and in the Asian land reforms, peasants aimed to free themselves from the exploitation of the latifundia or from feudal lords. However, in today’s world, people’s agrarian reform has to aim, above all, at the production of healthy food for the entire population.

This means employing agroecology as a method of food production. Additionally, we must defend nature. If we do not reforest, protect water sources, and safeguard biodiversity, life on this planet will not be sustainable. We are already witnessing the devastating effects of climate change, which is endangering millions and taking many lives. Just last summer, more than fifty thousand people died in Europe due to extreme heat. In my home state in Brazil [Rio Grande do Sul], an actual deluge affected about five million people. Fortunately, the death toll was relatively low—around two hundred—but crops were destroyed and thousands lost their homes, including my son. This is the future capitalism is creating. It is up to us in the rural areas to defend nature so that life on this planet can continue for everybody. The new people’s agrarian reform also focuses on what we call human emancipation. This means that on the land we reclaim, beyond producing food, protecting nature, and safeguarding water and biodiversity, we must also forge new social relations among the people who inhabit it.

Now it is not just about defending the campesino way of life. We need schools, agro-industries, and, above all, new human relations. Life must be emancipatory, based on living well together, on being respectful of diversity, of women, of diverse sexual identities, of Black and Brown people, of all cultures. This is the new paradigm we are building; a task that is ongoing and permanent.

In the end, this is not just a theoretical program written down on paper that people will just follow. It is a continuous educational process, a process of self-training and self-transformation within communities. It requires changing the economy in ways that will also transform society. For instance, we cannot overcome patriarchy without ensuring that women have incomes and autonomous work. No one envisions a future where women work in the fields all day like beasts of burden. What we seek is dignified work and an income for women, for young people, for everyone. For us, that is only possible by developing agro-industrial cooperatives. Cooperative production will create new economic and social relations capable of combating the distortions of capitalism—patriarchy, racial discrimination, and all other forms of oppression.

CPM and CG: Capitalism has evolved in such a way that today the bourgeoisie is incapable of leading a process of national liberation and development; only the working class can do so. Arguably, that is why, even if the MST initially began by confronting a particular contradiction in capitalism—the battle for land reform—the dialectic of the struggle

has led the movement to challenge the capitalist system as a whole. Since 1990, the MST has embraced socialism as its strategic goal. Today, it sees its task as nothing less than organising the entire working class to confront capitalism and imperialism. We would like to hear your reflections on this trajectory and how the MST's struggle for collective control of land and to build cooperatives fits into a broader national strategy aimed at socialism. Beyond that, how does this project translate into an international strategy?

JPS: Socialism is neither idealism nor a ready-made formula that solves everything. It is about overcoming capitalism in its entirety—from the exploitation of people to the concentration of wealth and more. Although we are a campesino movement that defends the project of a people's agrarian reform, we know that to attain that reform today, a paradigm centred on campesino forces alone is not enough. This is especially true because, in most of our countries, campesinos are a minority. The majority of the working class is in the cities, which means that our political work must be done in combination with urban sectors. That unity will be built through a program that defends access to healthy food, an income and work for all, and also defends nature.

But what is happening now? Since the rise of neoliberalism and the dominance of financial capital and multinationals, we have been living through a historical epoch in which the mass movement is in decline, coupled with an ideological crisis on the left. The dialectic of class struggle has its ups and downs, and they also affect the countryside. However, we must recognise that this is a particular historical phase—one that, like all others, will not last forever. Eric Hobsbawm and the British Marxist historians taught us that class struggle, both nationally and globally, takes place in waves. There are moments when the masses take the initiative and drive movements forward, and there are moments of ebb when the masses are defeated and the bourgeoisie asserts total hegemony.

However, there are also periods when we experience a return to a balance of forces and the masses begin to rise again. In my view, we suffered a major defeat with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the ensuing end of the socialist bloc. That event provoked a reflux in mass movements throughout the West. I would argue that we are still in that moment, but we have already managed to re-balance the situation in many countries and the masses are beginning to rise again. However, we are still not an international movement, which is crucial for the success of our struggles. The one advantage, if we can call it that, is that capitalism has become fully internationalised. That is why we must also channel our energy into building international connections that, in the medium term, will lay the foundation for a resurgence of mass movements on a global scale.

The other issue to consider is that, in this new phase of mass movement revival, we will likely see a period of popular governments in power before socialism itself emerges. Venezuela is an example. There was no classical revolution, but rather a resurgence of the mass movement that began with the Caracazo in 1989 [a popular rebellion]. The repression of the people during the Caracazo provoked deep indignation within sectors of the Armed Forces, leading to the 1992 rebellion and the emergence of a leader, Hugo Chávez. Then, in 1998, Chávez was elected, and a popular government took power. However, it was not yet a government that resulted from a [classical] revolution.

In Brazil, we do not even have a popular government in that sense. Lula, while coming from a leftist party [the Workers' Party, PT], governs through an alliance with sectors of the bourgeoisie. It is a broad-front government aimed at halting the rise of the far right. In Brazil today, the political and organisational conditions necessary to accumulate revolutionary forces do not yet exist, meaning that the resurgence of the mass movement is still ahead of us.

CPM and CG: The MST has maintained a brigade in Venezuela since 2005 that has worked a great deal with the communes. Has Hugo Chávez's socialist communal project influenced the MST? Conversely, has there been influence in the opposite direction?

JPS: I believe there has been a process of integration and mutual learning among Venezuelans, Brazilians, and Latin Americans in general. We have developed various ways of coming together. One important example, from a long while back, is the campesino movement's role in the struggle against neoliberalism and the U.S. drive to impose the Free Trade Area of the Americas [FTAA]. The FTAA would have subjected our countries to complete market liberalisation under the domination of U.S. capital. In the early 2000s, the fight against the FTAA resulted in numerous Latin American organisations linking up and working together. The struggle culminated in the historic 2005 march in Mar del Plata [Argentina], where we successfully defeated and buried the FTAA.

The continental struggle against the FTAA also led to new coordinating bodies, such as the Latin American Coordinator of Rural Organisations [CLOC-Vía Campesina]. From its inception, Venezuelan campesinos and rural workers from across Latin America participated in the CLOC. That was followed by the creation of ALBA Movements [Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America Movements], which was to be the counterpart to the FTAA. These internationalist projects have served—and continue to serve—as spaces of integration, where we exchange experiences and build solidarity. Later, ALBA Movements sent brigades around Latin America with various objectives. These brigades were inspired by the Cuban Revolution, which developed them from its earliest days as a method for organising the militancy into a collective that would address specific challenges.

The first big brigade that the Cubans organised in the very early years of the revolution was a literacy brigade. Later, they formed brigades to harvest sugarcane, and, over time, these brigades would travel around the world, reflecting their internationalist spirit of solidarity with other peoples. Thousands of Cubans went on to support other countries in areas such as health care, agronomy, and education. This represents a collective learning process that has not only affected Brazil, Venezuela, and Cuba—the spirit of the brigades has spread across Latin America.

The MST, too, has promoted brigades in various countries—always at the invitation of local grassroots organisations and within a framework of mutual understanding. We have had brigades in Cuba, Haiti, Central America, Colombia, and Paraguay, and a permanent brigade here in Venezuela. We have also sent brigades to several African countries. We all learn a lot from those experiences, and they help us develop our ideas and our programs in new ways. The brigades help us address shared problems in agriculture, in education in general, in the training of cadres, or in the area of health care.

CPM and CG: Finally, we would like to hear your reflections on the commune, understood in a broad sense as a mechanism to dismantle the metabolism of capital through democratic self-government and collective control over the conditions for the reproduction of life.

JPS: In Venezuela, due to its political culture, people use the term “commune.” The commune can be understood in two ways: on the one hand, as a space for organising productive processes or, on the other, as a space of political power at the municipal and district levels. I prefer to think about the commune as an experience of productive cooperation, which is the key issue.

To accumulate forces for overcoming capitalism and achieving socialism, we have to generate diverse forms of organising production that empower people. It is only at the site of production that people can control the products of their labour and develop new social relations of production. As I mentioned when discussing the Brazilian experience, it is through cooperation in production that you can develop a new level of class consciousness in the masses and among militants. Even if you offer political education, literature classes, history courses, and so on, mass consciousness will only advance through practice.

The commune is one way to organise cooperation in production, but there are undoubtedly other forms, with different names, that exist here in Venezuela and across Latin America. For example, in Venezuela, people speak of the conuco as an agroecological model rooted in Indigenous traditions. Other associative or cooperative forms may also persist and should be taken into account. There are multiple ways of developing collaborative forms of work. In the end, the aim is to organise work and production in a cooperative way.

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- ❖ **About the authors: João Pedro Stedile** is a Brazilian economist, activist, and writer. He is a member of the national board of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST), of which he is a cofounder. **Cira Pascual Marquina** and **Chris Gilbert** are the creators and hosts of Escuela de Cuadros, a Marxist educational television program and podcast.
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