

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE LANDLESS WORKERS MOVEMENT AND THE LULA

GOVERNMENT

A EXPERIÊNCIA DO MOVIMENTO DOS TRABALHADORES SEM-TERRA E O GOVERNO LULA.

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Abstract:

Based on fieldwork carried out in Southern Brazil, this article analyses the achievements, difficulties and contradictions of the MST's alternative project. It identifies the organizational structure of the MST as a major factor explaining the success of the movement. It highlights that mobilization and pressure on the state have also been instrumental to land distribution and the development of its settlements. It thus looks at the strategy that the MST had adopted towards participation in institutional politics and its alliance with the Workers Party in Southern Brazil and argues that this strategy and alliance will most likely change because of President Lula's cabinet composition and policy orientation.

Keywords: MST, land concentration, struggle for land, camps, settlements, organizational structure, mobilization, state, institutional politics, PT, Lula government

Resumo:

Baseado no trabalho de campo realizado no Sul do Brasil, este artigo analisa as realizações, dificuldades e contradições do projeto alternativo do Movimento Sem-Terra (MST). Identifica a estrutura organizacional do MST como a grande responsável pelo sucesso do movimento. Destaca a mobilização e as pressões sobre o Estado têm sido também meios úteis para a distribuição de terra e do desenvolvimento dos assentamentos. Observa a estratégia que o MST tinha adotado em relação à participação na política institucional e sua aliança com o Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) no Sul do Brasil, e questiona que esta estratégia e aliança mudarão, provavelmente, por causa da composição do gabinete e da orientação política do Presidente Lula.

Palavras-chave: MST, concentração de terra, luta pela terra, assentamentos, estrutura organizacional, mobilização, Estado, política institucional, PT, governo Lula.

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Resumen

Este artículo se basa en un trabajo de campo realizado en el sur de Brasil y analiza los logros, las dificultades y las contradicciones del proyecto alternativo del MST. Se identifica la estructura organizativa del MST como el factor principal que explica el éxito del movimiento. Se subraya que la mobilización y la presión sobre el Estado por parte del MST han hecho posible la distribución de tierra y el desarrollo de los asentamientos. Por ende, el artículo se enfoca en la estrategia que el MST ha adoptado en cuanto a su participación en la política institucional y su alianza con el Partido de los Trabajadores en el sur de Brasil y argumenta que esta estrategia y alianza muy probablemente cambiarán debido a la composición del gabinete y de la orientación política del gobierno del Presidente Lula.

Palabras clave: MST, concentración de tierra, lucha por la tierra, campamentos, asentamientos, estructura organizativa, mobilización, Estado, política institucional, PT, gobierno Lula

Introduction

This year, the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (Landless Workers' Movement, MST) is celebrating 20 years of existence. In these 20 years, 221 571 families have gained access to land and a decent standard of living through participation in the movement. Currently, there are 112 656 families in 629 MST camps throughout Brazil (Carvalho, 2003: 8) preparing to occupy land which the state has the constitutional responsibility of distributing. Throughout these years, the MST has not only organized the struggle for land but has also taken on numerous tasks that go from child and adult education, to provision of basic health care, to training educators, agronomists, administrator of co-operatives and health care provider. Because of its results, its organizational strength and its activism in Brazilian politics, the MST is probably one of the most important and successful peasant movements in Latin America.

This article will present some of the findings of my three months fieldwork in Southern Brazil in 2003, where I visited MST camps and settlements1. I will look at different aspects of the struggle of landless families organized in the MST, from the

¹ The MST's struggle for land has two stages. First, landless families temporary live and prepare themselves for land occupation in camps (*acampamentos*) on the fringes of federal roads nearby *latifundios* subject to expropriation. Second, once these families win the land they occupied, they establish a permanent settlement (assentamento), divided in family or common lots, common area and buildings (school, health care clinic, cooperative, etc.). The people involved in land occupations are referred to as *acampados* and *acampadas* while settlers are referred to as *assentados* and *assentadas*.

struggle for land to the struggle to remain on the land, to the recent incursions of members of the MST in municipal and state politics.

I start by looking at the historical roots of land concentration in Brazil in order to understand the context of the rise of the MST and the meaning that the struggle for land has for landless people today. I then follow by describing the organizational structure of camps and of the movement in general and I identify it as a major factor in the ability of the MST to maintain politicised and mobilized "autonomous rural communities". I follow by looking at the struggle to remain on the land and present the mechanisms through which the MST seeks to secure the survival of its settlements. Here again, I highlight social mobilization because the resolution of many of the problems faced by the settlers depends on the amount of pressure that the movement is able to put on the state. But since this necessity to pressure the state 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 to institutional politics. Considering that the Lula government has not yet fulfilled the promises he made to landless people and small farmers, I conclude by raising the issue of a possible shift in the MST traditional alliance with the Workers' Party (PT).

Old and New Roots of Land Concentration in Brazil

After Paraguay, Brazil is today the second country in the world in respect to land concentration, its GINI coefficient —where 0 would mean totally equalitarian distribution and 1 complete concentration— having been 0.802 for the year 2001 (Sparovek, 2003: 19). Statistics on the unequal distribution of land are extremely revelling. Based on data for 1995/96, the top 5 per cent controlled 68.8 per cent of the land, while the bottom 50 per cent possessed a mere 2.3 per cent. The situation was slightly better in the South and South-East, where the bottom 50 per cent possessed respectively 7.5 per cent and 4.9 per cent of the land, while the top 5 per cent 56.8 per cent and 53.2 per cent (Sparovek, 2003: 18).

The origin of this concentration goes back to the Portuguese colonization, when, in order to claim control of the territory, the Crown created a powerful oligarchy by giving away large extensions of land to those that took the responsibility for defending and

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administering it (Wright-Wolford, 2003: xxi). However, the land remained legally the property of the crown and landlords only benefiting from a usufruct right over it. With Independence, the landed oligarchy consolidated its power and with the promulgation of the Land Law (*Lei de Terras*) in 1850, which made purchase the only way to acquire land and privatize possession, effectively blocked access to land to poor peasants and immigrants (Guimarães, 1968: 133-135). From 1850 onward, land became a commodity and the growth of private property in land was not submitted to any significant restrictions. The only possible restriction to its expansion could have been the persistence of large extensions of land, property of the Crown and later federal or state governments. But instead, these state properties were used as "land property reserve" for the oligarchy and political elite, which initiated a practice called *grilagem*, referring to the fraudulent appropriation of state land by landlords through the fabrication of false documents, which constitutes the birthmark of many of today's *latifundios* in Brazil.

However, this concentration of land would not have taken the proportion it did had it not been re-enforced by the labour regimes maintained by the export-oriented sugar cane and coffee oligarchies, characterized by labour relations that went from slavery to debtbondage to oppressive forms of tenant farming (Martins, 2003: 304, 307). Hence, the Land law imposed some form of money accumulation as requisite for the acquisition of land that oppressive labour regimes rendered impossible for rural workers and small farmers from the offset. However, with the crisis of Brazil's export-oriented agricultural production and the growing dependence to imported food stocks in the early 1900's, the state encouraged a more genuine colonization of land through immigration in the Southern states and a significant class of small private farmers producing for the local food market emerged (Guimarães, 1982, 74-77, 299-300). The process of industrialization of the 1930's, which triggered the growth of the working class and the local market, provided small family farmers from the South with a demand for their products and a possibility for subsistence. But this sector of the Brazilian peasantry, constituted alongside the large estates, remained relatively small, dependent and thus incapable of challenging the landed oligarchy. Under these conditions, small peasants could not resist the later waves of concentration that accompanied the "modernization of the countryside", promoted by the military dictatorship from the 1960's and continued by subsequent neoliberal regimes.

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In the 1940's and 1950's president Getulio Vargas tried in two occasions to incorporate rural workers in the corporatist state system but did not attempt to infringe further on the interests of the landed class with an agrarian reform (Houtzager, 1998: 137). It was only in 1963 that his successor, João Goulart, managed to codify rural labour rights within the Rural Worker Statute (Estatuto do Trabalhador Rural), but this time also promised an agrarian reform. It was opposed by the São Paulo oligarchy that, with other sectors of the Brazilian ruling class, sponsored the military coup of 1964 (Welch, 1999; Houtzager, 1998). During the military dictatorship, an authentic agrarian reform was cast aside in favour of a project of modernization of the countryside subordinated to the shift in the economic model. Agricultural production would be subordinated to the search for a new comparative advantage of Brazil in the world market. This new strategy led to the encouragement of mono-crops exports, the development of agro-business and the concentration of agricultural production (Maybury-Lewis, 1994; Scherer-Warren, 1988). The project called for the generalization of capitalist relations in the countryside and, at the beginning, was centred on the Land Statute (Estatuto da Terra) that was suppose to promote capitalist enterprise over *latifundio* as the privileged form or rural property (Houtzager, 1998). The *Estatuto da Terra* incorporated articles permitting the expropriation of rural properties that did not fulfill their social function, i.e. that were not put to productive use or that did not provide employment. It also established maximum size for landholdings and conservation criteria (Wright-Wolford, 2003: 35). But these clauses of the Estatuto da Terra remained without effect almost for the whole duration of the military dictatorship.

This modernization policy really took off after 1968 with heavily subsidised credits and below the market interest rates for agricultural production (Houtzager, 1998, as well as fiscal incentives to any company that invested in land (Cardim, Vieira and Viégas, 2003: 23). One of the consequences of these measures were that landowner used the money for many other purposes, including speculation, rather than agricultural production (Guimarães, 1982: 310-313). Another unforeseen consequence has been that large national and transnational corporations, the great majority of them not even from the agricultural sector, own large extensions of land2 and have accentuated land

2 A decade ago, a study that looked at the 46 largest *latifundios* in Brazil and grouped them by economic sector, found that companies from the financial sector owned 22, 133, 342 hectares of land, those from the industrial sector 19,991,211 hectares and those from the agricultural sector 6,277,169 hectares. In all these cases, the percentage of cultivated land in relation to the whole property remained very low: 17.16% for

concentration. In only 9 years, from 1967 to 1978, the amount of land in the hands of the largest landowners (top 5 per cent of all land owners) went from 65.3 per cent of all land to 71.6 per cent (Sparovek, 2003: 20). Simultaneously, another consequence of this modernization on Brazilian agriculture was its increased mechanization and the growth of cattle ranching, which in both cases diminish drastically the need for labour. Thus, between 1960 and 1980, 28 millions rural workers and peasants were expelled from the countryside (Sparovek, 2003: 24) to the major cities of Brazil, that in turn were unable to provide employment for these new comers.

Land distribution gradually began only with the democratic opening in 1983, when rural workers were in a better position to organize and pressure the state to implement an agrarian reform. In 1985, democratic forces victorious in the elections modified the Constitution to allow the expropriation of unproductive *latifundios*, but ever since, the state has preferred to distribute federal and state land or colonize the Amazon in order not to confront the privileges of the large private and corporate landowners. Few specialists agree on the numbers regarding land distribution. A recent FAO study (Sparovek, 2003: 2) mentions that 458 483 families were settled from 1985 to 2001. According to other sources, if we extend the period to the end of Cardoso's presidency (2002), land would have been distributed to 710 255 families. Sarney would have settled 90 000 families, Collor and Franco 35 6000 and Cardoso in his two terms (1995-2002) would have settled 584 655 families (Andrioli, 2003). The actual numbers seem to be closer to the first account. Indeed a recent independent study of the University of São Paulo requested by Cardoso's agrarian reform minister concluded that his government would have actually settled 328 000 families. Moreover, 67 per cent of the settlements projects were located in what is called the "Legal Amazon", making them more colonisation projects than agrarian reform projects by way of expropriation of large latifundios. Hence, land concentration was not reduced in the 1990's. On the contrary, according to statistics from the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA)—the federal agency responsible for agrarian reform—, the total amount of land in the hands of the 26 000 largest landowners passed from 80, 128 million hectares at the beginning of the decade to 178 million at the end of Cardoso's administration (Stédile in Amaral, 2003: 6).

Finally, the current context of neoliberal globalization, representing a new phase in

properties owned by the financial sector, 18.12% for those of the industrial sector and only 14.42% for those

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the expansion of the logic of capital to all spheres of life, is also having consequences on land concentration and agrarian reform. Within this movement, property relations play a crucial role, which diminishes the possibility for a profound agrarian reform in Brazil. The agenda pushed by business sectors and supported by states is to pass from national regimes of private property rights limited by a series of social and political prerogatives, to homogeneous regimes of absolute private property rights with little or no restrictions. The fact that all major commercial agreements (NAFTA, APEC, FTTA, WTO, etc) include clauses regarding investment rights is a case in point. The objectives of these clauses are to legally limit the intervention of the state, especially in respect its expropriation right, and to guarantee the absolute liberty and security for private property in whatever sphere of activity. Obviously, absolute private property rights in land represent a crucial element in this expansion of the logic of capital, for it is the physical basis for any type of natural resource exploitation. A traditional agrarian reform, based on the notion of social rights, social tenancy or state interventionism, is at odds with this objective. In fact the current trend with regard to land is toward the privatization and de-collectivization of land tenancy so as to push for the complete commodification of land. The underlying assumption behind this view is that only the generalization of private property in land can attract investments in the countryside, as long as private property enjoys enough legal guarantees of nonexpropriation. To this respect, it is revelling that the current "market-friendly agrarian reforms" all favour the purchase of land over expropriation of latifundios or distribution of state properties (Bernstein, 2002). Not surprisingly, during his presidency, Cardoso distributed land through a World Bank financed project called Banco da Terra, where landowners freely sold land at market prices directly to landless rural workers or small farmers, who benefited from credits from the federal government (Martins, 2000: 37-38).

In sum, the MST struggle for land distribution, agrarian reform and democratization of society and the economy confronts centuries of entrenched power interests based on land concentration3, a recent trend of free market modernization of agriculture, and a global context of expansion of absolute property rights.

of the agricultural sector (Júlio José Chiavenato cited by Robles, 1998: 152). 3 The GINI index on land distribution kept increasing throughout the twentieth century. It went from 0.798 in 1920 to 0.826 in 1940, to 0.836 in 1960 to 0.857 in 1980. It is only in 2001, with 0.802, that it came back to level similar to that of the beginning of the century (Hoffman in Sparovek 2003: 20).

The Struggle for Land as a Way to Regain Human Dignity

After a long conversation with a MST settler in settlement Pirituba 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 have it because I conquered land. Land is the beginning of everything... who could have told that everything starts under a plastic tent.

Winning land is at the same time the end of a long and very difficult journey and just the beginning of another one: the struggle to remain on the land. But as Jacir told me, *everything starts under a plastic tent*. This tent represents one of the symbols of the struggle of the MST, since camps made of hundreds of these tents can be seen on the fringes of federal highways all over Brazil. It is under these tents that landless families, men, women and children, live and organize during years4, as they prepare to occupy unproductive *latifundios* and once they occupy a property. Life in these camps is very harsh. Families live under these plastic tents the year around, braving all kinds of illnesses and weather inclemency. On a daily basis they administer scarce food and firewood supply, and irregular sources of drinking water. On top of that, in many regions, they face constant intimidation and violence from gunmen paid by local landlords. All this, without any guarantee of achieving their goal: conquering land. Why would then entire families, sometimes with very small children, embark on such a hazardous and uncertain adventure?

The answer to this question is not an easy one, since there are probably as many answers as there are landless families' life-stories. However, the deep economic and social crisis, characterized by the dramatic growth of poverty, unemployment and social marginalization, that has marked the experiences of Brazilian popular classes in the past two decades, provides an important part of the answer. Indeed, if the Brazilian economy maintained an average rate of growth of 6.2% between 1960 and 1970 and of 8.6% between 1970 and 1980, but the average rates of growth dropped to 1.6% between 1980 and 1990 and 1.8% between 1990 and 2000 (Lesbaupin and Mineiro, 2002: 104).

4 Due to the numerous legal instances a landlord can appeal to in order to contest and postpone expropriation, a landless family can live in one of many of these camps for a minimum period of a year but more often for a period of 2 to 3 years, sometimes more.

According to the great majority of studies, regardless of the methodologies used, poverty was reduced in the 1970's. However, studies that determine the poverty line around food baskets that take into consideration regional variations and distinguish between rural and urban areas, agree that poverty has not dropped but grown since 1980. A ECLA study evaluated that the poverty level remained constant at 45% of the population between 1979 and 1987, while another conducted by M.C Romão observed that it was highly fluctuant but on the rise starting from 24% in 1980, increasing to 42% in 1983, dropping again to 28% in 1986 and rose again to 35% in 1987 and 39% in 1988 (Rocha, 1997:11). These results were confirmed by another recent study requested by the International Labour Organization (ILO) that show poverty levels dropping significantly from 39.9% in 1970 to 24.4% in 1980, but then fluctuating between 41.9% in 1983 to 28.4% in 1986 to 35.9% in 1987 to 39.3% in 1988 (Singer, 1997). During the 1980's, this fluctuation coupled with a declining tendency was also perceivable in the real income of poor sectors of the population who by 1990 had seen their real income drop by 17% (Singer, 1997). The last decade has not been very different as the level of real unemployment in metropolitan areas has been on the rise. It was at 8.7% in 1989, 14.2% in 1994, 18.3% in 1998 and 19.5% in 1999 (Matoso, 2000: 13).

In this context, the struggle for land in Brazil, like in many other parts of the underdeveloped world, represents a popular response to the growing fragmentation of work and insecurity of the informal economy5 that puts the question of social reproduction of labour at the centre of the struggle (Bernstein, 2004). In other words, in the era of globalization, the struggle for land by popular classes is gradually becoming one of the ways to simply secure social reproduction. In the case of the MST, this is perceivable in the growing numbers of *favelados* (shantytown inhabitants), with no personal rural background, joining the movement6.

For MST's landless, the laws and the constitutional articles that permit expropriation of unproductive *latifundios* are not necessarily what justified their right to land. Its justification is much more anchored on a moral and political claim than a legal one. The

⁵ In 1990, 82.73% of the occupied rural population worked in the informal sector, while this sector provided work to 48.65% of the occupied urban population (Singer, 1997).

⁶ In the camp "Following Rose's Dream" in Julho de Castilho, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, camp representatives mentioned that 30 per cent of the inhabitants of the camps was of urban origin and without personal ties to rural life. According to an organizer of camp "Zumbi dos Palmares" in Pantano Grande in Rio Grande do Sul, this **pro**portion reached 80 per cent of all camps inhabitants.

right to land forms part of a larger claim that questions the principles guiding capitalist economy and stresses the necessity to impose moral and political limits on the overall functioning of capitalist economy.

One of the first institutions of the capitalist economy to be questioned is private property. The legitimacy of private property in land, particularly if it perceived as constituting a latifundio, is assessed through a moral understanding of justice. Land concentration, regardless of its illegal character, is considered unjust because it impeded millions of Brazilians from having access to a decent livelihood. For landless people affiliated with the MST, the right to land is understood as a universal right because possession of land can allow a family to sustain itself. Within this perspective, the right to land is associated with a right to live with dignity, understood as a fundamental human right having supremacy over property rights. In a recent interview, João Pedro Stédile, the most well known MST leader, summed up this conception by arguing that "the ideology of absolute private property could not have supremacy over natural goods", such as land (Stédile in Amaral, 2003: 5). However, contrary to other countries in Latin America, this moral claim does not form part of a broader system of customs and traditions that one could associate with a moral economy of the Brazilian peasantry. It is rather a consequence of the political influence of progressive clergymen, that adopted the "preferential option for the poor" within the Catholic Church and which were key leaders in the rebirth of the landless movement in the early 1980's (de Almeida-Ruiz, 2000: 14, Cadji, 2000: 32, Navaro, 2000: 37).

The right to work or have a decent source of income is another right that landless people oppose to the blind functioning of the market. Land is strongly associated to work, as the words of Don José from Fazenda Primavera in Andradina state of São Paulo, attest: "Land is for working, for producing, it should not be sold. If someone does not want to work the land, he must give it to someone that wants to". Most of the people living in the MST's camps have gone through long periods of unemployment and underemployment. Many of the life-stories that I heard echoed a sense of frustration and powerlessness experienced throughout years as temporary rural worker, tenant farmer or favelado. "We are not vagabonds. We are landless. We want to work the land. When you work the land, you are producing, you are contributing, you are going forward" a landless woman said to me to explain her struggle. In many discussions, the sense of being at the mercy of

someone else's will, of being treated as an object and not as a person came back again and again. Gaining land rights was thus presented as a way out of the humiliation of unemployment and marginalization and was seen as a way to take their destiny into their own hands. Land is thus a way of regaining human dignity, associated with a productive life and also a demand for integration to a more just Brazilian society.

The Organizational Structure of the MST and the Making of its Militancy

A recent article (Wolford, 2003b) argues that the MST capacity to maintain high levels of participation is due to its ability to create an "imagined community" organized around ideas, practices, symbols, slogans and rituals; and, more importantly, to its ability to remain an effective mediator between the state and settlers. Although these factors lead to high levels of participation within the MST, I argue that this participation also derives from the maintenance of an organizational structure that encourages participation and creates not only an "imagined community" but real concrete "autonomous rural communities", which are easier to mobilize than the membership of other organizations.

Understanding the struggle for land in terms of universal human rights and humanistic values that establish limits to the capitalist functioning of the economy is probably the first step in the process of political consciousness of landless rural workers envisioned by the MST. But it is through the actual everyday experiences and practices in the camps and land occupations that landless families are transformed into an organized force of the poor. The occupation period constitutes a period of ultra-politicization (Romano, 1994) of everyday life, because almost all aspects of camp members' lives are dealt with through participation in different types of committees. In this regard the MST differs from many other organizations. Unlike what happens in many social movements, membership in the MST is not a part time activity. Being a *sem terra* means not only to be part of an organization but more importantly to live during a relatively long period of time in a community with its own norms, values, and objectives. This feeling of "belonging" to a community of *sem terra* takes form gradually through participation within the organizational structure of a camp and the movement in general.

The *núcleo* (nucleus), made of 10 to 15 families is the most basic unit of discussion and decision-making in a camp. These *núcleos* name representatives (always a man and

a woman) to higher and more specialized instances, called teams and sectors. The teams are in charge of taking care of practical problems such as security, food, wood, barracks, work, sport and sectors are responsible for planning the functioning of the camp in respect to specific issues such as education, health, production, political education, gender relation, discipline, women, human rights, communication, youth and culture, etc. A coordinating committee, made of 2 representatives (a man and a woman), named by each *núcleo*, oversees the camp's life. This committee in turn elects a direction that has to be ratified by the camp's assembly, which constitutes the highest decision-making instance (de Almeida and Sánchez, 2000: 16). In all these instances, decisions are taken through discussion and participation, making life in the camp a life of constant meetings.

At the state and national level, the MST is organized in a similar manner as it is in camps and settlements, i.e. through a series of sectors and committees. Camps and settlements elect members to the different regional sectors and the coordinating committee, which in turn names representatives to the state coordinating committee, responsible in front of the grassroots membership (Fernandes, 2000: 184-185). Out of these state-based organizational instances come out different national sectors and a national leadership, made of 20 members, 15 that participate directly in occupations and settlements and only 5 which names are made public (de Almeida and Sánchez, 2000: 17). This measure mirrors the practice observed throughout the organization of having collective instead of individual leadership.

In a camp, political decisions are taken by *acampados* and *acampadas* in consultation and coordination with regional, state and national leaderships. For instance, the ins and outs of the decision to occupy a specific *latifundio* is discussed in the camp in conjunction with the regional, state and national leadership, which often provide the technical information (facts about ownership and legality of the property) and the global strategic assistance and analysis (media coverage, mobilization of allies and resources, etc). In many interviews that I conducted during my fieldwork in 2003, the narration of the various times camp members had to move from one property to another was a common feature. In all cases, people remembered the direct discussions and the negotiations they had with state and police officials in respect to the terms and location of the displacement. Hence, the movement, although highly institutionalized, maintains an important level of local autonomy within the organization. Like in any other organization though, the balance



of power between the different decision-making instances is negotiated constantly under the light of political victories or defeats. For example, decisions taken by the leadership too rapidly or with not enough participation from the grassroots might confront opposition or might very well not be followed.

These negotiations, discussions, decisions and actions undertaken during the period of occupation make up a concrete and practical process of political education and empowerment (Fernandes, 2000: 1740. In the case of many members of the MST, in camps and settlements, this process is reinforced by a formal political and technical training offered in various MST training centres, like Instituto Técnico de Capacitação e Pesquisa da Reforma Agrária (ITERRA) in Veranópolis in Rio Grande do Sul, which offers state recognised courses in education, pedagogy, co-operative administration, agronomy, social communication and community health. Finally, this formal system of political and technical mobilizations, marches, encounters, forums and congresses, where landless exchange on their experience among themselves or with members of other organizations.

Through their different political experiences, either within or outside the camps and later in their settlements, MST members, by solving problems and planning activities and actions, learn to mobilize and organize. By becoming aware of the rights as well as by pressuring, negotiating or confronting state authorities from the different levels of government, they also learn to demystify the state. All along, MST membership also acquires a sense of 'imagined community' constantly reinforced by cultural practices and symbols, referred to as "*mística*" which helps to maintain the movement's cohesion and activism. The movement, throughout the different moments and actions, builds its ideology by encouraging certain values, such as humility, honesty, conviction, perseverance, sacrifice, gratitude, responsibility and discipline, and by discouraging others, such as individualism, spontaneity (sic) and immobility (Wolford, 2003: 508, 510). In turn, these values inform the type of alternative rural communities the MST hopes to create on the settlements.

This whole process of politicization of landless families has provided the MST with a constant renewal of leaders, who emerge directly from the grassroots membership, have experienced the vicissitudes of life in the camps and settlements, and thus who identify completely with the values and practices of the movement. The differences that do exist

within the MST, however, are thus not due to different political or ideological backgrounds. They will more often be related to different experiences of struggle marked by regional and cultural characteristics (Wolford, 2003a) and divergent points of view on issues of tactics and strategy.

The Struggle to Remain on the Land

If winning land comes after a very long and extremely difficult struggle, remaining on the land is also far from being an easy task. Becoming a settler means, first and foremost, the beginning of the battle to secure survival within the very hostile market of agricultural production controlled by large farmers and big agribusiness enterprises. Moreover, this battle is fought with almost no real help from the government. Indeed, for years now, scholars and social movements have been criticizing the Brazilian state for not showing a real commitment with agrarian reform. Agrarian reform would not form part of an alternative agricultural policy but would function rather as an instrument of its social policy. The distribution of land would be a way to reduce poverty and social confrontation in the countryside and not a measure directed at reorienting agricultural policy towards goals such as the development of the a dynamic sector of small producers geared at providing food for the internal market (Wright and Wolford, 2003: 274-279). Even INCRA officials recently recognised that in reality "INCRA was simply planting minifundio throughout Brazil", only partially solving tree problems: hunger, housing and employment (Cardim, Vieira and Viégas, 2003: 24). Even the administration of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who provided more support to settlers, creating programs of productive credits called Procera and Pronaf did not depart from this tendency. In effect, the amount of credit per family allocated through Procera—from R\$3000 to R\$7500 for infrastructure7, R\$1000 to R\$2000 for harvest (CONCRAB, 1998: 8)-, makes it more a program for poverty reduction than one that actually promotes the growth in production and productivity of small farming (Cardim, Vieira and Viégas, 2003: 24). As a form of defence, Cardoso's government stressed that the great majority of the government's financial resources for

7 By creating co-operatives or production groups, settlers can petition for another credit line within Procera to buy collectively machinery that would not be accessible individually.

agrarian reform went to cover compensations and that this was due to the way tribunal handled land expropriation8.

Regardless of who is responsible for the lack of financial resources for agrarian reform and settlements, in their struggle to remain on the land, MST settlers are faced with a major challenge: having to create economic mechanisms that will generate secure sources of income.

The movement meets this challenge by securing in the first place the selfsubsistence of its settlers. Where land is sufficiently fertile and allows for the cultivation of many types of agricultural produces, settlers are encouraged to reach this objective through the diversification of their production. In Southern Brazil, the great majority of settlers tend to combine production of a commercial crop, such as soy beans or wheat, with the cultivation of produces that constitute their basic diet such as beans, rice, maize and different kinds of tubercles. Most families also raise animals such as chickens and pigs and have a garden where they grow all kinds of vegetables. The many visits I made to settlements from different regions of São Paulo, Paraná and Rio Grande do Sul confirmed the result of the study conducted by Jurandir Zamberlam and Alceu Froncheti in the settlement Rincão de Ivaí in Salto de Jacuí in Rio Grande do Sul, which revealed that almost the totality of settler families had 3 meals a day and that their diet were much more varied than that of average peasant family (Zamberlam and Froncheti, 1997). But solving the problem of hunger is not sufficient to guarantee the subsistence of settler families. This is why the MST recommends to its members to choose a production that will guarantee a constant minimum income the whole year round, which becomes especially crucial between harvests. In the South, the great majority of families have invested part of the government loans for infrastructure (Procera) in the purchase of a few heads of cattle, mainly for milk production. This capacity for self-sufficiency is extremely important for settler families because the great majority of them are incapable of paying back their government loans due to the disadvantageous market prices for main commercial crops.

⁸ For example in 1997, out of the 900 million dollars spend on the agrarian reform, 830 million went to that purpose. In comparison, only 214 million went to credits for settlements (Sparovek, 2003: 28). One of the reasons for this has been the excessively high cost of compensations conceded by tribunal to landowners. For instance, in the North, compensations conceded by tribunals were 9.09 times higher than what INCRA had evaluated, in the North-East this proportion was 4.93, in the Centre-West 11.97, in the South-West 14.64 and South 1.2 (INCRA, 1999).

Hence, for the MST, self-subsistence can only represent a first step towards the sustained development of settlements, which can best be reaches through the encouragement of forms of cooperation, the creation of agro-industries (MST, 1991), and the search for new (collective) forms of organizing production. Cooperation and collective work are also testimonies of the MST's early Marxist-Leninist discourse that emphasised class struggle, expropriation of the means of production, collectivization of agricultural production, the construction of socialism and the emergence of a new man and a new woman. Today, the MST's discourse has evolved under similar lines than the rest of the Latin American left. The revolutionary rhetoric has not completely disappeared, but notions such as socialism and revolution have given way to more concrete objectives like employment creation, reduction of the unequal income distribution, democratization of land property, improvement of women's participation, etc (Stédile, 1997: 106, MST, 2001). Similarly, ideas about cooperation and collective work have been adapted to the settlers' preference for family farming. The movement still argues that the advantages of cooperation are the following: it allows surviving to the competition of large farmers, it increases the volume of production which translates in better prices, it increases the productivity of labour, and it allows to gather more capital which can be collectively invested in machines and inputs.

This promotion of cooperation is thus not solely based on an ideological preference, on the contrary. In fact, a recent INCRA/FAO study (Bittencourt and al., 1999) found higher levels of development in settlements that had organized production around some sort of cooperation. Researchers conducting this study also observed that these settlements benefited from higher monetary income and internal social differentiation was lower (1999: 29). My visits in the settlements of Southern Brazil also confirm these conclusions, with some differences in respect to internal social differentiation. The levels of well-being of settlers members of cooperatives —simply evaluated on the variety of the food diet, the consumer goods (refrigerator, kitchen appliances, television, radio, bicycle, motorcycle, etc.) and most of all by the quality of housing—, were superior to that of settlers who were working their plot individually. In settlements Pirituba 3 and 5, this social differentiation was perceivable in the type of houses. All the cooperative members owned a brick-concrete house, build with surplus money from the cooperative transferred to the members, while the great majority of the other settlers owned house made of wood planks. But regardless



of this relative success, only a small percentage of all the cooperative experiments have passed the test of time, the great majority of them having lasted only a few years.

According to Bergamasco (1994) the de-articulation of collective forms of production is not evidence of its definitive rejection but is rather part of a process of adaptation of the wills of settlers. In effect, in many settlements where cooperative projects and forms of collective work were abandoned, settlers are thinking of testing new experiments that will allow more flexibility in the process of production. In the case of Sumaré in the state of São Paulo for instance, the second generation of settlers are working at the creation of a production and commercialization cooperative that will allow settler families to choose its preferred form of organization of production (individual, group or collective). As an organization, the MST itself has learned some lessons from past failures and has understood the difficulty of implementing forms of cooperation in small-scale agricultural production. It has now adopted a much more pragmatic and gradual approach by privileging the creation of production groups, which share the cost of machinery, or regional commercialization and service cooperatives, who simply help to negotiate better market prices for inputs and products.

However, the current context of market liberalization in Brazil, which has resulted in constant price fluctuations and puts small farmers in competition with highly subsidised agribusinesses, is very adverse to small farmers even when they are organized in cooperatives. Thus, the MST sees two possible paths to transform the current situation of settlers: a fundamental change in the agricultural model or a long-term coexistence of the current agribusiness model with a gradual growth of a sector of small farmers benefited by agrarian reform. Considering the balance of power within Brazilian society, the first path would not be possible at this time but the second one is (Stédile in Amaral, 2003: 6). In the coming years, the main objective of the MST will thus continue to be to pressure the state for agrarian reform in order to see the small farmer sector grow. But the difficulties of current settlers also bring to the fore two other objectives: avoiding the privatization of land rights and sustaining political mobilization for government credits and assistance.

The issue of privatization of land rights is closely related to the type of title given out by the state at the time of distribution. Since the mid 1980's, when landless people win land, INCRA hands out titles of usufruct rights (*título de concesão de uso*) and not title of property. In the beginning of the 1980's though, INCRA gave out private property titles like

in Fazenda Primavera in Andradina in the state of São Paulo or in Fazenda Macali in Ronda Alta in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, where, after a few years, titles of usufruct were replaced by private property titles. This had negative consequences for the modification of traditional social relations in the countryside because the property titles facilitated the sale of lots or the rent to third parties and did not impede the process of concentration. For example, in Fazenda Macali I, out of the 70 original settler families in 1981, only 9 remained. In Fazenda Macali II, of the 38 original families, only 13 remained. Of these 25 lots sold, their owners occupied 6, the 19 remaining lots were property of absentee farmers9. The property titles, by commercializing the right to land in the settlements, impede the access to land to other landless families. In contrast, in the settlements where land was distributed through usufruct titles, the proportion of families that desisted, exchanged or illegally sold their lot is much lower. According to members of the MST, this proportion does not go over 10% of the settlers and, under the law, the exchange cannot be with someone that does not reside on their lot.

INCRA and the MST have realised the importance of impeding land concentration in the settlements and maintaining them open to the arrival of new landless families. Both have favoured usufruct titles over property titles. In respect to credit, for the MST, usufruct titles are even more convenient than property titles because they cannot serve as guarantee for a loan, protecting settlers from the possibility of loosing their land in case of debt problems. In contrast, INCRA has recently modified its view in relation to land titles, offering settlers that have been settled more than ten years to replace their usufruct title for property titles. Considering the advantages of titles of usufruct rights, the MST has decided to oppose government's latest titling policy, seeing it as a way for the state to avoid its responsibility of assisting settlers (CONCRAB, 1998).

Opposition to the neoliberal orientation of recent state policies and political pressure for the implementation or improvement of particular programs have traditionally been characteristics of MST's political practice. This dual strategy has been possible because of the constant mobilization of its social base. But maintaining high levels of mobilization and participation in settlements is much more difficult to achieve than in camps. The first years of settlement are a continuity of the period of ultra-politicised period of occupation (Romano, 1994), but this period is only temporary because after that most of the

9 Information gathered during my fieldwork in June 2003.

infrastructure is put in place, more private preoccupations become more important. Very often settlement politics becomes routine and less participative (Abramovay, 1994), since many of the number of actions that need the mobilization of everyone decrease and present themselves only from time to time. The forms of participation also change and become more specific, each settler attending the meetings on the issues that most interest him/her (education, health, production, etc.). The question of production in the settlements also generates many more contradictions than the struggle for land in the camps because, contrary to camps —that to a certain extent function at the margins of the capitalist society. As Abramoway argues, the world of production cannot be seen as *some sort of continuity or reproduction*. The reality of the world of the struggle that goes on during the period of land occupation. The reality of the world of the settlement is the reality of the capitalist society: *market, money, inequality, depersonalization of economic relations… a world that tends to reduce the weight of the local communitarian sphere* (Abramoway, 1994: 316).

However, considering all the pressure that need to be put on state agencies in order to have services and infrastructure, political organization is fundamental to guarantee the constant development of the settlement. A study sponsored by INCRA and FAO even observed that the great majority of the more developed settlements throughout Brazil were the ones that had gone through a process of mobilization before winning land and had consolidated their organization after being settled (Bittencourt and al., 1999: 39-43). One of the main challenges for the MST is therefore to keep its decision-making and representation instances in the settlement functioning so as to facilitate mobilization when required. Simultaneously, the MST, as an organization, needs also to remain a successful mediator between the settlers and the state (Wolford, 2003b, 513), what it cannot be without mobilized forces.

The advantage of the MST in comparison to many other social movements is that in its relationship with the state, it is not simply a mediator. Even if the state provides almost all the financial resources, contrary to Wolford's opinion, the state is not the ultimate overseer in the settlement (2003b, 513). On many issues, the MST settlers are the overseers, deciding over questions that go from the pedagogic orientation that will be followed in their schools to the type of health care philosophy they prefer to the type of

technical assistance they want. Moreover, political decision-making in the settlements adopts the forms and practices established by the MST. In other words, the MST represents and articulates "autonomous rural communities", that, regardless of the "normalization" of political life that characterises settlements, foster relatively good levels social mobilization of the militancy. However, the financial dependence of settlements towards the state has meant that the MST, in order to influence state policies, has had to find a way to enter the field of institutional politics.

The MST and Institutional Politics

Most of the mobilizations of the MST (for land, credits, housing, education, health care services, infrastructure, etc.) confront or pressure the state directly, be it the government or the institutions responsible for agrarian issues such as INCRA at the federal level or the ITESP in the state of São Paulo or the Agrarian Reform Cabinet in Rio Grande do Sul. The question of who controls a particular government has even made a significant difference in the way MST's pressures have been dealt with. For instance, the first wave of settlements in the early 1980's in the state of São Paulo benefited from some support (donation of tractors and machinery) of governor Franco Montoro (1983-1987) and more recently the PT government of Olivio Dutra in Rio Grande do Sul (1998-2002) found innovative ways to accelerate land expropriation and destined more financial resources for that purpose. The MST has evidently seen the difference between having to negotiate with a sympathetic government instead of being ignored or persecuted, as was the case in the state of Paraná in the mid 1990's. The movement has nevertheless been very cautious in its political strategy in respect to institutional politics.

Since its creation in 1984, the MST has always recognised the need to participate in all fronts (rural workers unions, small farmers' organisations, anti-globalization coalitions and political parties) but has also been conscious of the need to maintain its autonomy (Fernandes, 2000: 83-93, de Almeida-Sánchez, 2000: 26). The movement has hence decided to get involved in institutional politics without transforming itself into a political party or ending up subordinating itself to a party. Nationally, the MST has chosen not to run for electoral representation or participate in government while at the municipal and state level every local MST can decide its own position in respect to institutional politics.

By in large, until today, the MST had attributed the struggle for institutional political power to the Workers Party, its social base working alongside PT militants during electoral campaigns and some MST members individually militating within the party. But the MST, as an organisation, has resisted the idea of becoming organically linked to the party and bets either on the political congruence of the PT or at least on the possibility of establishing better channels of communication with it. For the MST national leadership, as well as the grassroots membership, though, this collaboration with the PT should not divert the movement from its mobilization strategy, especially when the PT is in government. For example, Armando, of Fazenda Macali, in Ronda Alta in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, echoing many other camps inhabitants and settlers, told me: *"When government is ours, it's worst. 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". The MST is thus conscious of the weakness of the strategy of simply relying on the PT for representing the interests of landless people and small farmers.*

In the case of older settlements in Southern Brazil, in order to have more influence and presence in local politics, settlers have decided to get directly involved in local politics. Elected MST settlers have occupied seats in municipal councils of Panacity in the state of Paraná and in Ronda Alta and Pontão in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, they have been mayor in those last two municipalities and in Sumaré in the state of São Paulo, and two well-known members of the MST (Marcon and Görgen) have been elected representatives to the state congress of Rio Grande do Sul.

Even though it is discussed and agreed upon collectively by the settlement, the participation of these MST members in local politics is not as representative of the movement but rather as individuals. Their actions are nevertheless closely followed and monitored by the settlement and sometimes the elected official has to give a percentage of his/her salary to the settlement. This is so because in reality the movement sees political representation as a way of amplifying its influence within Brazilian society. A national leader told me that participation in local and state politics had to be in line with the overall mission the MST, which is "to organize the poor in the city and in the countryside". The idea behind this is that a political representative is in a better position to access the media, intervene in public debates and organize gatherings and meetings. But, as the same

national leader told me, experience has shown that political representatives, because of their busy agenda, end up "administering the institutional machine and are left with very little time to organize the people".

Another problem that became evident in Rio Grande do Sul was the division created by the process of choosing a candidate or allowing or not the re-election of a successful representative. The leadership of the MST argues that it does not want its best leaders to end up caught in the webs of institutional politics and become professional politicians. But in reality it has not yet taken a clear position on the issue and prefers to treat the question on a case-by-case manner. But as the movement gets involved in more and more experiences of participation in institutional politics, it will have to make some difficult decisions that will address the question of its traditional identity as a social movement geared to mass mobilization.

The two ways the MST has decided to deal with the issue of participation in institutional politics, electorally supporting the PT and directly participating in local politics seem to be temporary solutions. Some members within the MST think that the movement should not get directly involved in politics and should instead concentrate in its mobilization strategy and in supporting the settlements. This appears very difficult since the more the movement grows, the more the political question will become problematic.

The Lula Government: A Turning Point for the MST?

Since he took office in January 2003, Lula has not set himself apart from his immediate predecessor. If one takes his monetary policy and the latest reforms to the public sector pension plan, one could even say that his government represents the continuity of Fernando Henrique Cardoso's agenda. Indeed, in order to win this past presidential election, Lula had to go very far in toning down his leftist image. Afterwards, in the formation of his cabinet, he had to balance out individuals from the establishment with individuals with credentials of social activism. For instance, his vice-president is José Alencar, leader of the right-wing Liberal Party, the director of the Central Bank is Henrique Mereilles, former president of BankBoston and member of Cardoso's Social Democratic Party of Brazil, the PSDB, and his minister of finance is Antonio Palocci from one of the most moderate wings of the PT. From the other side of the political spectrum, Lula chose



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Olivio Dutra, former governor of Rio Grande do Sul from the left-wing of the PT as his minister of cities and Marina Silva, activist that sided with Chico Mendes in the protection of the Amazon, as minister of environment. Nowhere is this attempt to balance out forces more evident and contradictory than in the ministries that deal with rural issues. The minister of agriculture is Roberto Rodrigues, former president of the Brazilian Association of Agribusiness while the ministry of rural development, responsible for agrarian reform, is in the hands of Miguel Rosseto, former governor of the state of Rio Grande do Sul from the left of the PT and sympathetic to the MST.

In terms of policy, this has translated into favourable but timid political measures towards small agricultural producers: credits for small farmers has doubled and has been made available before the harvest, debts have been renegotiated and include cancellation of part of the debts, some guaranties for commercialization, such as minimum prices for cash crops, have been put forward and finally, under the *Fome Zero* (Zero Hunger) program —which provides a monthly basic grocery basket to poor families— the federal government has promise to promote small farmers production by encouraging the creation of production groups and cooperatives, from which it would buy the agricultural products for the grocery baskets.

With respect to the land issue, Lula's position has yet to be clearly defined. He has reiterated his sympathetic support to the struggle of the MST, by receiving its leadership in the presidential palace in July 2003 and by previously de-penalizing land occupations. But on the real issue of land distribution, the first year and a half of the Lula government have been characterized by a very slow pace of land distribution. When Lula took office he promised, with his *Plan Nacional de Reforma Agraria* (PNRA), to settle on the land 400 000 families, to give access to land through credit to another 130 000 and regularize land tenancy for 500 000 more (Andrioli, 2003). According to the may newsletter of INCRA, from 2003 up to April of 2004, the Lula government had distributed land to 47 394 families, of which 36 301 were settled in 2003 (http://www.incra.gov.br) which is still very short of the 115 000 families he had promised to settle within the first two years of his administration10. This pace raises questions with regard to the capacity or willingness of the Lula government to carry out a vast and well-financed agrarian reform. It might very well be the case that Lula is postponing the agrarian reform as much as he can, because

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he needs the support of other parties (the majority in both chambers) to pass important reforms. On the issue of agrarian reform, Lula is even vulnerable within his own government coalition, as a study revealed that 31 deputies from the Liberal Party (PL), the Labour Party (PTB) and the Social Democratic Party (PMDB) could be identified as defenders of the interests of large landowners (Pompeu, 2003: 12). Whatever the case may be, this past June, the MST decided to modify its position in respect to the Lula government and initiated a series of land occupations in order to pressure the government to accelerate the pace of land distributions.

Conclusion

According to Zander Navarro (2000: 39), the MST will face two main challenges in the coming years. The first one concerns the issue of democracy, both within the organisation and in its relations to other social movements. The second concerns the productive management of future settlements.

The problem of internal democracy will never be a settle issue in the MST, as grassroots militants may contest and oppose decisions of the leadership. However, it does not seem to be a determining challenge for the continuity of the movement, since the movement, organizationally, allows for relatively significant levels of autonomy and debate. Its relations with other organizations also do not appear to be a problem that can weaken the MST. In fact, the movement has actually managed to build and maintain a close collaboration with other groups, such as the MPA (Movement of Small Farmers), the MAB (Movement of people displaced by hydroelectric dams) and the MTST (Movement of Homeless Workers), and has been one of the driving forces in national and international coalitions, such as the Union of Popular Movements (CMP), *via campesina* and the World Social Forum.

The productive management of settlements is probably the main and most difficult challenge to face. In the context of neoliberal policies of commercial liberation, reduced and targeted credits that favour the interests of agro-business, the future for peasant or small farmer's production does not look good. Pressuring governments for assistance programs, better credits, import quotas or creating production or commercialization

10 In its August newsletter, it reported that Miguel Rosseto declared having settled 82 000 families in 2003

cooperatives can only be a way to maintain decent levels of subsistence for farmer families. But, as cooperatives still are submitted to market imperatives, this is surely not, at this point, a guaranteed promise of sustain rural development.

As was argued in this article, the way the MST can face the challenge of production is still through the organization and mobilization of enough landless workers and small farmers to force the state to distribute substantial amount of land, provide resources for settlements and support small farming. The MST has grown because it achieves concrete results. This is, because it has managed to settle thousands of families on the land and has fought successfully to acquire resources for different activities in those settlements (credits, technical assistance program, elementary and secondary education, health clinics, etc.). It is able to make those gains because it has maintained a highly participatory organizational structure, which facilitates the mobilization of its membership. In turn, this mobilization, as the MST has come to realize throughout the years, needs to be complemented with a strategic participation in the field of institutional politics along side the PT. The current Lula government will be determining for this dual strategy the MST had been pursuing since its creation.

For the moment, Lula has already taken some measures that indicate a different kind of treatment to issues regarding landless rural workers and small farmers. But it is still too early to evaluate Lula's promise to accelerate agrarian reform and to buy up small farmers' production to supply the agricultural products of his *Fome Zero* program. What happens during the Lula government, particularly if he does not fulfill his promises to landless workers and small farmers, might very well push the MST to reconsider its relation with the PT and even rethink its participation to institutional politics? If the disillusion with Lula's policies generates new divisions within the PT, the participation of MST members within the PT will become more delicate. If agrarian reform does not move rapidly enough or agricultural policies do not change substantially, will the MST want to maintain its alliance with the PT? Will it be appropriate to compete in local elections under the banner of the PT? Will the MST be able to stay on the margins of the creation of a new alternative party to the left of the PT? Moreover, if these scenarios become reality, the disillusion of the MST membership with the results of years of actively supporting Lula

and 41 000 as of august 2004 (www.incra.gov.br).

might initiate a reflection around the limitations of the movement's participation strategy in institutional politics that will have important consequences on the future of the movement.



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