

Resisting injustice by creating justice: The Landless workers movement MST, Brazil

The first time I visited Brazil was at the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in 2002. I was deeply impressed by the strong, radical and sophisticated resistance of activists in South America, especially of the landless workers movement MST. Since then I have been coming back. During the last few years I visited together with my colleague and friend, Professor Kurt Schock from Rutgers University. We went in order to learn from and study the work of the MST. We have visited national leaders of MST in Sao Paulo, the MST activist university (ENFF) outside of Sao Paulo and the MST store in Sao Paulo. This store sells local MST produce and books and includes a café and bar. We also visited both new land occupations (Acampamentos) and established MST communities (Assentamentos), as well as educators that help different movements in Brazil deal with issues of direct action, civil disobedience and security/safety issues. All this was made possible thanks to our excellent research assistant Carolina Munis, who organized the contacts plus scheduled, translated and guided us around.

During our last visit in June 2019 we encountered both a new and an old MST community. We went to the new land occupation (Accampamento) Marielle in Valinhos, two hours outside of Sao Paulo (a 14 months old occupation), and went to an old settlement that has been in existence for over 20 years, (Assentamento) Contestado in Lapa, Parana. We met amazing people and learned about their impressive struggle and daily work to maintain their communities.

Our first visit was to the ongoing land occupation of Accampamento Marielle. They have about 1, 000 families, organized in 33 base groups. They have a secretariat, an unarmed security team guarding the camp, a Saturday school for kids, a soccer field and a communal kitchen with food

made from donations. There is a store with clothing distribution from donations, where inhabitants only pay a symbolic fee for clothes and shoes, several small shops (e.g. a car repair mechanic, kiosks, etc.) and huts organized in neighborhoods with small communal gardens, etc. They all work in different committees, e.g. on education, health, sport and culture, infrastructure, LGBT support, etc. They have gender quotas for groups, make all decisions together and in equal fashion, and have a zero-waste plan, as well as a duty to work in the different thematic committees and a right to have representatives from the base groups that take part in joint decisions

Meeting place
in the land occupation





Hut in the land occupation

Medical Center
in the land occupation



What particularly struck me at the more precarious occupation of Marielle was our visit to a little “health center” in one small room of an old, half-collapsed house. At this health center two women in white clothes, who were newly trained health workers, did their best to help people with their different medical problems. They had learned some basics from a conventionally

trained nurse and together they have made a medical handbook with advice for common health problems. They had also acquired simple equipment for checking fever, blood pressure, etc. and had collected many local herbs for remedies. In a large bottle they kept a mix of a natural medicine that one of them made from her mother's old formula. They told that they try to use natural medicine and traditional knowledge when possible, while being clear that sometimes conventional medicine was needed. On a shelf they stored a collection of usual medicaments, scrambled from the inhabitants of the occupation. If anyone would get a serious illness they would call the ambulance or organize a transport to the nearest hospital. Although, often they had to give a false address when arriving at the hospital, since staying in the camp made them technically "homeless". Being without any official, recognized address would lead to a denial of treatment. These two health workers were acutely aware of how little resources they had. They showed both embarrassment over their meager health service and great pride of what they, despite all difficulties, had built up together with their comrades. Talking to these nurses was very hopeful. Encountering the dignity of these committed MST activists, turned health workers in the little health center, made a deep impression on me.

Then, after two days at this land occupation we traveled to the established MST settlement Assentamento Contestado in the state of Parana. There we found the main South American educational center for Agroecology (ELAA - Escola Latino Americana de Agroecologia), thriving farm lands, nice and comfortable family houses, a small processing factory for vegetables, and a newly built health clinic. This health clinic consisted of a large one floor building with two entrances into spaces for visits to medical doctors and dentists as well as an educational facility where interested community members could take a one-year class learning to cure people with

natural medicine and traditional methods. All this has become possible through a combined effort of the resources of the MST community itself and a state supported program for rural communities. Therefore, the clinic gives free health service for everyone in the local area, also those that are not part of the MST. When I saw all this, the new shining health clinic with its free service of both conventional medicine and natural medicine run by trained experts I still had the “health center” at the land occupation fresh in my mind. As I recalled their little room inside a half-collapsed house, a place guided by the same aim and approach but with almost no resources at all – a profound realization about what MST is doing dawned on me ...



South American educational center for Agroecology (ELAA - Escola Latino Americana de Agroecologia) at Assentamento Contestado

Agroecology at work
at Assentamento Contestado



Health Center at
Assentamento Contestado

What MST is actually doing is to resist by creating the new society, or building the new society through resistance. It is fully integrated: The contemporary resistance and the creation of the future. You cannot understand their resistance if you do not see how they are recreating community, agriculture, education, health, their relations to nature and each other, politics,

gender relations, etc. And, you cannot understand their creation of this new society if you do not see how the resistance is what makes it possible. The resistance creates the possibility of breaking the chains of the exploitative capitalist modernity that entrap them in poverty, injustice, repression and isolation from each other. Resistance is what makes the re-creation of communities possible, and the building of community is what makes resistance possible. It is an integrated form of “constructive resistance”.

In this occupying community of Marielle, I met with a man who is an experienced land activist. He told me about a previous occupation that he was involved with. It is a hopeful story about a similar situation where they lived in shacks, resisted and created community together. And, now they are a settlement with legal titles of their land. But he said: “Over seven years we were evicted 13 times ... We would have to leave, occupy a different land and come back, leave and come back ... but at the end we got the land”. I was astonished, although I had heard such stories before. The difference this time, hearing the story after I had seen all the hard work of the people in creating a precarious community life, I realized what his story meant. Every time the bulldozers and the police came, the state destroyed their decorated shack homes, the small gardens with vegetables and flowers growing, their assembled furniture, the meeting spaces with wooden benches and roofs, the soccer field where their kids have enjoyed themselves, their little but proud health center and communal food place, their water collection system and their simple cafés and shops. Every time they had to rebuild it on a new piece of land in the area or on the same place after the bulldozers and police had left. Plus they had to do it 13 times, again and again. That kind of incomprehensible endurance, persistence and resilience is essentially what

resistance is about. They rebuild and rebuild, re-creating their community again and again. It is also how nature works. It adapts, comes back with new life every spring, even after a fire, and with time the vegetation will flourish if left alone. When the forces of state repression come, this land reclaiming group of the poorest people move away and take hold somewhere else. When the brutal blow of the state's armed fist hits them, they move like water, absorbing the violence by flowing away. Like a swarm of bees or birds they disperse when attacked, and quickly reintegrate again. Over time the state does not have the energy to repress them anymore, since the land occupations start to pop up everywhere, counter-forces to the state mobilize, and urban support groups of journalists, lawyers, social workers and some politicians put pressure on the state. When the poor eventually get their rights in courts, and get the support of the general population, the state tends to give up. Therefore, at the end of the day they often get the legal titles to their piece of land. And then, finally, they can build their permanent structures, solid meeting houses with real facilities, proper and large gardens, effective water systems, cultural centers, and schools, and their proper health clinics.

I think the landless workers movement has achieved something unique. The MST has succeeded with something Gandhi never was able to do: to integrate the YES and the NO of the struggle; to combine the building up of new constructive alternatives constituting a new society, with the mobilization of a mass-based resistance to the dominant system that oppress ordinary and poor people. Clearly, Gandhi thought it was important to have a "constructive program" and he emphasized and mobilized for it. He could rightly be seen as the foremost proponent of a kind of resistance that focuses on building a new autonomous society. On the other hand he had serious

trouble getting the other anti-colonial activists to understand its importance for the liberation of India from British colonial rule. So the constructive element never became as big as the peaceful mass-based resistance for which he became so famous. More importantly, the mass resistance campaigns against British colonialism did not integrate the constructive program. Instead they were separated, happened at different places, and were sometimes not even organized by resistance-oriented activists, but people specialized in this more constructive work like teachers, journalists, etc. In contrast, with MST their resistance and construction are *integrated*. I would argue it is nearly impossible to understand the land occupations by MST without seeing how their land occupations are experiments in creating a new community and a new way of living. It is also impossible to make sense of and understand how they are able to create a “New Brazil” on their settlements, if you do not see it in relation to their resistance through land occupations. The resistance and the construction are part of the same work.

I am not saying that MST is perfect. Many problems and weaknesses as well as failures still exist, but they are on to something, and they show us a promising path of social change that we all could follow. By combining resistance with constructive work, they avoid the fundamental weaknesses of each. The fundamental weakness of resistance is to just be against, to protest, critique and obstruct what is unjust and wrong and demand that others correct it (often the state). The fundamental weakness of constructive work is to only build up what is already tolerated, legal and fits into the existing system, like adding new alternatives for us to choose from in a market. Resistance will always be repressed if it is strong and a real challenge to elites and the privileged and it will need resources and community to survive and endure. Constructive

work will always be coopted if it becomes popular that corporations exploit and steal it to make a profit. Additionally, resolve and struggle is needed to maintain the foundational values and principles of constructive work, in order to push the limits and break the rules that otherwise force it to conform to existing systems. This particular combination shows a way forward for truly transformative social change. That is what is so hopeful about the landless workers in Brazil and what we can learn from them. Without copying what they do, we can and shall apply the same combination of “constructive resistance” in our own struggles.

I am already longing for the next visit to Brazil knowing very well that they need all our solidarity and support. The new fascist Bolsonaro regime has declared MST as a main enemy of the state and they are determined to crush them. We cannot let that happen. Now is a time when international solidarity will be vital.