



JOÃO PEDRO STEDILE

LANDLESS BATTALIONS

The Sem Terra Movement of Brazil

Which region of Brazil do you come from, and what was your family background and education ?

I WAS BORN in 1953 in Rio Grande do Sul, and grew up on my parent's farm there until I was about eighteen. There was a community of small farmers of Italian extraction in the region—it had been colonized in the nineteenth century by peasants from those parts of what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire. My mother's family was originally from the Veneto, and my father's from what is today the Italian Tyrol. My grandfather came to Brazil in 1899. He was a farmer, too. My grandparents were almost certainly illiterate, but my father and mother had three years of primary school. But this was the period of industrialization, in the sixties, and my brothers and sisters already had wider horizons—they wanted to study. One of them became a metalworker. Some of the others went to the city, too.

The greatest influence on me at that stage was the Catholic Church—the Capuchin friars, in particular. In all the colonized regions of Rio Grande do Sul—Colônia, Caxias do Sul, Bento Gonçalves and the surrounding areas—the Church had a very strong presence, and the Capuchins were doing interesting work, preaching against injustice and taking up social issues. I owe my education to my uncle, a Capuchin, who helped me get a place at the Catholic grammar school where they taught the entire curriculum. I loved studying, and in the final year I applied for the advanced

course. I was living at the house of an uncle by then, because my father had died. I worked on the land by day and studied by night, walking the ten kilometres to school. I knew I wanted to carry on learning so I moved to Porto Alegre. I worked in various places, still earning my living by day, reading economics by night.

I had a stroke of luck in my second year at Porto Alegre. There was a competition for posts in Rio Grande do Sul's State Agriculture Department. I was from a farming family and I understood agriculture: I decided this was the route I should take. With the Agriculture Department, I'd travel a lot in the interior of the state and my work would still be linked to the farmers' lives. I got the posting, and from there I became involved with the local *Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais* (Rural Workers Union), especially the grape-farmers. My first experience as a social activist was working with the Union's members to calculate the price of grapes. Every year there was a battle with the buyers over this—the big vintners would name a sum and none of the growers could contest it, since they had no idea how to calculate what the harvest was really worth. We went round to the communities, sat down with the farmers and worked out how much it actually cost to produce a kilo of grapes, from trellising the vines to the manual labour of the harvest—since I was reading economics, I was able to help. In the process, the farmers became increasingly conscious, they got together and began to confront the wine producers. This coincided with the multinationals' entry into the market, and we won some important victories—there was a leap in the average price the farmers got for their grapes. At the same time, I'd maintained my links with the Church, and when the *Comissão Pastoral da Terra* (Pastoral Commission on Land) was set up in 1975, I met with them to discuss how to organize the farmers.

In 1976, I won a bursary from the Agriculture Department to go and study in Mexico for two years. It was there that I met Francisco Julião, from whom I learned a tremendous amount.¹ I only ever had two questions for him: 'What did you get wrong?' and 'What did you get right?'. It was a great privilege to be at UNAM at the same time as some of the major exiled intellectuals of the Brazilian Left such as Rui Mauro Marini,

¹ Francisco Julião (1915–1999): leader of the Farmers' Leagues in the northeast of Brazil, federal deputy for the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB); exiled after the military coup in 1964.

who gave courses on *Das Kapital*; Teotônio dos Santos himself, in sociology; Vânia Bambirra, who taught us dependency theory. I concentrated mainly on agrarian questions, but I took a few courses in economics and other disciplines. There were scholars from other Latin American countries who were also in exile in Mexico—Pedro Vuskovic, Allende’s economics minister; Jacques Chonchol, Allende’s minister for agrarian reform. I was very young, but I learnt a phenomenal amount from them. It was probably the best period of my life.

What were the origins of the Sem Terra Movement?

The MST was the result of the conjunction of three basic factors. First, the economic crisis of the late seventies put an end to the industrialization cycle in Brazil, begun by Kubitschek in 1956. Young people had been leaving the farms for the city, and getting jobs quite easily. Now they had to stay in the countryside and find a living there. The second factor was the work the friars were doing. In the sixties, the Catholic Church had largely supported the military dictatorship, but with the growing ferment of liberation theology there was a change of orientation, the emergence of the CPT and a layer of progressive bishops. Before, the line had been: ‘No need to worry, you’ll have your land in heaven’. Now it was: ‘Since you’ve already got land in heaven, let’s struggle for it here as well’. The friars played a good role in stirring up the farmers and getting them organized. And the third factor was the growing climate of struggle against the military dictatorship in the late seventies, which automatically transformed even local labour conflicts into political battles against the government.

It was against this background that land occupations began to spread throughout the South, the North and the Northeast. None of them were spontaneous—all were clearly planned and organized by local activists—but there were no connexions between them. From 1978 onwards, the first great strikes began to take place in the cities: they served as a good example of how to lose your fear. In the five years from 1978 to 1983—what you could call the genesis of the movement—there was an outbreak of large-scale land occupations, and people really did begin to lose their fear of struggling against the dictatorship. The role of the CPT was of crucial importance here—the Church was the only body that had what you might call a capillary organization, across the whole country. They soon realized that these occupations were happening in

different areas, and started setting up meetings between the local leaders. I'd already been involved in helping organize various actions in Rio Grande do Sul, the first one in September 1979. The CPT contacted me and other comrades and we began to hold national meetings, along the lines Julião and I had discussed. The farmers talked things over, in their own way: 'How do you do it in the Northeast?', 'How do you do it in the North?'. Slowly, we realized we were facing the same problems, and attempting similar solutions. Throughout 1983 and 1984 we held big debates about how to build an organization that would spread the struggle for land—and, above all, one that could transform these localized conflicts into a major battle for agrarian reform. We knew it changed nothing just to bring a few families together, move onto unused land and think that was the end. We were well aware from the agrarian struggles of the past that if farmers don't organize themselves, don't fight for more than just a piece of land, they'll never reach a wider class consciousness and be able to grapple with the underlying problems—because land in itself does not free the farmer from exploitation.

In January 1984 we held an Encontro Nacional in Cascavel, Paraná, where we analysed all these questions and resolved to set up an organization. The name was of no great importance, but the press already had a nickname for us. Every time we occupied some land the newspapers would say, 'There go the Sem Terra again'. Fine, since they called us that, we'd be the 'Movimento dos Sem Terra'. We were ideologically more inclined to call ourselves the 'Movement of Workers for Agrarian Reform', because the idea was to build a social force that would go beyond the struggle just for land itself. But history never depends entirely on people's intentions. We got our reputation as the 'Sem Terra', so the name stuck; the most we did was to invent the abbreviation—MST.

Another important decision we took at the Encontro Nacional was to organize ourselves as an autonomous movement, independent of the political parties. Our analysis of the farmers' movements of Latin America and Brazil taught us that whenever a mass movement was subordinated to a party, it was weakened by the effects of inner-party splits and factional battles. It was not that we didn't value parties, or thought it was wrong to join them. But the movement had to be free from external political direction. It also had to be independent of the Catholic Church. Many of the farmers were strongly influenced by the Church and argued that since it had helped us so much we should form a movement of

Christians for agrarian reform. Fortunately, some of the most politically aware comrades were from the Church. They had had previous experience with Ação Católica or in the JOCs, and they themselves warned us against it—the moment a bishop comes to a different decision from the mass organization, the organization is finished. We also decided then on the general tactics we would use. We were convinced that the fight for agrarian reform could only move forward if it were a mass struggle, so we had to try to involve as many people as possible. When we set out on a land occupation, we would try to take everyone along—fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, old people, children, the lot. We listed the ten or twelve objectives our movement would serve—the struggle for agrarian reform, for a different Brazil, for a society without exploiters. That was the initial framework.

So the movement didn't start out from Rio Grande do Sul?

No—that's the usual story, but it's not completely true. It's been characterized like that for various reasons. Firstly, because it was in Rio Grande do Sul, northeast of Porto Alegre, that we built the Encruzilhada Natalino encampment, and the press turned that into a historic event. It was based at the junction of three counties, Sarandi, Ronda Alta and Passo Fundo—hence the name, *encruzilhada* [crossroads]. The president, General Figueiredo, sent the Army to destroy the settlement, under the command of Major Curió. It was the dictatorship that politicized our struggle. All we wanted was land, but overnight the encampment was encircled by the Federal police, the Army and even the Air Force, to airlift the farmers to the Mato Grosso—they took over a hundred families, in the end. Curió was such a symbol of the military repression that all those who opposed the dictatorship began to sympathize with us, and Encruzilhada Natalino became a counter-symbol, like the strike at the Scania truck factory, or Lula's imprisonment. There's a commemorative monument there now. The encampment grew into a historic nexus for the Sem Terra—we took over several unproductive *fazendas*—large properties, or ranches—in the area and eventually a new municipality was set up there. It's called Pontão, because 80 per cent of the population are squatters, including the mayor. It's a mini-free territory, the result of agrarian reform.

That was one experience that gave the movement a southern imprint, although as I said, there were land occupations going on in the Northeast,

the North, the Bico do Papagaio, and here in São Paulo, in the Andradina region, between 1979 and 83—though only a few of these became well known. The other factor that's contributed to the impression of a southern bent to the Sem Terra Movement is that this is where many of our activists have come from—for the simple reason that, south of the Paraná, farmers' children had a better chance of an education: a fundamental requirement if you're going to help to articulate struggles, to get in contact with people, to establish relations with them. Dozens of militants from the South could then be sent to other regions—not because there was an ideology of wanting to teach northerners, but because of the different educational level. We adopted a method others have used before: the Brazilian Army posts officers from the South across the whole country, the Federal Savings Bank transfers its employees—so does the Catholic Church.

Could you describe a typical land occupation?

For two or three months, our activists visit the villages and communities in an area where there are lots of landless farmers, and start work on raising awareness—proselytizing, if you like. They explain to people that they have a right to land, that the constitution has a clause on agrarian reform but that the government doesn't apply it. Next, we ask the farmers if there is a big, underused land-holding in the region, because the law is clear: where there is a large unproductive property, the government is obliged to expropriate it. They get involved in the discussion, and start to become more conscious. Then comes the decision: 'You have a right to land. There are unused properties in the region. There is only one way to force the government to expropriate them. You think they'll do it if we write them a letter? Asking the mayor is a waste of time, especially if he's a landowner. You could talk to the priest, but if he's not interested, what's the point? We have to organize and take over that land ourselves.'

When that decision is reached, we can bring to bear all the historical experience we've accumulated—which, from a political point of view, is simply what the Sem Terra Movement does: our role is to pass on what we've learnt, as a class. As far as land occupations are concerned, we know our business—not everything, but a lot. Everyone has to go, all the families together. It has to be done during the night to avoid the police. Those who want to join in have to organize themselves into committees

of 15 or 20 people. Then, each committee—there may be twenty or so of them—has to hire a truck, and set up a kitty to buy canvas and stock up on provisions. It takes three or four months to get ready. One day there's a meeting of representatives from each of the 15-person committees to decide when the occupation will take place. The decision has to be kept secret. On the night, the hired trucks arrive, well before daybreak, and go round the communities, pick up all they can carry and then set off for the property. The families have one night to take possession of the area and build their shelters, so that early the next morning, when the proprietor realizes what's happened, the encampment is already set up. The committee chooses a family to reconnoitre the place, to find where there are sources of water, where there are trees for shade. There are a lot of factors involved in setting up an open-air encampment. It's better if you're near a road, because then you don't have to carry so much on your back. This sort of logistical experience has a big influence on how an occupation works out. But success really depends on the number of families involved—the more there are, the less favourable the balance of forces for the proprietor and the police; the fewer the families, the easier it is to evict them, and the more limited the political repercussions will be.

By morning, the settlement is established—and the basis for conflict is sprung. It will be covered in the press, and the proprietor will apply to the authorities, asking for the squatters to be evicted. Our lawyers will arrive on the scene, arguing that the property is large and unproductive, and therefore in breach of the constitution. From the Sem Terra point of view, if we win it's because the INCRA makes an inspection of the property and decides to expropriate.² If we lose, it's because the proprietor has enough force at his disposal to carry out the eviction. If the police come to evict the squatters, we always try to avoid there being violence. The encampment gets shifted—to the edge of the road, for example—and we go on from there, to occupy another unused property. But the main thing for a group, once it's gathered in an encampment, is to stay united, to keep putting pressure on the government.

The biggest occupation of all was in 1996, on Fazenda Giacometti, in Paraná. The property took up 80,000 hectares—nearly 200,000 acres—of good, fertile land, covering three municipalities. It was an

² INCRA: Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária.

insult to society that that land was lying unused—all the farmers in the region were enraged about it; everybody was. We started work in the region, discussing with the farmers, and decided to set up an encampment by the side of the road where people could gather if they wanted to join the occupation, rather than going to the Fazenda Giacometti straightaway. We kept the encampment there open for a week, and more and more people turned up. When the leaders decided on the date for the occupation, we assumed it would be the traditional method—they'd hire trucks, pile everyone into them and drive to the site. But on the night, there were so many families involved that we decided not to use the lorries. We walked the twenty-one kilometres—thirteen miles—all through the night. When we reached the Fazenda the day was breaking, and the police were called out immediately. But there were so many people—ten thousand squatters, with their bundles of belongings on their heads—that all the police could do was to help the procession down the road, and make sure there were no car accidents. The sheer scale of numbers transformed the balance of forces. That was our biggest victory, and since we knew it would be a historic event, we invited Sebastião Salgado to take photographs of the march. It was an epic, the greatest of all the land occupations we've carried out to this day.

What is the structure of the MST—how many are involved? How are decisions taken, at local and national level?

We are a mass social movement, whose principal objective is to gather people for the struggle. How do you join the Sem Terra Movement? There is no membership, no cards, and it's not enough just to declare that one wants to be in the MST. The only way to join is to take part in one of the land occupations, to be active on the ground. That's how we get members. It's very hard to pin down statistically. We wanted to get away from party or union-style bureaucracy—filling in forms, and subscription fees. When your base is poor, illiterate farmers, you have to develop ways of going about things that are as open as possible, drawing people in rather than putting up barriers or bureaucratic hiccups.

To describe the MST's structure: our base is the mass of those who would benefit from agrarian reform—according to the last IBGE census, around four million landless families.³ This is the layer we're working

³ IBGE: Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística.

with. Many of them will come along on some sort of action—protest marches, for example—but not all will dare to occupy land. That’s a very radical form of struggle, and you need to have been through several previous stages first. Recently the government tried out a little test on us. They started putting out propaganda saying that it wasn’t true that there are so many landless farmers in Brazil, that the MST had invented it. Raul Jungman, Cardoso’s minister for Agrarian Development, went on TV to launch a programme calling for the landless to register by post with the INCRA, promising the government would allocate them land. He thought there would be a tiny response, and we’d be demoralized. We took up the challenge. We went to our base and campaigned for postal registration. We said: ‘You see this government propaganda saying, whoever wants land should write in for it? Come on, let’s reply en masse. Let’s organize and do it collectively, instead of on our own’. During 2001, 857,000 families registered, and the government found themselves in a pickle—they couldn’t give land to any of them, because that would have meant allocating it to all. It was a simple, effective way of proving the existence of the millions of landless in Brazil.

Many of these people have been mobilized during the eighteen years of the Sem Terra Movement. Some 350,000 families have taken over land. In February 2002, we had 80,000 families camped on roadsides or on unused properties, their problems unresolved—they’re in the frontline in the battle against the government. There have been about 20,000 activists involved in this—the comrades with the greatest ideological clarity, who’ve helped to organize the rest. The activists come on courses, they take part in the regional and state-level meetings, where our leading bodies are elected—these consist of between fifteen and twenty-one comrades. Every two years we hold national meetings, where a national commission is elected, with representatives from each state. Every five years we hold a nationwide congress, which is always massive—a moment of real political debate. At the last congress—the fourth at national level—in August 2000, in Brasília, we spent five days in a sports hall with 11,750 delegates. From what I know of farmers’ movements, this was the largest farmers’ congress in Latin America, and maybe in the world. Though we could be beaten by the Indians and the Chinese. You can get ten thousand people there easily—click your fingers and you get more. But it was certainly the biggest in Latin America.

I also want to stress how much we've learnt from earlier farmers' movements in Brazil and throughout Latin America. It was this that taught us we should organize in collective bodies, that we should have committees to govern political decision-making and the allocation of tasks—that we shouldn't have a president. Even the encampments run themselves and resolve their problems through committees—an encampment doesn't have a president. It's the same at regional, state and national levels—I'm one of twenty-one national directors, but decisions are taken by the whole committee, and tasks divided between us. Some are better known than others, because the press always go for the chatter-boxes. But the best known aren't the most vital for the organization. The most important are those who stay quiet but take decisive actions for the movement to grow and spread.

How many Brazilian states do these delegates come from?

Of the twenty-seven states, our movement has a presence in twenty-three. We're strongest where there are most farmers, in the South and Northeast—or, in order of importance: the Northeast and the South. The Southeast is highly urbanized, there aren't many poor people left on the land—they're either rural wage-earners, who dream of going to the big city, or else the *lumpens*, who live on the city outskirts. In the North and West-Central areas there aren't many landless farmers. It's the agricultural frontier—even if there was a big settler movement in these parts, there'd still be a good deal of land available. The most common form of action there is individual initiatives. A tenant moves onto a patch, and for a few years he can delude himself he has land of his own, until someone takes it away from him. In Amazonas, Acre, Roraima and Amapá, the MST doesn't exist, because there is no mass base of farmers. Sometimes sectors of the Catholic Church and the rural unions try to tempt us to work there. The PT runs Acre now, and every time we meet the governor he asks when we're going to come there and organize.⁴ The answer is: when you have some farmers. There's no point us going there, putting up banners and opening an office—our problem is not lack of branch offices. If there aren't large numbers who will organize to occupy land, there is not going to be a farmers' movement. That's why we prefer to concentrate our work in

⁴ PT: Partido Trabalhista.

regions where there is a real base of landless farmers—hence the priority of the South and Northeast.

How is the MST financed, and by whom? Does the greater part of your funding come from your own activities, or are there other sources?

In terms of the land occupations themselves, we have a principle: all the costs have to be borne by those who participate. Otherwise things get confused: ‘I don’t know who’ buys the tents, ‘I don’t know who’ pays for the transport; the farmers end up depending on ‘I don’t know who’. At the first sign of trouble they’d say, ‘No, I didn’t come here on my own, so-and-so brought me’ and they’d leave, because they wouldn’t see the struggle as a personal sacrifice. We could carry out much larger actions if we asked for money from outside—but it would have a disastrous ideological effect. Instead, every family taking part in an occupation spends months working, to get materials for shelter, to get food—they know that they’ll be surrounded by police, that they’ll have no food, that they’ll have to hold out for weeks until there are political repercussions, and solidarity begins to bring in resources. On a lot of occupations we’ve had to reduce the number of families taking part because some were so poor, we would have had to pay for their transport and shelter. We’ve been faced with this dilemma many times.

Secondly, there is a great deal of solidarity at a local level. Trade unions and churches help us with training courses and funds, which we use to develop the movement. But another of our principles is that everything must be decentralized—we don’t have a national treasury, or any centralized state-level ones. Thirdly, when we occupy land, every farmer—if he wants to be in the MST—agrees to give 2 per cent of the encampment’s production to the movement. This doesn’t go to some far-off authority, but to help the people camped in the region, to organize the movement and train activists. Sometimes a settlement produces very little, and the comrades say: ‘We can’t give you 2 per cent, we’re working like dogs just to feed ourselves. But we can release two of our people, and we’ll support their families, so that those two can go to train other landless farmers.’ This is a very important contribution, although money doesn’t enter into it.

Fourthly, when we help set up an encampment we provide for the community’s basic needs: housing, electricity, school, teacher-training, and

so on. But these should be the responsibility of the State, so we try to force the government to make the local authorities pay for these. We get further where the state governments are more progressive; where they are more conservative, it's harder for us. For example, we have agreements with the universities for training seven hundred MST teachers a year. The government bears the cost, but we decide on the curriculum and the orientation. It's the same when we need an agronomist—the state should supply one, it's their responsibility. To those who say 'Ah, the government's paying to train your teachers, you've been co-opted', we reply: 'No, we want to train seven thousand, but they won't give us the money'.

These are our usual sources of funds, although we also get some help from organizations in Europe and the States. Incredible as it seems, there's a group of US businessmen who send us funds every so often, without us even asking. In general the money from Europe goes for training activists. We're building a school—the National Florestan Fernandes School, here on the Via Dutra—as a joint project with the EU. We wanted it to be near São Paulo, where there's a concentration of well-qualified leftist teachers and intellectuals—it's much easier to get them to come 50 kilometres out of São Paulo than to resettle them in the Normandia encampment in the interior of Pernambuco. It will be a school for training cadres, true to the spirit of Florestan Fernandes.⁵ We see no contradiction in going to the EU with a construction project, because the European countries have already stolen so much from Brazil—it's high time some of it was paid back. There are other projects, too—for instance, one with a European human-rights organization, to help us get legal representation.

How would you characterize the MST's social base—not only in terms of class, but also of gender and 'race'? Does it have specific sectors for work with indigenous peoples?

The indigenous peoples are a minority in Brazil and here, unlike in Andean or Aztec America, they were traditionally hunters and gatherers, not farmers as they are in Ecuador, Peru or Mexico, where they work inside the farmers' organizations. Our relations with the indigenous

⁵ Florestan Fernandes (1920–95): doyen of radical sociology in Brazil. Via Dutra: motorway connecting São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

peoples start from the recognition that they are the original inhabitants of Brazil. There is no discussion about that—all the land they claim as theirs is theirs, and they should do with it as they wish.

In terms of ethnic composition, it depends on the situation of the farmers in each state. There are very few blacks in the MST, and very few Sem Terra farmers in the areas where they mainly live—Bahia, Pernambuco, Maranhão. Pedro II's Law 601 of 1850 was designed to prevent freed black slaves from becoming landowners; as soon as they got their formal freedom, they had to migrate to the ports, and work in the docks. Blacks were excluded from the formation of the Brazilian farming classes, and that's had a lasting influence. To this day, the farming layers are composed mainly of *mestizos* in the Northeast, and European immigrants in the South. This is clearly reflected in the composition of the MST.

As far as gender goes, because our form of struggle involves whole families, there's been a break with the traditional model of men-only farmers' movements. This is not to say there's not still a strong macho culture among the men in the countryside—on the contrary. But the way our movement is organized means the women are bound to play a role. In an encampment there are as many women as men—and even more children. In general, the women are very active in the committees set up to solve everyday problems, but they're much less represented at higher levels—which is where the influence of machismo comes in. A male comrade will often object to his partner travelling so much, or going to meetings in the capital. Family life imposes restrictions that impede women's broader participation at state and national level. All the same, even though we haven't adopted a quota system, 40 per cent of the 21 comrades on the national executive committee are women—and they got there by contesting elections against men, and not just because we'd saved places for them.

In terms of class, the rural population has been classified in many ways—structuralists say one thing, ECLA-types another, Marxists a third. In our movement, we try to use terminologies that take account of the fact that there are a great many *lumpens* in the country areas—the numbers living in misery there have risen with the economic crisis. The agrarian proletariat constitutes around a third of the rural population, but their numbers are dropping sharply with mechanization. They're still a strong force in sugar-cane production, in São Paulo and

Pernambuco, but in cacao farming the organized workforce has virtually been destroyed. There are a lot of wage-workers in cattle-rearing, but they're widely scattered, which makes it difficult for them to organize. The same goes for large-scale agribusiness—soya or orange production, for instance: a ranch of 10,000 hectares, or 25,000 acres, with ten tractors, will produce a lot; but there will only be ten employees, who will never be able to provide a solid basis for a union. Then there is the classically defined layer of small farmers, the *campesinato*—those who work with their families on a little bit of land, whether it belongs to them or not. Of this fraction, a third are landless—our base of four million families. They work as share-croppers, or tenants; or they could be farmers' children, who need to earn a wage. Another third—again, around four million families—are small farmer-proprietors, owning up to 50 hectares, about 120 acres. There is also an agrarian petty bourgeoisie, whose properties can vary from 50 hectares in some regions to 500, or 1,200 acres. Over that—the big ranchers and landowners—we'd consider as part of the agrarian bourgeoisie.

According to the Gini index, Brazil has the highest concentration of land ownership in the world. One per cent of the proprietors—around 40,000 of the biggest ranchers, or *latifundiários*—own 46 per cent of the land, some 360 million hectares, in *fazendas* of over 2,000 hectares, more than 5,000 acres each. In general, these are either occupied by livestock or entirely unproductive. Below them, the agrarian bourgeoisie own another 30 million hectares, roughly 75 million acres, on properties of between 500 and 2,000 hectares (1,200 to 5,000 acres); this is the most modernized sector, producing soya, oranges, coffee. The holdings of the small farmers—under 100 hectares, or around 250 acres—produce mainly for subsistence, selling a small surplus at markets.

In which areas has the Sem Terra Movement been involved most actively—Rio Grande, São Paulo, Nordeste, Mato Grosso, Goiás?

The regions where the social struggle is at its broadest are those where there's the greatest concentration of landless people—in the Northeast and the South. For the press, though—and, sometimes, for Brazilian public opinion—it seems as if most of the confrontations take place in the North or the West-Central region. The reason is that 'Brazilian

civilization' has yet to arrive in those parts—in Pará or Rondônia—and the ranchers and landowners exercise a lot more violence: assassinating union leaders, using the police to do their bidding. This ultra-brutality is more entrenched in those regions, but that doesn't mean the struggles there have the same breadth as those in the Northeast and the South.

I wanted to ask you about something not generally raised by the press—the question of fear. Do you or the farmers ever get scared during land occupations?

Collective actions release energy—there's a physical surge of adrenaline, and who knows what else, medical experts say. The occupation itself is a festival. The fear comes with the evictions, especially when the balance of forces is all on their side. If there are fifty or a hundred families facing several hundred shock troops it can be very frightening—they'll lash out at the squatters indiscriminately, women and children too. It's a terrible, fraught situation, with the children screaming and the women getting beaten about. Evictions of small groups of squatters are often tragedies—they impose such a degree of humiliation on the families involved. That's why we always try to stage large-scale actions—they have a much better chance of success. But with the growing social crisis, we're running into difficulties. In many regions, the poverty is so bad and, since the landless movement's gained a reputation, sometimes communities just organize themselves and squat on some land, thinking it'll work. They don't realize the movement has accumulated some vital experience, which it can pass on. The police turn up with their batons and they get evicted in the most brutal way.

What do you consider the greatest successes of the MST?

By the simple fact of existing for eighteen years, a farmers' movement that contests the ruling class in this country can consider itself something of a triumph—it's longer than any previous one has lasted. We've won some economic victories: the lives of the 350,000 families that have occupied land are improving—they may still be poor, but things are getting better. But maybe the greatest success is the dignity the Sem Terra farmers have won for themselves. They can walk with their heads held high, with a sense of self-respect. They know what they're fighting for. They don't let questions go unanswered. That's the greatest victory. No one can take that class-consciousness away.

There have been other actions that have made a big impact in folklore terms, so to speak, like the Giacometti occupation, or the march to Brasília in 1997, when nearly 1,500 comrades covered 1,500 kilometres—a thousand miles—in a few months. That was an epic, too. No mass movement had ever marched such a distance before—the Prestes Column, so important in our history, was on horse-back, or in cars.⁶ It was a heroic moment when we arrived in Brasília. There were over a hundred thousand people waiting for us there—not just the local people but trade-unionists and CUT and PT members who had come from all over the country. The march had a big impact in terms of winning over public opinion. A large part of this was due to Sebastião Salgado and his photographs. The ‘Terra’ exhibition was a worldwide success, and it gave the Sem Terra Movement a global visibility in the field of the arts, without the need for an ideological discourse. Salgado’s images launched us internationally, and for that we’re very grateful to him.

When did the MST decide to start organizing in the favelas, as well as in the countryside? What kinds of action are possible in urban areas?

Organizing in the favelas isn’t our principal work—there hasn’t been a shift of emphasis to the cities. But because the Southeast is highly urbanized, a lot of the rural working class has been absorbed into the *lumpenproletariat*, living on the outskirts—our social base from the country transplanted to the city. We have an obligation to them still, so we have to go to the favelas, to try to organize them. It’s for that reason that our work in the cities is mainly in the Southeast—São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Minas.

From the realities of organizing there, our activists have come up with a new proposal: what they call ‘rurban’ settlements—*assentamentos rurbanos*. Instead of grabbing a guy who lives on the outskirts and dropping him into the depths of the countryside, we set up encampments closer to the city, on small lots. These are people who are used to a more urban way of life—as opposed to a farmer from the Northeast, who wants 15 hectares (35 acres). Here in the Southeast that’s a vast amount of land. So we get them lots of one hectare, two or three acres, where they

⁶ Luís Carlos Prestes (1899–1990): army captain who led a column of insurgents several thousand miles across Brazil in the late 1920s; later leader of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB) until his death.

can do more labour-intensive sorts of farming, such as fruit-growing or chicken-rearing, combined with local agroindustrial work for the women and children, so they still have some connexion to agriculture. The kids can study computing and work in the administration of a milk or fruit concern, for example. We're discussing this with some of the regional governments, to see if it's viable. In São Paulo, we're working on an experimental settlement project with three hundred families, in partnership with the city Prefecture. There are already 'rurban' settlements like this in other states.

Will this still involve land occupations?

Yes, the struggle will be triggered by occupations, but maybe not in such a dramatic manner. For example, in São Paulo, there was a land occupation on the Anhanguera road out of the city—to a farmer's eyes, there were 10 or 15 hectares, nearly 40 acres, lying totally abandoned—but it's not necessarily the typical unproductive cattle-ranch. There are places close to the city that could be put to better social use, too, and in those sorts of cases there'll be a different focus to the occupations.

Will they follow a similar pattern to those in the country?

The form is similar—occupations have to have a mass character, they have to take place at night, they have to protect the squatters. It's the political work of raising consciousness that's different. Favela people have another sort of culture, with its own habits and vices and pleasures. Working with them is much faster. The farmer is more of a Doubting Thomas, he wants to take it slowly, to try things out. He needs to visit a settlement to see if it works. People on the city outskirts are more in touch with the mass media and the rest of the world, they're quicker to absorb new information and debate things—and also more readily distracted.

What has been the rate and rhythm of growth of the MST—continuous expansion, or sporadic? Has there been any regression in numbers since the early 1980s?

We've grown, but the rhythm has depended on the balance of forces—when the landowners or the government have had the upper hand, our rate of growth has dropped. For the last two years we've made very few

gains, despite the fact that we now have a substantial presence as a movement, because the Cardoso government has been drawing us into one fight after another, trying to force us onto the defensive politically. We've resolved to assault their neoliberal programme, and they're determined to defeat us.

How would you assess the record of the Cardoso presidency on the agrarian question, compared with the Sarney (1984–89), Collor (1990–92) or Itamar Franco (1992–94) periods?

The struggle for agrarian reform in Brazil—and the growth of the Sem Terra Movement itself—can't be measured solely in terms of numbers of families settled on land. Our struggle is a social and political one: sometimes we win victories that can't be measured in terms of hectares, and sometime we occupy a lot of land but the cumulative political effect is not so great. It's very complex, but we'd make the following analysis. The Sarney administration in 1984 was faced with the great social ferment that followed the fall of the dictatorship. These were highly favourable times for agrarian struggles. There were lots of land occupations. Brazil's ruling class was in crisis: industry had come to a halt and the old economic model had failed. They didn't know where to go next, which resulted in the elections of 1989. The enemy was weak in this period and we could move forward. The MST was born in 1984, but consolidated during the Sarney years.

Collor's victory in 89, and the implementation of the first neoliberal measures, put an end to any hopes for agrarian reform. Collor wanted to crush us. He set the Federal police on us—for two years we had to eat whatever bread the devil kneaded, as we say. Many of our state-level headquarters were raided. There was even an attempt to kidnap me from outside our national office. A comrade from the CUT who looks a lot like me was seized, taken away and tortured. He was only released when they looked at his documents and realized they had the wrong person. The UDR had grown in strength, and there were a lot of assassinations between 1990 and 1992.⁷ They were terrible years for us. There was little organic growth, it was more a question of keeping going. Instead of our slogan 'Occupy, Resist, Produce', it was more

⁷ UDR: União Democrática Republicana, an organization of ranch-owners and agrarian capitalists, modelled on the Ku Klux Klan.

like ‘Get beaten up and hold out’. Fortunately, Globo TV brought Collor down once they realized he was just a *lumpen*-bourgeois. Then came the period of transition, under Itamar Franco. He certainly had no plans for agrarian reform, but he did stop the repression—the boot was lifted, and we began to resurface. The two years under Itamar were a time of restoring our energies. We made few gains, and there were not many new settlements. It was a hybrid government, with no political will and no programme of its own.

The Cardoso administration underestimated the agrarian issue initially, in 94. Cardoso was being advised by Francisco Graziano da Silva, whose doctoral thesis ‘The Tragedy of Land’ set out to prove there were neither large land-holdings nor landless farmers in Brazil. Cardoso wrote a preface for the book when it was published—it had a strong influence on him. Then came the Rondônia and Carajás massacres and he got a fright—as did the ruling class—at the scale of the social problem they revealed.⁸ They were stunned as roaches, as the saying goes. It was a much better period for us in terms of morale—after the Carajás massacre, the government had to give in to the public outcry at the treatment of the Sem Terra. They had no way of repressing us. We had a stronger position in society and that helped us a great deal. There were lots of land occupations between 96 and 98, even though the neoliberal programme Cardoso was implementing didn’t seem to offer much hope for land expropriations or agrarian reform.

When Cardoso won his second term in 98, he put his foot down. The transition to the new economic model had been consolidated. In agriculture, the entry of international capital was put on the fast-track, together with what they call the application of the North American model to Brazilian farming, and the internationalization of our food production. The concentration of land and agro-industry in the hands of large-scale capital was speeded up. All agricultural trade is now under the control of the multinationals. The public sector has disappeared—going against the First World’s actual practice of developing agriculture through strong state support. Instead, the Cardoso administration has put everything in the hands of the market. The INCRA budget was three billion reals in 1997; in 2001 it was down to 1 billion. There is no more technical

⁸ Rural workers were killed by the police in Corumbiara, Rondônia on 9 August 1995 and at Eldorado dos Carajás on 17 April 1996.

assistance, no more state stockpiling, no more funding, no more government research; Embrapa has been scrapped.⁹ Clearly, there is no room for land expropriation or popular agrarian reform.

Over the last three years we have been faced with a situation similar to the Collor period, only worse in that the neoliberal model is widely accepted now. At the same time, the fight of the landless has been transformed into a much wider class question. It's this that has made us recognize that we, too, need to broaden our struggle, as we decided at our last Congress in 2000. We'll carry on squatting land, because that's the only way for families to resolve their immediate problems—to have a place where they can work. But if we are to move towards popular agrarian reform we have to confront the neoliberal programme itself, and that can't be done by land occupations alone. For that reason, the Sem Terra Movement has joined other farmers' organizations to combat the multinationals in milk production and, especially, GM seeds. They are the most extreme expression of the extension of the multinationals' control under the new economic model. In five years' time, all the seeds Brazilian farmers need to plant could be owned by the big corporations. The country's food sovereignty is in jeopardy.

That's our assessment of the Cardoso Presidency—a government that has subordinated itself completely to the interests of international capital, and has imposed that surrender on Brazilian agriculture. The Sem Terra have only escaped because over the last eighteen years we've managed to build a social movement with a coherent ideology and a layer of activists. If we had been the usual type of farmers' movement, they would have wiped us out. The avalanche of propaganda against the landless farmers in the media, the economic offensives against us, the attempts to suffocate us, to flatten us along with our settlements—all this has been impressive. For three years not a single newspaper has spoken well of the MST—it's just attack, attack, attack. What's saved us has been the support of the social forces that don't believe their propaganda, and protect us. Otherwise they would have finished us long ago.

What specific measures has the state taken to repress the MST? Have assassinations and arbitrary imprisonments decreased under Cardoso, or gone up?

⁹ Embrapa: Brazilian State Agricultural Research body.

The number of brutal killings has gone down under Cardoso, partly because Brazilian society has been more vigilant and partly because we've given increasing priority to mass struggles. Under Collor and Sarney, most of the assassinations were of union presidents—it was easier for the ranch-owners or the police to pick off a figurehead. Some 1,600 people have been killed in agrarian conflicts since 1984, but only about a hundred of these were Sem Terra members—most of them at Carajás and Rondônia. The point to stress—and I don't say this to boast: on the contrary, we share the grief and solidarity for those comrades from other organizations who were killed—is that our form of mass organization protects our members and activists, our committee structure and collective leadership shelters our leaders, and deters assassinations. This has been an important factor for the drop in the number of killings during Cardoso's second term.

Instead, they've taken up cannier, more disguised forms of repression, linked to the intelligence services. Firstly, Cardoso has reorganized the Federal police, setting up new departments specializing in agrarian conflict in each state, with inspectors who are experts on the Movement—they've read more of our literature than most of our activists, since it's their professional duty; they're Sem Terra PhDs. This is basically a reconstruction of the rural DOPS of the dictatorship years.¹⁰ Their officers keep opening inquiries on us, so the MST's energies are constantly being wasted on protecting its activists from the Federal police. They listen in on our phone lines and they've stepped up surveillance on our leadership. The ranch-owners are no longer at liberty just to have us bumped off, but there are men following us like shadows. Our leaders have to be rock-solid in their beliefs, because it's a terrible drain on their energies.

The second form of repression we're facing is through the judiciary, where the PSDB government and the land-owners have a lot of influence. They use the courts as a way to grind us down. Last week I spent a day in the prison in Mãe do Rio, a small municipality in Pará, where fourteen of our comrades have been held for 31 days, without charge, in a cell measuring 4 by 6 metres, while the judge systematically denies them the right of *habeas corpus*. They were in a group of three hundred

¹⁰ DOPS: Department of Political and Social Order.

families, occupying unused ranch-land belonging to Jader Barbalho.¹¹ It's clear the local judiciary is under Barbalho's influence, and he's openly told the newspapers that the MST should be taught a lesson: 'They'll see who they've got mixed up with.' So the fourteen comrades have been held for a month, and the movement's energies have been spent on getting them freed instead of going towards the struggle for land.

The third form of repression I've already mentioned: the concerted use of the media against us, the attempt to stigmatize us among broad layers of society, and especially among the least politicized sectors of the urban lower-middle class—the readers of *Veja*, which is very heavily biased against us.¹² Fortunately, the impoverished working class don't read *Veja*. But the way the media are systematically ranged against us by the Palácio de Planalto, in order to conduct a permanent campaign against us, is no less a form of repression.

What is your opinion of Cardoso as a person, president and statesman?

As a person, I think he was betrayed by his enormous vanity—everyone who's had a long-term association with him testifies to that. It's led him to renege on whatever principles he may have had, as an intellectual—or at least, that his academic reputation suggested. As a president, he's been no more than a mouthpiece for a ruling class that's given up on national goals, and united around the programme of becoming the foreman for international capital on Brazilian territory. As a statesman? I've never heard anyone call him that—he's never had the dignity to represent the Brazilian people. At most, he represents a bourgeoisie that lives here, but has no national project—so he could never even constitute himself as a statesman in terms of his own class. History will be right to categorize him as the great traitor of the Brazilian people.

Who do you, and the MST, feel closest to internationally, on agrarian questions? How would you compare the MST to the EZLN?

Our relations with the Zapatistas are simply those of solidarity. Their struggle is a just one, but its social base and its method are different to

¹¹ A key Cardoso lieutenant in Congress, president of the Senate, forced to resign after corruption scandals.

¹² *Veja*: the largest circulation news weekly in Brazil.

ours. Theirs is, at root, a struggle of indigenous peoples for autonomy—and if there's a criticism to be made of their experience, it would be that the slowness of their advance is due to their inability to broaden it into a class struggle, a national one. They have accepted the terms of fighting for a specific ethnicity, within a particular territory—whereas ours is a farmers' movement that has been transformed and politicized as a result of the advance of capitalism, of neoliberalism. If the fight we're carrying on today had been waged in the 1930s—if Brazilian farmers had been able to organize then as well as they can now—it would have just been a movement for agrarian reform, seeking only to meet the needs of its own sector.

On the international plane, the context is far broader, politically. The Sem Terra have made a modest, but proud, contribution to the international network of farmers' movements, Via Campesina, which has a presence in 87 countries. There have been several international meetings and congresses, the last in 2001 in India. It is very striking that it is only now that farmers are starting to achieve a degree of worldwide coordination, after five hundred years of capitalist development. Workers have had an international day for over a century, and women for not much less, but farmers have only just agreed to mark one—17 April, a source of pride to us: a tribute to Carajás. As long as capitalism meant only industrialization, those who worked on the land limited their struggle to the local level. But as the realities of neoliberal internationalization have been imposed on us, we've begun to hear stories from farmers in the Philippines, Malaysia, South Africa, Mexico, France, all facing the same problems—and the same exploiters. The Indians are up against Monsanto, just as we are in Brazil, and Mexico, and France. It's the same handful of companies—seven groups, in total, worldwide—that monopolize agricultural trade, and control research and biotechnology, and are tightening their ownership of the planet's seeds. The new phase of capitalism has itself created the conditions for farmers to unite against the neoliberal model.

In Via Campesina, we're building a platform independent of the particular tendencies of the farmers' movements within each country. One plank on which we agree, at the international level, is that there must be the sort of agrarian reform that would democratize the land—both as a basis for political democracy, and for building an agriculture of another kind. This has major implications. From the time of Zapata in Mexico, or

of Julião in Brazil, the inspiration for agrarian reform was the idea that the land belonged to those who worked it. Today we need to go beyond this. It's not enough to argue that if you work the land, you have proprietary rights over it. The Vietnamese and Indian farmers have contributed a lot to our debates on this. They have a different view of agriculture, and of nature—one that we've tried to synthesize in *Via Campesina*. We want an agrarian practice that transforms farmers into guardians of the land, and a different way of farming, that ensures an ecological equilibrium and also guarantees that land is not seen as private property.

The second plank is the concept of food sovereignty. This brings us into head-on collision with international capital, which wants free markets. We maintain that every people, no matter how small, has the right to produce their own food. Agricultural trade should be subordinated to this greater right. Only the surplus should be traded, and that only bilaterally. We are against the WTO, and against the monopolization of world agricultural trade by the multinational corporations. As José Martí would say: a people that cannot produce its own food are slaves; they don't have the slightest freedom. If a society doesn't produce what it eats, it will always be dependent on someone else.

The third plank we are working on for the *Via Campesina* programme is the idea that seeds are the property of humankind—agricultural techniques cannot be patented. Biotechnology is a good thing. Scientists can develop things in the laboratory that would take nature millions of years to evolve. But it's only a good thing if these developments are democratized, if everyone has access to them, and if there are proper safeguards for the environment and for human health. This is not the case with GM technology. No scientist is prepared to give an absolute assurance as to what the effects of cloned animals and genetically modified seeds could be, so they should be restricted to experiments in laboratories, in limited areas, and their use shouldn't be extended until we're completely certain. The history of BSE should have taught us this.

Something that's not much known abroad is that, between 1998 and 1999, Cardoso pushed through a patent law granting the right to private ownership of living beings. The first draft was circulated to Congress in English, because the American Embassy that had imposed the programme on Brazil didn't even bother to translate it. Locally it was the handiwork of Ney Suassana, the current Minister of National Integration

and notorious for toadying to the US. Once the government had bent to their masters and the law was approved, the Institute of Biology here received 2,940 applications for patents, 97 per cent of which were from multinational corporations who wanted property rights over an Amazonian butterfly or some sort of shrub. It sounds absurd. But exactly the same thing is going on in India, Chile, the Philippines, South Africa—despite the illusion that the ANC would be a progressive government, it's a neoliberal administration, just like Brazil.

What has been the contribution to the Sem Terra movement of environmentalists and other democratic activists from outside the ranks of the landless?

There are many currents in the environmentalist movement, some very sectarian—sometimes a farmer cuts down a tree on an encampment, and there's a flurry of denunciations—but in general the majority of the groups here have helped us, including Greenpeace, which I find the liveliest. They've taken up the fight against GM technology, and they've been helping us raise people's consciousness on that. We've built a grand coalition on the issue with all the environmental movements in Brazil. There's a division of labour: some of the groups involved work in the juridical sphere, others—such as Greenpeace—on propaganda, and we organize mass actions. Today we occupied a 1,200-hectare—3,000 acre—property in Rio Grande do Sul where all the soya was genetically modified. There were 1,500 young people there and it turned into an educational exercise for them. After an intensive, five-day course on GM plants, they had a practical lesson in destroying a genetically modified soya crop. I think our involvement has also managed to politicize the environmental movements a bit more. Two or three years ago they were still only focusing on animals in danger of extinction, or defending the forest, when here in the Third World, humans are the living beings most at risk.

What is the position of the MST on the use of violence for social ends—including, specifically, agrarian reform?

We have a tradition of ideological pluralism within the movement, in the sense that we never claim to be the followers of any one thinker—we try to treat each one as synthesizing a particular historical experience, and to see how we can make use of them. As far as violence is concerned, we've learnt a lot from two Asians: Ho Chi Minh and Gandhi. Ho was

the only one who's managed to defeat the USA. He systematically taught the Vietnamese peasants that their strength lay not in what they held in their hands, but in what they carried in their heads. The achievements of the Vietnamese soldier—a farmer, illiterate and poor—came from his being conscious of what he was fighting for, as a soldier and as a man. Everything he could lay hold of, he turned into a weapon. The other main lesson we've learned is to raise people's consciousness, so that they realize it's our vast numbers that constitute our strength. That was what Gandhi taught us—through the Indians' Salt March against the British, for instance. If we ever decided to use the same weapons as our enemies, we would be doomed to defeat.

What is the best help that direct-action groups and NGOs in North America and Europe can give to the MST and sister movements?

The first thing is to bring down your neoliberal governments. Second, help us to get rid of foreign debt. As long as we're still financially dependent—which is what the plunder of 'debt' represents—it won't be possible to construct economic models that meet the needs of our population. Third, fight—build mass struggles. Don't delude yourself that because you have a higher living standard than us, you can build a better world. It's impossible for you to maintain your current patterns of consumption without exploiting us, so you have to battle to change the type of consumerism that you're caught up in. Fourth, stop importing Brazilian agricultural products that represent nothing but exploitation: wood, mahogany—all that wooden furniture in England made with Amazonian timber. What's the point of campaigning to save the rainforest if your governments and companies carry on boosting the sawmills and timberyards that are exporting its wood to you? Again, stop buying soya to feed your mad cows—let the people here have a chance to organize agricultural production to guarantee our own food needs first. Fifty-six million people in this country go hungry every day.

What is the relationship of the Sem Terra Movement to the Brazilian Left in general, and in particular to the Partido Trabalhista?

The MST has historical connexions to the PT—both were born during the same time period. In the countryside there are many activists who helped to form the PT and work for the MST, and vice versa. There's been a natural overlap of giving mutual assistance, while always maintaining

a certain autonomy. The majority of our activists, when they opt for a party, generally choose the PT, but there are Sem Terra farmers affiliated to the Partido Socialista Brasileiro, and to Lionel Brizola's Partido Democrático Trabalhista—though not to the PCdoB, because it's adopted the classic line of forming its own farmers' movement, the Movimento de Luta de Terra. Those who came up through the struggle with us but sympathized with the PCdoB automatically preferred to join that.¹³ Another reason for the predominance of the PT.

The MST is autonomous from the PT, but at election time we've traditionally supported their candidates, as they're the major Left party. But we feel that the Brazilian Left in general is going through a period of crisis at the moment, presenting difficulties for organic Left accumulation—irrespective of the electoral results of any one set of party initials, or of the diverse currents within the PT. The crisis is a complex one. Firstly, the Left has no clear project for Brazil—or it falls into the simplification of socialism versus capitalism, without managing to formulate clearly what first steps socialists should take. Secondly, the institutionalization of the parties and currents has distanced them from the mass movements. It seems that the Left has forgotten that the only force that can bring social change is the organized mass of the people, and that people organize themselves through struggle, not through the vote. A vote is an expression of citizenship, not a form of struggle. The Left has to regain the belief that we alone are going to alter the balance of forces, through mass struggles against the bourgeoisie. There is always a preference for negotiations, for accommodating to class pressures.

A third criticism—and this is also a form of self-criticism, because we consider ourselves as part of the Left: we need to recover our predecessors' tradition of grassroots work, the microscopic business of organizing people—something the Church talks about a great deal. Activists no longer have the patience to conduct meetings with depoliticized people. I don't know how the mass political parties used to do this work historically in England and Europe. Often when we speak of propaganda, it's really only agitation, the sort carried out by the Trotskyists here in Brazil; but they don't raise consciousness, they don't organize—often they simply give up. One constantly hears criticism of this sort of thing:

¹³ PCdoB: founded in 1961, a Maoist split from the PCB.

the trade-union leadership calls demonstrations for the 1st of May, which even the union president doesn't attend, let alone the members.

The fourth point is the question of political education. It's very rare for movements of the Left to maintain a consistent education programme for their militants, in the broadest sense. Activists need to read the classics, so they can master the tools necessary for a correct interpretation of reality. The Left here has simply abandoned the classics and even, from a theoretical perspective, the study of Brazilian reality itself. It's lazy when it comes to analysing its own situation, its contradictions, the class struggle, the living conditions of the working class. It falls back on generalizations which it doesn't understand, and is unable to explain. We need to recover the sense of a theoretical training for activism, without resorting to theoreticism. We need to marry theoretical education with political practice. It's pitiful to see where our young people end up, even those affiliated to the PT or the CUT—as if the only thing for young people to do today was hold music festivals or campaign for the legalization of cannabis. The Brazilian Left needs to overcome those challenges in order to reconstitute, in the not-too-distant future, a great mass movement with the consistent, revolutionary aim of an alternative project for our society.