

# Taking Back

Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence.

BY STACY PETTIGREW AND SKOTT KELLOGG

The *Movimiento Sin Tierra* (MST), or the Landless Workers Movement, is one of the most powerful grassroots movements in the world. Beginning in Brazil more than 20 years ago, the MST is now more than one million members strong throughout Latin America and has won land equivalent to half the area of Ohio.

Frustrated by the elite's monopoly on land ownership, as well as extreme poverty and unresponsive governments, members of the MST form small groups to occupy and create settlements on idle land. Land occupations, of which the MST has carried out tens of thousands, play a key role in the *mística*, the moment of collective theater and mythmaking that kicks off all MST events.

Brazilian MST leader João Pedro Stédile recognizes that it is a huge step for a poor rural family to take part in an occupation. "The vehemence of this action means that no one can sit on the fence," he says. "You have to have a position, either in favor or against." Another MST leader, Jaime Amorim, says it is the decision to risk all in a dangerous and arduous land occupation that sparks off a process of change in the individual: "Rural workers can learn more on the day of the occupation than during a whole lifetime."

The settlers often face violence from landowners, agribusiness and governmental armed forces. Yet despite these obstacles, MST settlements are creating alternative models of living and are securing physical spaces where hundreds of thousands of families can live decent, independent lives instead of having to submit themselves to the degradation and poverty of city slums.

Today, local MST groups are springing up throughout the Americas, including in Peru, Mexico and Bolivia.

## Bolivia: The Epicenter of Agrarian Conflict

It is no surprise that people have embraced land occupations in Bolivia, one of the poorest countries in South

America. In 2000, the MST Bolivia formed in Gran Chaco, an area described in the Bolivian newsweekly *El Pulso* as "the epicenter of agrarian conflict, where *latifundistas* and huge tracts of land contrast with the exploitation of sharecroppers and farm laborers living in conditions of semi-slavery." Established during the Spanish conquest, the economic system of *latifundismo* is based on huge, export-driven plantations, called *haciendas* or *latifundos*.

The Bolivian revolution enacted sweeping agrarian reforms in 1953, stating that idle land should be given to those who would work it. However, power quickly left the hands of the people who fought the war, and the land was distributed to friends of the ruling regime instead of the poor.

In 1996, the National Institute of Agrarian Reform (INRA) was created to verify that the titles to all of the farm land in the country were legally obtained and whether land was being excessively monopolized. *Campesino* (farmer) organizations, including those that would later form the MST, refused to participate in the negotiations leading up to the INRA because they felt it violated their constitutional right to the free endowment of land.

"Our struggle began with marches, protests and land takeovers," explains Wilfor Colque Caceres, secretary of the MST Bolivia National Coordinating

Committee. "We no longer ask the authorities to give us the land, because when we do that, they cut us off. We go directly to lands... We enter, we work, we occupy the lands."

He describes the MST as "an organization of men and women fighting for the recuperation of land that has been usurped by national and international businessmen." They form in local, autonomous nuclei that identify and occupy abandoned or unproductive land.

"The National Coordinating Committee is a collective (egalitarian) body, there is no hierarchy. We are all equal—that helps us to be a stronger body. In order to decide on a matter, we make our decisions amongst all of us." He explains that the MST is organized in each of Bolivia's nine departments (states). There are 4,250 families living

There is little that will stand in the way of the wave of devastation except the success of those who are making their stand in place. Again and again, the people of the MST have tried to make this point to us, fully aware of the shortcomings in themselves and in their communities.

The MST has made impressive progress against the terribly powerful forces thrown against them, and they have built stable communities where it had seemed impossible to do so.

—ANGUS WRIGHT AND WENDY WOLFORD

# the Land

Inside Bolivia's  
Landless Workers  
Movement

Land is the basis of freedom, justice and equality. —Malcolm X

on occupied land in the department of Santa Cruz. "Some are on plantations, others are on forested reserves." The MST firmly states that it won't touch productive or Indigenous lands.

"It's not that we look for people to organize," says Colque. "People that organize themselves come here and say to us: 'Look, we want to form part of the MST, and we found land to takeover.' So what we do is talk, share experiences, tell them what problems they can anticipate.

Every day, organizations arrive here asking for information. Communities invite us to their meetings."

Colque describes the solidarity among MST groups in different countries: "We have mutual support. Not only with Brazil, but with Peru and Mexico also. We have a coordination in which *compañeros* from here, Bolivia, go to train in Brazil. Recently a Brazilian *compañero* visited us, sharing experiences."

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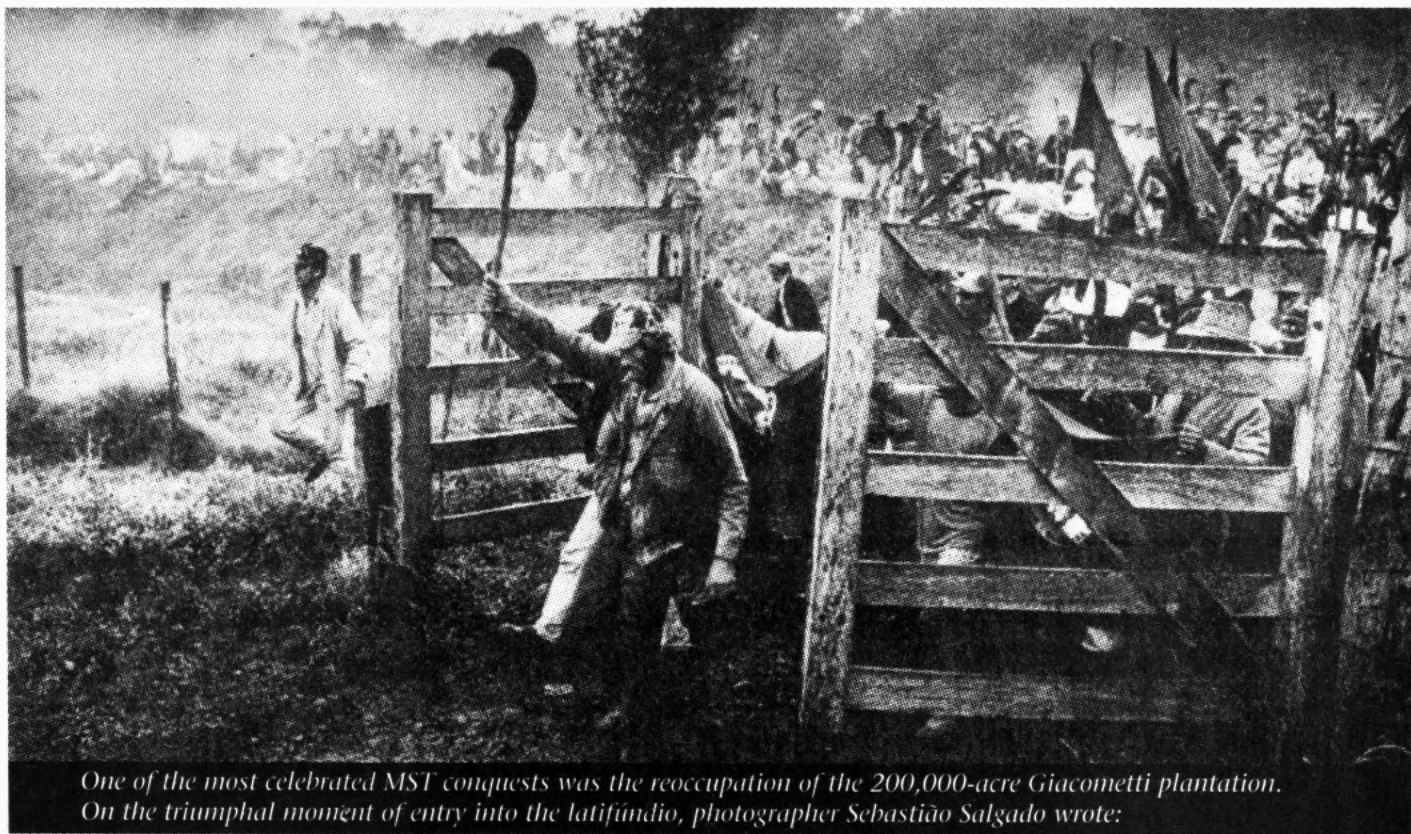


photo by Sebastião Salgado

*One of the most celebrated MST conquests was the reoccupation of the 200,000-acre Giacometti plantation. On the triumphal moment of entry into the latifúndio, photographer Sebastião Salgado wrote:*

It was impressive, this column of 12,000 landless peasants, made up of 3,000 families, marching into the cold night in the beginning of Winter in Paraná. The peasant army advanced in almost complete silence. The only thing you could hear was the regular breathing of people accustomed to making an effort, and the dull thud of feet on the asphalt.

When we arrived, day was breaking. The early morning was wrapped in a thick mist from the Iguaçu River that runs close by. The mist slowly began to lift. And the river of peasants, which had flowed down the asphalt throughout the night, finally stopped as it reached the gate of the estate, and then spread out, like the water of a dam.

But the small army protecting the *latifúndio* did nothing, so the men on the front line broke the padlock, opened the gates and entered. Behind them, the river of peasants began to move. They raised sickles, hoes and flags in an unrestrained avalanche of hope in this reencounter with life—and the repressed cry of the people without land rang out with a single voice in the clarity of the new day: "Agrarian reform! A struggle for us all!"



## The MST on Globalization

According to Colque, the MST doesn't isolate the issue of landlessness from other national concerns. Bolivians are wary of continuing attempts to privatize water after successfully resisting the US-based Bechtel Corporation's privatization plans in 2000. The US-imposed war on drugs against the traditionally used coca plant has resulted in the forced eradication of the crop, violence and deep resentment amongst *campesinos*. The proposed sale of Bolivian natural gas to the US has boiled over with strikes and roadblocks. Protesters have been reported injured and dead at the hands of governmental armed forces.

Closely tied to all national concerns is the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), which would open up Bolivia's natural resources to the international market, as well as decimate local farmers. "The FTAA is a matter that is very worrisome. They are trying to silence us. For us, this is a genocidal law," says Colque.

Not surprisingly, MST settlements in Bolivia have been violently repressed within months of their beginnings, as landowners use every means

## The Complexity of Bolivian Forest Reserves

Among the complex issues accompanying Bolivian national forest reserves, ecological priorities often compete with corruption, extreme poverty and unequal land distribution. While the well-intentioned North American environmental attitude would be in defense of the reserves, the *Movimiento Sin Tierra* (MST) views these areas as government rackets to keep the poor from having land to live off of. The MST maintains that the land is not being protected, while logging companies are allowed to continue reaping profits.

"All of this is a trick, with a wink and a nod from the government, so that lumber companies can continue to operate without paying the license fee," says Wilfor Colque Caceres, secretary of the MST Bolivia National Coordinating Committee. Colque adds that there is not much public knowledge about the logging companies destroying the forested reserves. Three trees are supposed to be planted for each one cut down, yet this has not been enforced.

Wealthy landowners and petroleum and lumber companies have

been known to join forces to start "environmental" campaigns, which accuse *campesinos* of destroying the environment. Such campaigns have gained the distrust of *campesinos* and Indigenous groups, as they are used as fronts to drive poor people from the land and exploit its resources.

According to Colque, "The protected areas provide a profit for non-governmental organizations, the environmentalists. That is to say, they take the land from us by designating it a 'protected area.' Indigenous people and *campesinos* can't enter, can't even set foot inside. Meanwhile, those from outside come; the tourists, they enter and remove plants to study. They do all that, but we don't receive any benefit."

The MST is organized and ready to seize lands in several states in Bolivia. "This Summer, there was a meeting in Cochabamba where it was said that if the government doesn't solve the restitution of land, we will enter the protected areas. We are not going to be concerned with whether they are protected areas or forested reserves," said Colque.

**It is not through resignation but through rebellion that we affirm ourselves as human beings. —Paulo Freire**

available to stop them. Throughout the MST, several hundred landless workers have been killed since the movement was formed. In many cases, the title-holding landowners enlist the help of other poor, landless *campesinos* by promising them a piece of land.

On November 9, 2001, six Bolivian MST members were murdered at the settlement of Pananti, outside the city of Yacuiba. The 7,000 acres of land encompassing Pananti had been given to a family in 1974 in return for their cooperation with the military dictatorship. By 1993, it was abandoned. More than 100 families occupied the empty plantation, and six months later, six *campesinos* were killed and 16 wounded on their way to work in the fields. The gunmen fled, but a local anti-MST landowner was caught by the *campesinos* and beaten to death.

MST leader Pablo Ruben Martinez Padilla recounted, "They were fighting for something just. They wanted a piece of land, so they could survive, because there isn't money, there aren't jobs."

When asked what message he would like relayed to the American public, Colque replied, "The poor people are always against the government because the government applies the stipulations of the International Monetary Fund, the International Bank of Development and the World Bank. We are

almost nine million inhabitants; we owe US\$900 per person, from when a child is born until death." According to the World Bank, Bolivia's per capita annual income is US\$950. "It is a very large debt for us. We see that the beneficiary of the loaned money is never the poor people. It simply stays among the government's inner circle."

It is very clear to the MST and other *campesino* and Indigenous groups throughout Latin America that free trade policies hurt them while directly benefiting international and US-based interests. Activists in the US can most effectively support the MST, and groups like them, by organizing in their own backyard against these global powers.

Colque concluded, "The struggle continues, and it will be a fight—it is not simply on a national level, but a South American level and also global. We will continue because it is worth more to die for the land than to be on one's knees to the government and before this system that they are imposing."

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