

## WORKERS' POWER AND SOCIALISM

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### A STUDY OF BRAZIL'S MOVEMENT OF LANDLESS WORKERS

#### INTRODUCTION

**T**HE *MOVIMENTO DE Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra do Brasil* (Movement of Landless Rural Workers of Brazil, or MST) provides powerful countervailing evidence to the widespread view that global socialism is in full retreat.<sup>1</sup> In this historical moment one observes leftist political parties, unions and social movements capitulating to reformist politics and strategies, the MST, which is one of the largest and most successful social movements in the world, steadfastly asserts socialist goals. Yet nowadays this assertion is not often made and much less frequently fulfilled. Ostensibly leftist political parties and social movements capitulate not only to liberal means but even liberal ends. The effect of this is to make the term “socialist” seem archaic, to denude it of all serious content, or, worse still, to make it a term of derision—a name reserved for those considered to be hopelessly naïve and stubborn. The MST, however, is anything but naïve as it engages in a sophisticated, successful and very much *socialist* practice of land-reform in Brazil.

Socialism has been a key goal of the MST from its founding. The MST seeks, according to its official statement of objectives, “To defend humanist and socialist values in social relationships” and to “build” a society in which labour has “supremacy over capital”.<sup>2</sup> While it is true that the MST has abandoned plans to fully collectivize all its communities, this should not be

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<sup>2</sup> One of the original objectives articulated at the founding meeting of the MST in January, 1984 was more blunt: “To struggle for a just and fraternal society and put an end to capitalism.” (Fernandes, 2000: 83). The MST objectives are as follows:

1. To construct a society without exploiters and in which work has supremacy over capital.
2. The land is a good of everyone and it must contribute to the whole society.
3. To guarantee work to everyone, with a just distribution of land, profits and wealth.
4. To seek permanent social justice and equality of economic, political, social and cultural rights.
5. To defend humanist and socialist values in social relations.
6. To combat all forms of social discrimination and to seek the equal participation of women.”

Quoted from the MST website: [www.mst.org.br/historico/objetivos.html](http://www.mst.org.br/historico/objetivos.html).

This and all further translations from the Portuguese are my own.

interpreted as a defeat for “socialist values”, since the key issue upon which socialism turns is not property relations, but the power of workers. In other words, the MST is not merely a liberal organization with socialist pretenses, and their “socialist values” are not just a kind of left-liberalism doomed to be swept away in the tide of international capitalism. In fact, the MST not only resists “capital” but embodies the most sophisticated possible strategy for the admittedly daunting task of building socialism. Socialism lives on in the MST not as a remnant of a global movement that is essentially defeated, but as the birth of an altogether new strategy. Moreover, the circumstances that gave rise to the MST are so widespread around the world—entrenched poverty, landlessness, alienation from democratic institutions and so on—that the MST represents a hope for a new kind of socialist movement that could potentially thrive not only in Brazil, but in dozens of countries around the world.

What is this strategy? The MST builds socialism precisely by repudiating the strategic priority of seizing state power. Instead, the MST organizes thousands of agricultural communities which function as the nuclei of socialism—participatory democracies that not only greatly increase the economic well-being of their members, but are schools of “socialist values” and, indeed, socialist practice. The MST should therefore be situated within the tradition of “worker-managed socialism”, such that the MST represents the concrete possibility of achieving the “supremacy of labour over capital” precisely because it locates political power in the hands of democratically responsible producers themselves.

I will defend this claim by beginning with a brief study of the context within which the MST operates. In the second section of the essay I will explore the problem of sustaining socialist theory and practice in contemporary, liberal-capitalist Brazil. In the final section I will defend the claim that the MST is not only a socialist movement, but arguably represents the most sophisticated strategy for building socialism.

## **I. THE MST AND THE CHALLENGE OF PROPERTY IN BRAZIL<sup>3</sup>**

As is the case in so many Latin American countries, the history of land tenure in Brazil is one of oligarchical patronage and corruption. In the

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<sup>3</sup> This essay is in no sense a summary or detailed analysis of the MST’s history or structure. For this kind of study in Portuguese see Fernandes (2003), and Fernandes and Stedile (1999). In English see Branford and Rocha (2002) and Wright and Wolford (2003).

colonial period the majority of good land was distributed by the Portuguese crown to a small number of favourites who, to varying degrees and in varying ways, subdivided it among their own family, friends and patrons. Furthermore, corruption in the distribution of land titles has been endemic in Brazil for its entire history (For historical summaries see Stedile, 2000: 14-28; Wright and Wolford, 2003: 19-25). Today there is little fertile land available for an unemployed and property-less population that numbers in the tens of millions. One percent of the Brazilian population controls approximately 45 percent of the land, and the top three percent own some two thirds.<sup>4</sup> To add salt to these wounds, much of this land is not used for agricultural production. The failure to develop land was so widespread that even the 1964-85 military dictatorship passed legislation that allowed for the seizure and redistribution of any land that was being left unproductive. The constitution of 1988, moreover, stated that land should serve "its social function" such that if anything less than 80% of a total property was in productive use it could be expropriated (Wright and Wolford, 2003: 23, 105). Of course this provision proved to be ineffective, since there were few mechanisms in place to transfer land and even less political will to carry out land distributions, especially since land distribution frequently involved the property of wealthy and powerful Brazilians. Landless and unemployed workers in Brazil had, ironically, been granted the legal right to seek to appropriate land, but did not have the strength to realize this right.

The MST, which was created in 1984 as the offspring of the Catholic Church's *Comissão Pastoral da Terra* (Pastoral Land Commission or CPT), responded to this impasse by quickly developing farming communities on land seized by landless people themselves (for interesting essays on the CPT see Secretariado Nacional, 1997). In the thirty years since its founding the MST has been enormously successful, in spite of the ongoing incarceration, torture and murder of thousands of MST members. The MST has created thousands of communities on land that has been seized from individual landowners, corporations or various governments, and has successfully won legal rights to much of this land. Indeed, the MST claims to be Latin America's largest social movement, with 1.5 million members active in 23 of the nation's 27 states, and some 400,000 families successfully settled on redistributed land.<sup>5</sup> While the base of the Movement is obviously its agricultural communities (plus some small-scale commercial initiatives), the organization is extremely active politically

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics are taken from Tarso Luís Ramos, "Brazil at the Crossroads: Landless Movement Confronts Crisis of the Left", August 2005. [www.mstbrazil.org](http://www.mstbrazil.org).

<sup>5</sup> [www.mstbrazil.org](http://www.mstbrazil.org)

at local, state and national levels. The MST has marched by the tens of thousands on the capital of Brasilia on several occasions, occupied legislative buildings, lobbied government and international bodies and undertaken countless other social and political actions. Most recently, in May of 2005, 12,000 MST members marched to Brasilia to demand, among other things, that the ostensibly left-wing government of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers' Party or PT) live up to its own commitments.

The election of the PT in October of 2002, which was supported by a strong majority of MST members, has only marginally diminished the tension between the MST and the federal government. After years of combativeness with various administrations, including that led by former neo-Marxist sociologist Fernando Enrique Cardoso, the MST greeted the new PT government of Luis Ignacio da Silva, Lula, with a very brief moratorium on land seizures. Since that moratorium ended the MST has continually butted heads with the PT, has criticized Lula's party for being too moderate, and has continued its policy of land seizure unabated.<sup>6</sup> The tension between the MST and the PT is justified, for the latter has plainly betrayed its own promises. Upon coming to power President Lula commissioned leftist economist Plínio de Arruda Sampaio to develop a land reform platform that ambitiously called for settling one million landless over four years. Lula rejected this proposal, and instead adopted a "National Plan for Agrarian Reform" that committed the PT to settling only 400,000. In the three years of his government, however, he has settled only 113,000—well below his own commitments and, indeed, fewer than settled by the Cardoso administration. Thus the May march on the capital by the MST sought to secure Lula's commitment to his own promises. The President donned an MST cap when meeting with representatives of the movement, and said, "If we do not fulfill the goals of Land Reform, we will have a problem with our consciences." Of course the failure to meet these goals will have far worse implications than a few guilty consciences in Brasilia. The MST plans to be vigilant in holding the PT to its commitments.

While the MST is very active politically, and has become a significant force in Brazilian political life, it adamantly holds itself at a distance from party

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth noting that neither the PT nor the MST wishes to be perceived as being in the back pocket of the other, and thus neither, presumably, seeks a norm of perfectly cordial relations—at least at the level of public perception. For its part the PT must keep its eyes on moderate voters essential to its electoral aspirations and thus is wary of close relationships with adamantly leftist organizations like the MST. The MST, meanwhile, is guided by the insight that state-based efforts to achieve agrarian reform have nearly always failed. The MST therefore keeps itself at arms length from all political parties and seeks to build socialism from the ground up.

politics. This is an essential aspect of its socialist strategy for several reasons. First, even though the MST and PT have had a long alliance one cannot, as current events make clear, depend on leftist governments to deliver on their promises once they are elected. The MST is anxious not to repeat mistakes made, for example, in South Africa. In the case of the African National Congress, many activists left social movements to take government positions when the ANC formed the national government, emasculating the former only to become involved in policies that failed to live up to earlier expectations.<sup>7</sup> Second, it is essential that social movements not become tied too closely to the vicissitudes of a political party such that, for example, a serious decline in the popularity of the PT or any other party would rebound upon the MST. Third, the Latin American left (of whatever variety) has typically prioritized seizing state power—either by electoral or military means. This policy has been an almost complete failure. Elected governments have failed for a variety of reasons, and revolutionary movements have succeeded in taking power only in Cuba and Nicaragua. The United States, its client governments, and its clandestine and mercenary organizations moreover, have proven themselves willing to stop at nothing to prevent leftist governments from either coming to power, staying in power or being capable of engineering any form of serious social change. The MST's strategy is to sidestep all of these limitations by building socialism from the ground up.

But are the MST communities really “socialist”? While MST communities vary in their internal organization, cooperative management is a key feature of the MST vision. Some are full fledged cooperatives, others have shares of private land extracted from a far larger common property, while others still divide their land into private family plots, but run a wide variety of service cooperatives. Attempts were made to mandate the transformation of most, even all, MST encampments into full cooperatives, but this initiative was opposed by many members of the Movement and was thus abandoned. A voluntaristic policy was adopted by which individual communities determine their own property system (Wright and Wolford, 2003, 86). The most senior MST leader, João Pedro Stedile, recently said that some seventy percent of MST members farm individually (Wright and Wolford, 2003, 87).

The failure to collectivize opens the MST to a key challenge from the point of view of “socialist values.” However courageous and principled the MST and its members may be, there is nothing about land seizure and

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<sup>7</sup> Tarso Luís Ramos, “Brazil at the Crossroads: Landless Movement Confronts Crisis of the Left.”

redistribution that is, in itself, “socialist”, especially given the corrupt distribution of land in the first place and the interest that Brazil’s dominant classes have in increasing agricultural production. Indeed, such a land reform process may be interpreted as attempting to do no more than establish a norm in Brazil that was common to land distribution in British colonies (for example) for hundreds of years—that is, the widespread distribution of family-sized land entitlements. Indeed, a structure of small landowners is commonly understood in classical liberal theory to be a necessary condition of a solid, liberal-capitalist society. In sum, potential objectors to the MST may well accuse it of doing its part to build not socialist, but liberal society. Is, then, the MST really a “socialist” movement, or yet another organization that will contribute to the good of society and its members, but never take any substantial steps toward socialism?

## II. IS THE MST REALLY SOCIALIST?

When the MST says that “work should be supreme over capital” it should be interpreted to mean that capital should serve the interests of the workers who create it, and not those of an exploiting class that controls it. This objective can only be met, however, when workers control their own surplus value, including that portion thereof which is held back as capital. But this is the definition of socialism—the control by workers of the value created by their own work. The MST’s objective that labour should be supreme over capital is a specific and essential form of the struggle for “socialist values”. It is only in socialism that work is supreme over capital, for it is only in socialism that workers control their surplus value.

Is the MST a socialist organization that will establish the supremacy of labour over capital? The behaviour of the Brazilian state might suggest the contrary. While there has been an enormous amount of violence against the MST (and this has not abated), the attitude of the state toward the Movement cannot be described as purely and simply repressive. Most importantly, many thousands of MST communities have been granted land tenure by various levels of Brazilian government, state agencies have lent money to MST farmers (as individuals and collectivities), and a high proportion of the repression authored by governed authorities comes not from Brasilia but from local centres where particular elites have more control. Indeed, as I mentioned above, it may be possible to view the MST in the light of a centuries old goal of republican democracy and small-scale capitalism, rooted in the “family farm.” According to this ideal, the

MST represents a hopeful basis for a productive economy and democratic responsibility within a liberal capitalist framework. This is part of the reason why the Brazilian state has had an ambivalent attitude toward the MST—bourgeois politicians know that the MST represents the possibility of economic growth, the amelioration of unemployment, a partial solution to urban and rural poverty and a means to challenge an old guard that is still remarkably feudal in its attitude toward economy and society. It is thus not that hard to construe the MST as playing its role in the fulfillment of the long-overdue dream of the liberal modernization of Brazil. Cardoso's administration demonstrated a suggestive ambivalence. While Cardoso created a special police unit specifically mandated to harass the MST, he also granted thousands of land titles to MST communities.

So, does the practice of the MST embody ends (even if not means) that are appropriately supported by Brazil's capitalist class, or does the MST pursue socialist values that may ultimately challenge the liberal vision of Brazil? I will explore this question by studying, in turn, collectivized and non-collectivized MST communities. The MST, as I mentioned above, has abandoned the project of collectivizing all settlements, following upon a widely unwelcome attempt to impose such a plan. Approximately seventy percent of MST communities are divided into family sized plots of land (held privately), usually with a variety of service cooperatives functioning in the community. Let us look first at the communities based on private property, and then move on to discuss the cooperatives.

An MST farmer on one of the earliest settlements, Sarandí, whose fish pond produced extremely well one season, deliberately sold his fish at a much cheaper rate than his competitors and thus not only sold many more fish, but simultaneously made more profit and all but guaranteed a future market (Wright and Wolford, 2003: 297). The capital generated from this one good season allowed him to increase the size of his ponds and his stock, and thus once again reinforced his competitive advantage. His "competitors" may just as well have been members of his own MST community as non-members. This relatively simple development is the seed of worrisome outcomes. In a system of private property, capital is controlled privately. We see the affects of private property on farming outside of Brazil. However much it might be the case that the economies of Canada and the northern United States were built upon the sturdy spine of small-scale family farms, this system of land-tenure is being steadily and quickly marginalized. The emergence of factory farming, in which capitalist economies of scale are decisive to profits, represents a trend that affects most nearly all sectors of the economy. Meanwhile,

within this sector it is not only farms that are getting larger, but also access to seed, fertilizer and other necessary products and services is increasingly controlled by a small number of multi-national corporations.

It is no secret that this scenario is unfolding. The key for my purposes is to understand how this transformation of agricultural land tenure was built into the essence of the original small-scale family farm system in the first place. The competitive structure of a market economy generates this logic of concentration. Any edge gained on one's competitors, whether the result of thoughtful planning or mere contingency, has a way of exponentially increasing one's competitive advantage, as we saw in the case of the Sarandí fish seller. In other words, the roots of large scale factory farming were established in the earliest days of a supposedly egalitarian land distribution policy. This was not the intention of those land-distribution programs, but the logic of the combination of capital and market economy makes any system of small-scale, family farming only a temporary arrangement.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find MST members confessing to the emergence of proto-class divisions within their communities. In a discussion of Sarandí, Wright and Wolford report that, "(O)ne of the leaders of the settlement admitted after close questioning that 'there were some tendencies toward the re-creation of class structures' among the Sarandí settlers (2003, 270)." This confession is not a sign of the moral weakness of the members of Sarandí, but a confession that a system of private property motivates the emergence of class division. Those whose competitive edge grows beyond a certain level may, with their always increasing capital resources, buy out land from others, and a distinction may eventually emerge between a class of people who own land and a class of people who earn wages working it. Even before this happens, they may lose their incentive to be part of credit cooperatives, for example, because they may have enough capital of their own. Of course MST communities are nowhere near that point, yet they are perhaps caught in the trap of this logic. In short, no matter how egalitarian an original distribution of land or other economic resources, the logic of the competitive market and private property generates momentum toward an unequal share of capital resources and perhaps eventually to the formation of classes.

This fact may lead to a socialist critique of the MST, which might be put as follows. If the dynamism of private property, capital and the competitive market truly leads to the formation of classes, then the dominant system of land tenure in MST communities will most likely itself lead to class

distinctions, and labour will come, once again, to be subordinate to capital. In sum, the MST's system of private property may well be an excellent means to raise the standard of living, promote education and improve the life prospects of its members—and this is, in the context of serious impoverishment, a great achievement. But it is an unlikely recipe for socialism, and does not ensure that labour will reign supreme over capital.

Do the MST communities that are cooperatives mitigate this trend? Though it is not a majority, thirty percent still represents a significant number of cooperatives whose very success stands as a means of hope for others—much like the inspiration provided by the successful Mondragon cooperative based in the Basque region of Spain. (For a more detailed discussion of the structure of MST cooperatives, see Fernandes, 2000: 228-245). Indeed, there are practical reasons for this hope. As larger economic units, cooperatives are better able to generate capital of their own and their larger yield gives them other advantages in terms of economies of scale. Moreover, lending agencies are more likely to give capital loans to cooperatives not only because it is easier to administer a loan to one large cooperative than thirty loans to individual producers, but because the cooperative is a better competitive risk, given that large economic units dominate the agricultural economy. Cooperatives have a better chance of holding their own against other large producers (For the advantages of cooperatives and related matters see Wright and Wolford, 2003: 86-7, 93-4). Of course these cooperatives are still themselves “corporations” with respect to the economy as a whole. They compete against other corporations that are based on private property and, conceivably, against other cooperatives as well. It is thus possible to imagine some MST cooperatives becoming very wealthy at the expense of others, or even driving them to financial ruin. All of this follows from the structure of privately owned capital, for even though the internal structure of the cooperative is common property, it still functions as a kind of “legal individual” to which the logic of private property applies.

It might thus seem that it is impossible for the MST to say, with a straight face, that it is struggling for socialist values simply because it is impossible that workers ever gain supremacy over capital in a market economy dominated by private property. Even the minority of MST communities that are full cooperatives can themselves be accused of ultimately contributing to the dynamic by which capital gradually accumulates in fewer and fewer hands. By these measures the MST has ensured that it will fail to live up to its own stated objectives. Is this account, even if discouraging to socialists, nonetheless convincing?

### III. THE MST, SOCIALIST VALUES AND WORKERS' POWER

The analysis presented above is flawed in one major respect: It treats the structure of property as though it is the necessary and sufficient condition for determining workers' power. Specifically, it claims that property structures function to bind individuals and communities to a specific set of results over which they will have no possible power (short of completely changing the system of property relations). This claim, I now want to argue, is not necessarily true. I will argue instead that property relations, while creating powerful dynamics such as those described above, can be resisted through the development of workers' power—the power of individuals and communities to influence their society despite its property relations.

Yet if property relations have such a powerful effect on the way social relations are organized and developed, as I argued above, how might this effect be countered? Let us draw briefly on the Yugoslavian experience. Tito's Yugoslavia was expelled by the Soviet bloc primarily because it rejected the state centered socialism typical of the Soviet Union. While the Soviet Union was built upon a notion of common rather than private property this did little to give power to workers. Indeed, compared to the Western capitalist democracies, the highly centralized Soviet state system arguably reduced the power of workers. On this basis, the Yugoslavian theorist Alexander Bajt makes the following argument about how capitalist countries (which are based on a "system of private ownership") are actually closer to socialism ("the principle of distribution according to work" or "social ownership") than are Soviet style communist nations,

As we know, the legal order together with the price structure formed by the economy determine the content of ownership. Today there are public instruments (progressive income tax, property tax, progressive inheritance tax, and so forth) that can bring the distribution of national product in a system of private ownership to approach the principle of distribution according to work, and hence close to that which corresponds to social ownership

*Bajt, in Horvat et al, 1975: 159*

Bajt refers here to key features of the Western welfare state—particularly the way in which taxation can re-distribute resources from the relatively wealthy to the relatively poor. Similarly, the various social programs that benefit workers and the poor have been established, with varying degrees of success, throughout the Western liberal capitalist democracies. For such tax provisions and social programs to exist in the first place citizens had to have

demanded that they be established either by lobbying existing governments or by electing political parties that had promised to implement such programs. This, of course, is an expression of workers' power that changes the hegemonic structure of a society, yet without fundamentally challenging the system of private property. Or, more precisely, the system of private property is bypassed at the level of the state in so far as the state can be convinced to use its power to requisition the private property of the relatively wealthy and distribute it to the relatively poor.

Yet the MST attempts a far more sophisticated augmentation of workers' power than anything like the Western welfare state, for it can only be understood within the tradition of "worker-managed socialism". The MST, rather than provoking a partial redistribution of wealth, is really a nucleus of a socialist society. The MST seeks to increase the power of some of Brazil's most marginalized people not by depending on state-funded social programs, but by creating self-sufficient communities that are fully functioning participatory democracies. The goal is not just to achieve a very particular strategic goal (obtaining land, or a basic standard of living), but what Ademar Bogo calls "permanent participation" in democratic community (1999: 151).<sup>8</sup> This strategy is arguably the most sophisticated embodiment of "socialist values" one finds in the world today.

The MST strategy evades the problems associated with seizing state power (which I discussed above), but also prevents workers from demobilizing in the face of dependency on government welfare programs. In the industrialized countries social movements have often disbanded after successfully lobbying the government to adopt social programs of one kind or another. These social programs may well be very beneficial in a variety of ways, but responsible citizen participation in society is an ironic victim of its own success. In order to achieve a more genuinely participatory democracy social movements must be, in the words of Cohen and Arato, "self-limiting" (1992: 32, 57-8, 63). In other words, citizens must have the power and opportunity to manage their own lives to a higher degree, rather than deferring much of this power to the state. The MST is an ideal example of this goal put into practice. The MST looks to no paternalistic state, whether capitalist or socialist, but seeks to maximize the participation of members in the management of their own communities. Whether or not an MST community is a full cooperative does not

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<sup>8</sup> "(D)emocracy refers not just to consultation, voting and the reception of information, but so much more, it is permanent participation, it is the power to enjoy all the benefits that an organization can offer, to take decisions...according to principles and political strategies." (Bogo, 1999: 151.)

change the fact that the Movement is a dramatic assertion of the power of working people in Brazilian society, and is a daily training ground for engaged and responsible citizenship.<sup>9</sup> I will enumerate four essential features of the MST that make decisive contributions to the education of MST members to the participatory democracy of worker-managed socialism.

First, the MST creates what Wright and Wolford call a “virtuous circle” of economic growth and human welfare (2003: 265-7, 289-90). Higher standards of living not only open the way to better health care, education and lifestyle, but also raise the integration of individuals into a wider network of production and citizenship.

Second, participation in democratic community demands of individuals that they learn to negotiate within groups small enough that real personal participation is concretely possible. Participation in MST communities is a lived education—members learn the modes of cooperation they need as citizens in a participatory democracy: the fundamental recognition of their own right and that of others to be self-determining as individuals and as community members, the ability to sort out inter-personal relationships with others, strategic planning on behalf of a community, and so on. This kind of education is impossible not only in liberal capitalist businesses (for they are hierarchically ordered and not democratic), but also in society at large when representative democracy is the only form of participation (for democratic participation herein is too abstract to habituate practical citizenship skills). Indeed, in the context of liberal capitalism, citizens experience a kind of inverse habituation—an habituation to passivity in the face of authority, be it the authority of business leaders or the government. The MST community, on the other hand, is both end and means. It is itself the end or goal of the democratic imaginary (as Lacleau and Mouffe call it, 1985: 155ff) because it is the means for a practically achievable participatory democracy. Yet it is also the means to educate its own members to the skills they need in order to be fully self-determining citizens of a socialist participatory democracy.

Third, the structure of the MST as a participatory democracy allows for gradually increasing levels of democratic participation that stretch beyond the

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<sup>9</sup> Aristotle’s concept of habituation is decisive to the theory of education I am proposing here. For Aristotle the development of more sophisticated forms of human life is achieved only through first habituating individuals to those abilities presupposed by the new form. (1999: 33-5) Just as a violinist must gradually develop the habit in his or her hands that allow for more sophisticated forms of playing, so too does participatory democracy require the habituation of individuals to the kinds of initiative, responsibility and power that it calls for.

community itself. The MST is divided into “sectors”, each of which addresses a key feature of “socialist values”. These sectors include “Cooperation and Environment”, “Education and Political Training”, “Gender”, “Health”, “Communications”, “Human Rights”, “International Relations” and “Culture”. Furthermore, MST members participate in the different levels of MST organization from local to national levels (For a detailed account of the structure of the MST see Fernandes, 2000: 245-56). A magazine and newspaper keep MST members informed on issues of local, national and international scope. Indeed, this structure extends beyond the MST itself toward participation in political parties, the wider Brazilian left and, indeed, the international solidarity community. Membership in local MST communities is simultaneously membership in far broader forms of democratic life.

Fourth, membership in the MST exposes individuals not only to the informal education that comes from democratic practice, but also to the formal education provided by the Movement’s workshops, conferences and other special events. The MST has been very intentional about training its militants and teachers carefully, so that the leadership they provide in local communities is both informed by and communicates the principles of self-determination and justice—the “socialist values” addressed in the MST’s objectives (See Caldart, 1997). The philosophy of education informing the MST was developed by Paulo Freire (1993) and others, and stresses pedagogical methods that develop self-consciousness and self-determination. This pedagogy is put into practice in numerous educational programs, but also at the new Florestan Fernandes School—the MST’s own university—which teaches everything from philosophy to agricultural methods.

In conclusion, these factors do not eliminate the threat posed by the dynamics of private property and market forces, nor do they change the fact that ultimately socialism must challenge the priority of private property and take control of the state. However, the workers’ power embodied in the MST not only mitigates the dynamics of private property, it may well surpass them and render them functionally subordinate. Meanwhile, the MST cannot alone achieve the supremacy of labour over capital—it must ally itself with countless other social movements, unions and political organizations and international bodies—but its existence is a serious challenge to the dominance of capital, and it is the development of the MST and organizations like it that hold the most promise for “socialist values” in the world. Indeed, as the inheritor of the tradition of worker-managed socialism, the MST embodies what is arguably the most sophisticated strategy for building socialism in the world.

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