

Access denied: the Brazilian land issue

Luc Vankrunkelsven

From the time the Portuguese established themselves in Brazil in the sixteenth century, the country has been ruled by an economic elite whose power lies in land. A major piece of legislation enacted in 1850 - the *Lei da Terra* - recognises two forms of land use in Brazil: *propriedade* (possession) and *posse* (right of use or usufruct).

Lei da Terra defined land in capitalistic terms as a commodity to be bought and sold, making it possible for a small minority to establish control over the countryside. As a result, when slavery was abolished and impoverished immigrants started to enter the country in the late nineteenth century, most of them could only claim users' rights to land. Known as *posseiros* or "farmers without papers" their heirs still depend on usufructory rights granted by private and company landlords.

Green counter revolution

Demand for fair land redistribution has increased steadily in Brazil in recent decades. However, the military dictatorship (1964-1985) and the United States wanted no "communist-type" land reform. Instead they encouraged the Green Revolution - a counter revolutionary answer to the cry for justice. Super seeds, pesticides and large subsidies were made available and resulted in a new gold - soya. But family farms drawn into soya monoculture were unable to compete with the large estates. *Posseiros*, without papers and rights were driven from their farms and joined the hundreds of thousands of farm labourers who, having lost their jobs because of mechanisation, joined the massive exodus to the cities.

Churches and resistance

During the military dictatorship the churches were the only places where people could organise and many civil society movements emerged from the grassroots of the Christian community. Amongst these was the trade union CUT (*Central Unica dos trabalhadores*) and the PT (*Partido dos trabalhadores*) - both established by the present socialist President of Brazil Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva - as well as the *Comissao Pastrol da Terra* (CPT), *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais sem Terra* (MST), women's organisations and human rights groups. The CPT, CUT and MST were particularly important actors in agricultural politics.

The organisations involved in land issues such as the CPT, CUT and MST support each others efforts. CPT is a service of the Catholic Church. It helps farmers and farm labourers as well as the urban poor and their organisations in their struggle to hold on to or acquire land. In some of the provinces where the MST is less strong CPT organises land occupations.

The trade union CUT works with farmers, farm labourers and urban labourers. Since 2002, several alliances such as *Federação dos Trabalhadores da Agricultura Familiar da Região Sul* (*Fetraf-sul/CUT*) have been formed. CUT has established a number of cooperatives on *assentamentos* (redivided land), particularly in *Mato Grosso do Sul*, the north and the north-east.

One of the organisations most specialised in the fight against unfair concentrations of land is the MST. MST has a strong international reputation and this status is reflected in its website which is available in six languages. Since the late 1990s, MST has broadened its perspective to include agroecological issues.

Land reform through the market

In 1998, then-president Fernando Henrique Cardoso launched "land reform through the market". With financial support from the World Bank, local banks provided money to farmers so they could buy land from estate owners. Farmers, in fact, were paying for the land reform which was their right and richly compensating estate owners at the same time. The effect of Cardoso's programme on small farmers was disastrous: land prices rose and many went bankrupt, unable to pay back their loans. Even so, in this way, 80 000 farmers gained access to land. Cardoso's approach raised considerable discussion in Brazil and within the landless movement. Lack of credit eventually put an end to this neo-liberal approach to the land problem.

Lula and land reform

Since January 2003, when President Lula came to power, there has been more hope of a strong land redistribution policy. Lula is closely associated with the fight for land reforms. One of the priorities of his government is the *Zero Hunger Programme* in which the family agricultural model has been given a central place. The question for all those concerned with the politics of land reform in Brazil is whether "Lula" will be able to stay out of the landowners "clutches".

For its part the landless movement currently follows a double strategy: it puts government under pressure by encouraging land occupation yet it is also ready to engage in dialogue. On 2 July 2003, the President met several representatives of MST. These amicable discussions were not greeted with enthusiasm by the country's estate owners.

Future direction

The land issue continues to be a life or death struggle. In the first 6 months of 2003 alone, 31 farmers have been murdered. Whilst the landless movement demands that a national plan for land reform be drawn up which would ensure one million farm families will receive land rights by 2006 and an immediate solution is found to the problem of the 120 000 farm families living in camps, landowners are organising themselves to hold on to their (il)legal possessions. In this highly volatile situation it is difficult to predict the direction land reform will take in Brazil.

A full version of this article is available from ILEIA.

Luc Vankrunkelsven, Wervel and Fetraf-Sul/CUT, Wervel, Paleizenstraat 90, 1030 Brussels Belgium. Email: lucvankrunkelsven@pi.be; www.wervel.be

References

- Vankrunkelsven, Luc. 2002. **Porto alegre: de basis in beweging** (in Dutch). Wervel press, Paleizenstraat 90, 1030 Brussels, Belgium.
- CUT website: www.cut.org.br
- Fetraf-Sul/CUT website: www.fetraftsul.org.br