

Working the land to feed the people

LEVEL THREE - ADVANCED

Brazil's landless workers' movement has radical solutions to the country's problems, writes Jan Rocha

Pre-reading activities

1 What is YOUR view? Which of the following do you regard as positive and which as negative?

- | | |
|--|--------------------------------|
| a Genetically-modified foods (GM foods) | e Traditional farming methods |
| b The removal of trade barriers | f Small family farms |
| c Building roads and dams | g Transnational food companies |
| d Using fertilisers and pesticides to grow crops | |

2 Which of these statements do you think are TRUE and which are FALSE

TRUE FALSE

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| a Brazil is one of the world's biggest producers of food. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| b One third of the population of Brazil goes hungry. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| c In Brazil, cattle ranchers struggle against road builders. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| d Using fertilisers and pesticides means bigger and better harvests. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| e Chemical farming rapidly exhausts the soil. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| f Small farmers rather than big companies have benefited from the government's reforms. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Now read the text and check your answers:

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Hunger is spreading in a world of plenty: in Brazil, one of the world's big food producers, a third of the population goes hungry. The governments and corporations that run the world insist that only free markets, the removal of trade barriers and the spread of GM crops will solve the problem. But so far this sort of globalisation has only brought more, not less hunger. Yet a movement that grew out of violence and despair claims to have found the answer. Its solutions are radically different from those on offer from the rich countries. They involve empowering the poor through land

reform, education and mobilisation. The Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) - the Landless Rural Workers Movement - has become one of Brazil's biggest popular movements, and their red T-shirts, caps and flags are now a familiar sight at every demonstration, rally and strike. Through direct action - occupations, marches, confrontations with the authorities - they have won land and undeniably eliminated hunger from the lives of hundreds of thousands of Brazilian families.

Twenty years ago war raged throughout Brazil's vast interior. It was an unequal conflict: peasant farmers and smallholders, share-

croppers and rubbertappers against the powerful forces unleashed by the military regime's economic policy - ruthless cattle ranchers and landowners, road and dam builders. In the 1970s this policy led directly to the displacement of almost 5 million people in the three southern states alone. They became *sem terra* - or landless. Their choices were stark: move to the cities and shanty towns or migrate thousands of kilometres north to the malaria-ridden shallow soils of government colonies in the Amazon, far from roads, schools and hospitals. Those who tried to stop the advance of big capital were eliminated. Between 1981 and 1984 alone 277 peasant leaders, union officials and rural

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workers were killed. It was in this climate of violence and desperation that the MST was born. With nothing left to lose, families began occupying the estates of absentee landlords.

"We've come a long way in 20 years," said Vilmar Martins da Silva, president of a farm cooperative in one of the many MST settlements. "By occupying huge unproductive estates, we forced the Brazilian government to carry out land reform. Today we've got about 1 million members."

The learning curve has been steep. At first the families tried to beat the big farmers at their own game, planting cash crops instead of food. Claudemir Mocellin, who as an eight-year-old child accompanied his father on one of the early occupations, today works as an agronomist on a settlement. "We used the most fertilisers. We bought the modern hybrid seeds and the biggest machines. We wanted the largest harvests." But it did not work.

"Families found that, as their soils got exhausted, they were spending more and more money on pesticides and fertilisers, and they were getting ill from the side effects of the chemicals. It didn't make sense, either economically or environmentally."

Gradually the families adopted more environmentally friendly ways of farming and went back to growing their own food. "I don't like calling it subsistence farming, because that suggests we're sub-existing . . . whereas really, with our concern for biodiversity, we are the truly modern farmers," said Mocellin emphatically. "Chemical farming is doomed, as it exhausts the soils so rapidly."

While the government's agrarian reform programme gave land to 260,000 families, in the same period (1995-99) more than 1 million small farmers lost their land under market pressures. Only the big exporters of soyabeans, coffee, orange juice and poultry and the transnational companies who control the export net-

work, have benefited.

There is little room for small family farms in this world, unless they are willing to provide what amounts to bonded labour, growing seeds for Monsanto or rearing chickens for Sadia. The MST believes that, because of its extraordinary capacity to mobilise the excluded, it can take on these forces and win. Yet the outcome is still uncertain. Future historians may look back at the MST and see landless peasants who attempted "a revolution that never happened". Or it may just be that the MST are front runners in the global movement towards greater sustainability, greater equality and less hunger.

The Guardian Weekly 4-7-2002, page 22

Glossary:

Smallholders	Owners of very small farms
Sharecroppers	A farmer who grows crops on someone else's land and receives part of the money earned from selling the crops.
Rubbertappers	Person who taps rubber from trees
Malaria-ridden	Full of ridden
Bonded labour	A situation in which workers are obliged to work for their employer in conditions close to slavery

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Comprehension check

Choose the best answer for each question:

- 1 What is the main objective of the MST
a to occupy land b to empower the poor c to overthrow the government
- 2 Who fought the "war" in Brazil's interior twenty years ago?
a rich and poor b farmers and rubbertappers c landowners and cattle ranchers
- 3 How did the MST force the government to carry out land reform?
a by migrating to cities b by occupying unproductive estates c by violence
- 4 Why was planting cash crops unsuccessful for the peasant families?
a it was difficult to sell the crops b it didn't make economic sense c they got exhausted
- 5 Why is chemical farming doomed?
a it isn't traditional b it exhausts the soil rapidly c it requires big machines
- 6 Between 1995 and 1999 how many small farmers lost their land?
a 260,000 b almost one million c more than one million
- 7 Why does the MST believe it can take on the forces of multinational capital and win?
a because it is excluded b because it can mobilise the excluded c because the future is uncertain

Vocabulary Work 1

Find the words that mean the following:

- 1 a verb meaning to give power to someone or something
- 2 an adverb meaning certainly correct or true
- 3 a verb meaning to continue with force and violence
- 4 an adjective meaning without mercy
- 5 an adjective meaning without land
- 6 a noun meaning an area where very poor people live in improvised housing
- 7 an adjective meaning having no future
- 8 a noun meaning the eventual result

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Vocabulary Work 2 – collocations

Fill the gaps with words from the text.

- 1 Poor farmers found themselves pitted _____ powerful forces.
- 2 Landless peasants were left with a _____ choice.
- 3 Poor families began to occupy the estates of _____ landlords.
- 4 The Brazilian government was forced to _____ land reform.
- 5 Many people got ill from the _____ effects of the chemicals.
- 6 Chemical farming _____ the soil.
- 7 The global food industry seems likely to _____ its control.
- 8 Many poor farmers are forced to _____ chickens for big companies like Sadia.

Vocabulary – Suffixes *less* and *ful*

In the text there are some words with the suffixes above. These include *ruthless* and *landless*. In both cases here the suffix *less* means *without*. (The origin of *ruth* in *ruth* + *less* is in Middle English and is opaque to most users of modern English)

Try to fill the gaps below using the following words formed with these two suffixes.

Careless	Homeless	Heartless	Thoughtless
Meaningless	Brainless	Countless	Topless

Thankful	Meaningful	Grateful
Bellyful	Careful	Beautiful

- 1 I have had a _____ of his rude comments. I've had enough!
- 2 Jane had a difficult past. She was _____ for a year until she found a place to stay with the help of a friend.
- 3 I'm not getting in the car with him. I've never seen such a _____ driver.
- 4 The politician was photographed having a little too much fun in a _____ bar.
- 5 She was really _____ for all of the help you gave her.
- 6 The boss made some really _____ comments in the meeting today. He really offended Henrik.
- 7 We have had _____ applications for the new design job. I don't know where to start.

What are the opposites of the 14 words in the boxes? (Note some do not have clear antonyms)

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Discussion Points

Do you agree with genetically modified foods (GM foods)?

Do you agree with the saying "Small is better"?

Should the government give land to everyone?

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KEY

2 a T; b T; c F; d F; e T; f F

3 1 b; 2 a; 3 b; 4 b; 5 b; 6 c; 7 b

4 1 empower 2 undeniably 3 rage 4 ruthless 5 landless 6 shanty town 7 doomed
8 outcome

5 1 against 2 stark 3 absentee 4 carry out 5 side 6 exhausts 7 strengthen 8 raise

6 1 bellyful 2 homeless 3 careless 4 topless 5 grateful 6 thoughtless/heartless 7 countless

Some possible antonyms:

Careless – Careful Homeless – ? Heartless – Caring

Thoughtless – Thoughtful Meaningless – Meaningful Brainless – Clever

Countless – ? (few) Grateful – Ungrateful Beautiful – Ugly Bellyful – ?