

In Brazil one per cent of farmers own over half of the land. Almost two-thirds of these vast latifundios remain idle while millions go hungry in the favelas (city slums) and tenant farmers pay crippling rents. Enter the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) – the Landless Rural Workers Movement of Brazil – which has been carrying out its own ‘land-reform from below’ for the last 20 years. It identifies these latifundios and occupies them. Under MST occupation, large houses belonging to the landowners can play host to dozens of poor families, who cultivate the land and gradually turn the encampments into settlements replete with co-operative stores, decent housing, and MST schools. The MST is the largest and most successful social movement in Latin America with one million members and has won 81,081 square miles of land. But it has paid a high price – hundreds of its members have been assassinated.

Today it is evolving from a more centralized, traditional leftist movement as the younger generation grow up on the settlements, into one that is making the move towards green and sustainable farming, and improved internal democracy. MSTs in Bolivia and elsewhere have sprouted, as has a Movimento dos Sem Teto – movement for those without roofs – comprised of homeless people squatting buildings in Brazil’s cities.

Brazilian agriculture is where feudalism meets capitalism, and the MST fight both. Globalization is land reform in reverse as big farmers take over, expanding vast corporate monocultures, and forcing small farmers to compete with the forces of giant agribusiness on international markets. On the global battlefield, the MST is a member of Via Campesina, the international peasant farmers’ union which includes the Karnataka State Farmers’ Association of India, the Confédération Paysanne of France, and the Assembly of the Poor of Thailand. Together, they have been fighting global agribusiness and marching on WTO meetings from 1994 onwards.

Cutting the Wire: the landless movement of Brazil

by Sue Branford and Jan Rocha

“When the pliers cut the wire and it snaps like the string in a violin and the fence tumbles down, the landless lose their innocence.”

– Pedro Tierra, MST poet.

For the MST the act of occupying land – which they call ‘cutting the wire’ – is the cornerstone of their movement. It is the baptism of fire for the militant, an essential part of their identity. It plays a key role in the *mistica*, the moment of collective theatre and myth-making that kicks off all MST events. MST leader João Pedro Stedile 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 favour or against.”

Until the moment that the wire breaks, explains Roseli Salete Caldert, rural workers “have been trained always to obey, to obey the landowner, the priest, the political boss. They learnt this from their families and from the short period they spent in school.” Taking their life in their own hands, they gain political awareness. They realize that they will never achieve what they want if they restrict their demands to what the establishment sees as acceptable. And they learn to impose their own agenda. “We have always been told that agrarian reform is a good idea in principle,

but the *conjuntura*, or present moment, isn't right," said Monica, a woman leader from the northeast. "Well, we make the *conjuntura* right." In other words, they become subjects of their own history. And, in taking this step, they turn their world upside down. They start to realize that the established values are not immutable. As the historian, Christopher Hill, has pointed out: "Upside down is after all a relative concept. The assumption that it means the wrong way up is itself an expression from the top." The act of occupation becomes the fuse for a profound process of personal and political transformation.

"Land that we conquer through struggle is land that we win without the help of anyone," says Darci Maschio, a MST activist. "We don't have to go down on our knees to give thanks to anyone. This allows us to go on to fight for other things." He says that government authorities try hard to stop the families believing that they had rights. "In the beginning," he said, "the authorities made a point of saying to us, 'you're here to beg for land, aren't you, because no one here is going to demand anything. You don't have that right.' But we do have the right, a right constructed through struggle."

The MST has never won a single acre of land without first carrying out an occupation. "I tell everyone who hasn't got land to do what we did, join the MST," said Zezilda Casamir, a settler from Rio Grande do Sul. "But the MST won't give you land. You'll have to win it for yourself." Stedile says that the act of occupation is "the organizational matrix of the movement, in that it was around this concept that the organization was built". The MST has to conquer every right it is demanding at every stage of the struggle; nothing is bequeathed.

In 1996, shortly before his death, the educationalist Paulo Freire, who was a fervent supporter of the MST, recalled a visit he had made to an MST settlement: "I shall never forget a beautiful speech from a literacy worker, a former landless worker, who was living in an enormous settlement in Rio Grande do Sul. 'We managed through our work and our struggle to cut the barbed wire of the *latifundio*, the big estate, and we entered it,' he said. 'But when we got there we discovered that there was more barbed wire, like the barbed wire of our ignorance. I realized that the more ignorant we were, the more innocent we were of the ways of the world,



>> **April 18-21** >> Via Campesina, a network of peasants and farmers groups fighting globalization, meets for its second conference in Tlaxcala, Mexico. 69 different groups from 37 countries meet; they range from the Thai Assembly of the Poor, to the Brazilian Movimento Sem Terra, to the French Confédération Paysanne.

>> **May 30-June 2** >> About 1,000 people from 26

European countries participate in a "Continental Meeting for Humanity and against Neoliberalism" under the banner of "Ya Basta - Enough!" in Berlin, Germany. The meeting is organized by the Mexican branch of the Berlin Research and Documentation Centre on Chile and Latin America.

>> **May 30** >> Driven to desperation by food shortages fostered by the peso devaluation, drought, and the

the better it was for the landowners, and the more knowledgeable we got, the more frightened the landowners became.' As he was speaking, I realized what real agrarian reform was about." "We have three fences to cut down," says Stedile. "They are the fence of the big estate, the fence of ignorance, and the fence of capital."

The long line of raggedly dressed rural workers, men and women and children marched around the rows of black polythene-covered tents they had put up on a hurriedly cleared patch of undergrowth. They marched behind the red flag of the MST, their left fists punching the air as they shouted slogans, hoes and spades raised in their other hand. There were 264, including the 40 children who marched at the front of the columns. Ten days ago, very few of these largely illiterate people had had any contact with the MST. Outside the camp, standing by the sugar plantation's distinctive white and green Toyota pick-ups, some 30 gunmen looked on as the marchers shouted lustily: "Agrarian reform! When do we want it? Now! When do we want it? Now!"

Zona de Mata is a region of large, semi-feudal sugar plantations in the northeast of Brazil. When we arrived in the area, we found that the MST activists had planned a daring occupation. They wanted to occupy an estate which belonged to the most powerful landowner in the region – Jorge Petribu. They had chosen as their base the small town of Igarassu, which forms part of the disorderly periphery around Recife. The MST wanted to recruit in both the large

shantytown in Igarassu and the small rural hamlets scattered among the plantations.

We travelled around with the MST activists, often balanced precariously on the back of a motorbike. It was the beginning of the sugar harvest, which lasts from December to March. As we sped dangerously along the rough roads between the villages, we watched the rural labourers as they set fire to the sugar cane fields to burn the young vegetation and then, wielding sharp machetes, cut down the thick, charred stems that contain the sugar cane juice. It was a scene that had changed little over the last 400 years. At the end of the day workers are blackened from head to toe. The talk in the villages was about the growing unemployment and the loss of the *sítios* that a job in the plantations used to guarantee. There was real hunger in the hot dusty villages of wooden huts.

The story of Antonio Jose de Santos, 50 years old, was typical. He explained, his voice tinged with sadness: "I've been living here in Tres Ladeiras for 30 years. We moved here, because we were turned off the sugar plantation we used to work on. When we lived on the plantation, we had a hard life. We were paid very little and we were badly treated. But we had our *sítios*, our plots of land. We could grow all the food we needed – cassava, beans, rice, pumpkin, breadfruit, oranges, lemons and so on. Since we've been here in Tres Ladeiras, we've only had these tiny plots, which aren't any good at all. And it's getting worse. So many of the plantations have closed down. There's really just this Petribu left. And there's not much work with them.

I can't get any work there. I'm too old. And those that do are treated badly. They've turned us back into slaves. We don't earn enough to survive. We get odd jobs when we can. Those of us who get over our feeling of shame go begging in the streets. But there's a lot of hunger. There are 600 or 700 children living here. Their lives are a calamity."

"The only way out for us is through land invasions with the MST," he continued. "It's only together, through union, that we'll be able to get land, feed our children, help our friends. For some families are in a desperate situation, overwhelmed with debts. And there's plenty of land out there. There are a lot of landowners who aren't planting any more. It's our right to invade this land, so that we can plant crops and feed our children. It's going to be difficult. I don't think we can get back to the time of plenty, but we can't go on as we are. I've got 11 children. Fathers should be able to help their children, get them started in life. But I haven't been able to. We're going on the occupation. My wife and children are coming too."

The MST has drawn up guidelines for choosing the area for the first occupation in a new region: talk to local people

and select an area that has water, is potentially fertile, and over which there is some controversy as to its legal ownership. In the past, the MST had always chosen areas that were unproductive, that is, were not being farmed by the landowner. This allowed them to justify the apparently illegal occupation of private property by pointing to Article 184 of the 1988 constitution that states that land not being used productively should be expropriated and distributed in an agrarian reform programme. But at the time of this occupation (1999) the MST was tentatively adopting a new strategy: in rural areas of great poverty and hunger, it was occupying land being used to produce commercial crops, such as sugar cane, not food for the local population. "We want to create a debate over the use of land," Cicero Onario Alves, an MST organizer from a poor northeastern family of peasant farmers who was rallying local people for the occupation, told us. "We think that the government's first priority in a region like the Zona da Mata should be to end starvation, and that means giving the land to poor families so that they can grow their own food."

The sugar plantation beside the church, known as

impact of NAFTA and GATT trade rules on peasant farmers, 400 women and children stop and loot a train near Monterrey, Mexico, carrying away 40 tonnes of yellow corn in buckets and plastic bags.

>> June 19 >> Large parts of the South Korean car industry are shut down as workers at Kia Motors Corp., the country's second largest auto corporation, go on strike over a wage dispute.

>> June 27-29 >> The G7 meet in Lyon, France. Eight counter summits take place and for the first time in the G-7's 21-year history, 25,000 trade unionists take to the streets, protesting against job cuts, labour deregulation, attacks on public services, and the "sinister impact of the global economy." The summit, as always more ceremony than content, costs \$40 million to organize, and delegates promise next year's meeting will be a

cheaper, scaled down affair.

>> July 23 >> London Reclaim the Streets occupies the M41 motorway with a 10,000 person street party. Lurking near the sound system are 20 foot high carnival figures in hoop skirts, which conceal jack hammers busily digging up the tarmac. Trees are then planted in the fast lane.

>> July 27-August 3 >> In Chiapas, Mexico, the

Engenho Pasmado, fitted the MST's new criteria. Until the mid-1950s there had been a thriving community around the church. All the families had worked on the plantation and during the off-season they had cultivated large *sítios*. The old labourers looked back nostalgically to life during this period. Alice, an old labourer who as a child lived nearby in another village, remembered visiting the community. "The workers had big *sítios* and we ate so well during festivities – there were wonderful harvests of cassava, beans, maize, bananas, mango, breadfruit, and coconuts. People were poor but no one ever went hungry. It's so different today."

In 1956 the plantation was sold. The new owners, Votorantim, claimed it was wasteful to allow the workers to have so much land for their own use. They caused great resentment when they transferred the families to a nearby village, and planted sugar cane on the land around the church. "People cried when their houses were knocked down and their crops destroyed," Alice said. Mauricio Henrique de Nascimento, who had been the plantation administrator and now lives in Igarassu, said it still pained his heart when he drove past the church and saw sugar cane fields where so much food had once been harvested.

More recently, all the plantations had been sold to Petribu. It was widely assumed that the land around the church had been included in the sale, for Petribu's guards patrolled the area. When we later phoned up Votorantim's office in Recife, we were told that the company no longer owned any plantations. Yet Petribu said that the area still belonged to Votorantim, information that was eventually

confirmed to us by Votorantim's lawyer. This contradictory information led Jessimar Pessoa Boracho, the lawyer working with the MST, to suspect that Votorantim did not have proper land titles for the plantation, and for this reason had been unable to sell it to Petribu. So there was a jumble of information over the legal ownership – which was all grist to the MST's mill.

All the villagers were certain that the MST occupation would be on Petribu land, as it was the only big plantation owner in the region. In their chats with the villagers, the MST militants did little to hide this, or the likelihood that Petribu would illegally send its security guards – in other words, gunmen – to prevent the occupation.

Everywhere we went we heard stories of Petribu's brutality. Jesimar Pessoa Boracho, one of the few lawyers in the region to defend the rights of rural labourers, told us that most of his cases involved Petribu. "The Petribu family is part of that old established elite of plantation owners who have ruled the north east since it was colonized by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century. They have that in-built arrogance that comes from centuries of domination."

Soon it became evident that Petribu was prepared to use violent tactics to prevent the occupation that we were hoping to join. Daniel Quirino da Silva, a 32-year-old unemployed cane cutter, after showing us festering wounds on his legs, told us his story. Ten days earlier, he had been cycling home when he had stopped "for an urgent necessity", as he put it, going into the cane fields. Gunmen employed by Petribu happened to be driving past in one of

their pick-ups. For no good reason, they stopped, seized him as he was squatting down, hauled him out of the cane fields, and kicked and beat him. Bleeding from the head, chest, and legs, he was dragged off to the local police station, and thrown into a cell.

The only possible reason for the attack was a desire by Petribu to show the villagers what they could expect if they dared to take part in the occupation. A week later Daniel was still unable to walk without help, because of the wounds he had suffered from the iron tips of the gunmen's boots. His attackers had left him incandescent with rage at the humiliation he had suffered. "I got beaten up for nothing," he told us. "I can't even work now. So I've joined the MST. I want to show Petribu that it doesn't own the world. My problem was that I was alone. Now we're in it all together. And I'll go to the bitter end."

The MST was organizing that first difficult step – the initial occupation. Cicero outlined their plans – where the occupation would take place, the dispute over land titles, the three buses they were organizing, the villages where they would pick up families.

Everyone was excited and optimistic, but we felt apprehensive. This was a region where the MST had not worked before. Despite the warm reception the MST activists had received in the villages, we were not convinced that many people would actually take that first step and join in what was widely known to be a dangerous undertaking. But it was too late to be having second thoughts. At 3.30 am on Sunday, a bus pulled up outside the MST headquarters in Igarassu. We got in and, after Cicero had explained to a somewhat startled bus driver that he was not going to take people on a fishing trip but on a land invasion, we left.

We picked up about 25 people carrying farm implements, clothing, and a little food in the village of Botafogo. They included a young woman, whose two year-old daughter was shivering with cold and had to be wrapped up in a blanket, and an old man, wearing a trilby hat and a raincoat, who seemed in his element, laughing and joking with the others. Then on to Alto do Ceu. We found the main road into the village blocked by four white and green Toyotas. So we drove round to the back entrance, a rough dirt track leading to the village up an exceptionally steep hill. The driver said that

Zapatistas organize the first Intercontinental Encuentro for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism. Thousands of people representing social movements from all five continents attend the seminars in the autonomous town of La Realidad, where they identify a common struggle and develop and strengthen networks of resistance.

>> **August** >> Enraged mothers organize an August march of more than 150,000 *campesinos* in the

provinces of Guaviare, Putumayo, and Caqueta, Colombia after aerial spraying of Ultra Glyphosate pesticide on 45,000 acres causes convulsive vomiting and hair loss among children, part of US-sponsored 'Plan Colombia'. Colombian *federales* diffuse the protest with false compromises, then assassinate march organizers. The US then insists that Colombia allow it to switch to the far more poisonous tebuthiuron.

>> **August 8** >> An estimated 60 per cent of all Argentinean workers honour a general strike, decrying President Menem's neoliberal policies and the IMF-imposed structural adjustment, which has privatized virtually anything of value in the country, including highways and zoos.

>> **August 16** >> Riots break out in Karak, Jordan, after IMF-imposed subsidy removal results in the price

his bus could not take the gradient, so a couple of MST activists and one of us climbed up the hill in the dark to tell the villagers to come down on foot, while the rest stayed in the bus. After about a quarter of an hour, three Toyotas appeared. Their lights flashing, they drove up and down. Eventually, one of them stopped by the bus and four men, one with his revolver clearly visible, came up. "Where are you going?" demanded the leader of the gunmen. "To do a job on a sugar cane plantation," replied Cicero, unconvincingly. "Well, this job better not be on Petribu land. If it is, we'll be waiting for you." And with that the Toyotas drove off up the hill.

Quick as a flash, Cicero pulled out his mobile phone. "Look out," he shouted down the phone to the MST activists

who had reached the group of villagers at the top of the long hill. "The gunmen are on their way up." He rang off and, in a climate of growing tension, the people in the bus waited.

Up at the top of the hill, the group of villagers ran to hide at the back of a bar on the edge of the square. One was holding a rifle, while an old man clutched a rolled up MST flag. The mothers hugged their children, telling them to keep very quiet. The Toyotas drove around the square, stopped, conferred, and then drove away. After waiting a while, the group emerged from behind the church and began walking down the road. The mobile phone rang again. "Look out, the gunmen are coming back!" This time the only place to hide was in a prickly hedge. We crouched down while a Toyota drove past the end of the road. They did not see us. Then we picked our way over the stones down a steep gully, a short cut to the road below. It was a difficult scramble in the half-light. Suddenly it felt as though we had travelled back 200 years, and this was a group of runaway slaves, fleeing the plantation to set up a quilombo, or free community. At last, we reached the bus at the bottom of the hill.

The Toyotas, too, had returned and were parked about 100 yards away. Taking care not to be seen, the villagers clambered aboard. The bus departed hastily and, rather to everyone's astonishment, the Toyotas did not follow. It gradually dawned on us that the security guards had jumped to the wrong conclusion. They certainly knew all about the planned land invasion, and all day Saturday they had been cruising around Alto do Ceu in their Toyotas, distributing



Art installation at an MST encampment. Brazil

leaflets with warnings about “evil elements” and “agitators” who were deceiving the population with false promises of land. During the night they had been back in the village, speaking through loudspeakers and threatening the villagers with violent reprisals if they took part in the occupation. But – and this proved decisive – the gunmen believed that the MST was planning to launch the land invasion from Alto do Ceu itself into an area of the plantation that bordered the village. They thought that the bus was trying to take people into the village, rather than out of it, so, when the bus drove off, they believed they had won.

Almost miraculously, the occupation went ahead as planned. After a ten minute drive, the bus reached the church of Nossa Senhora de Boa Viagem. With dawn breaking, the families hurried out of the bus carrying their farm implements, bags of food, pots and pans. Within an hour or two, they had cleared away the tangled scrub and bushes and put up their polythene tents. The camp held its first assembly. The red flag was hoisted and, in a climate of exultation, the people commemorated their first victory, singing and laughing. Many of the activities organized by

the militants followed a planned routine, taught to members on training courses.

This first assembly consisted almost entirely of *mistica* – the morale boosting, quasi-religious communal ceremony at the heart of the MST culture, involving songs and chants. One slogan proclaimed: “*Che, Zumbi, Antonio Conselheiro na luta pela terra, somos todos companheiros*”, invoking Che Guevara, an icon of the movement, and two northeastern revolutionaries: Zumbi, a Brazilian slave who headed a revolt in the sixteenth century, setting up a *quilombo* known as Palmares, which lasted 95 years, and Antonio Conselheiro, a mystic who led a rebellion among the rural poor in the nineteenth century and set up the quasi-communist community of Canudos. “We are all comrades in the struggle for land,” affirms the slogan. Both Zumbi and Antonio Conselheiro have acquired the aura of romantic freedom fighters in the north east, and roaming minstrels still sing about them in street markets around here.

One enterprising man climbed up a big stone cross in front of the church and tied a red flag on the top of it.

of bread tripling. The king suspends Parliament when it refuses to support price hikes. Protesters also target the Ministry of Education because of drastic increases in school fees – also imposed by the IMF.

>> **August 21-31** >> Active Resistance, a gathering in Chicago which coincides with the ‘Democratic’ Party’s national convention, brings together nearly a thousand people who engage in intensive work on building

sustainable communities of resistance. Police harass activists, particularly those involved in creating alternative media, make 14 arrests, and raid the site, pepper spraying participants and confiscating (and damaging) equipment and personal belongings. Yet the seeds of inspiration are sown for Indymedia and other new ways of resisting.

>> **August 23** >> Three hundred Africans occupy a

church in Paris in an effort to bring attention to the plight of immigrants, and to demand regular papers. The French government refuses to negotiate with them, and they are eventually evicted.

>> **September** >> In the ongoing campaign to save the ancient redwoods, 8,000 people gather across from a Pacific Lumber mill in northern California, US, to defend the Headwaters Forest. Over a thousand of them are

Another climbed even higher, to the top of a billboard on the main road that passed the camp and tied a red MST flag above an advertisement for insurance. The crowd below cheered enthusiastically and started to sing and dance. It seemed like Carnival. Yet the celebrations were at best premature. We were by then just 40 people, for the other two buses had failed to turn up. It later emerged that the telephone call from the labourer in Tres Ladeiras to say that he had arranged a bus had been an act of sabotage. He was really working for Petribu. The other bus had picked up some people in a couple of villages and then stopped in Cruz de Reboucas, only to find no-one waiting. As it made its way half-empty towards Engenho Pasmado, two green and white Toyotas had swung across the road, blocking its way. Wielding a revolver, one of the gunmen then threatened to set fire to the bus with everyone inside it, and understandably the driver, who had also not known beforehand that he was carrying people for a land invasion, had refused to go any further.

At about midday several jeeps and cars drew up near the church, and some 30 men marched in a phalanx towards the camp. About half wore the smart beige uniforms of official Petribu security guards, while the rest, wearing jeans, old t-shirts, and cowboy boots, were our acquaintances from the previous night. At the sight of them marching towards the camp, men and women seized their hoes and ran to block their path. It was clear that the guards and gunmen would have to use violence to evict the families and they hesitated. They admitted, when we questioned them, that the land

“The most dramatic and far-reaching social change of the second half of this century, and one that cuts us off forever from the world of the past, is the death of the peasantry.”

– Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes – The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991*, Michael Joseph, London, 1994

around the church did not belong to Petribu. In threatening language, they warned the villagers not to move into the adjacent cane fields, turned around, and strode back to their Toyotas. More celebrations.

We were still talking to Antonio Severino da Silva when the camp received its first visitors – José Servat, a French priest who has been living in this region for 35 years, and a nun, who immediately busied herself making sure that the children had enough to eat and were not ill. They had brought several sacks of rice and beans, which the women immediately began to cook. Father José had been delighted by the news of the occupation. “Workers in these sugar plantations were organized in the 1950s and early 1960s but then they experienced dreadful repression and the movement collapsed,” he said. “They were abandoned by the Catholic Church. Just one or two of us struggled on. Some members of the Church are frightened by these occupations, but I’m not. The people are simply saying that they’re not animals, they’re humans. They want land. They want to be

part of society. I've been hoping for years that something like this would happen."

Although clearly unwell, Father José spoke to a hastily convened assembly. To much applause he said, "This land does not belong to Votorantim or Petribu. There used to be a community around this church and, with God's help, you will build it again." More cheers. "I should like to make a proposal, that you christen this new community with its old name – Nossa Senhora de Boa Viagem." At which point Cicero intervened so that the MST's democratic procedures for presenting a proposal and voting on it would be followed. The assembly voted by an overwhelming majority to accept the proposed name.

The head of the security commission immediately called on the men to volunteer for two shifts, one from 6.00 pm to midnight and the other from midnight to 6.00 am. One of the volunteers was Junior, an openly gay young man who had been on the bus with us the previous night. A makeshift bell was quickly made out of a piece of metal. The head of the security commission said that, in the case of an emergency, day or night, the watch would ring the bell and everyone was

to grab a farm implement and assemble under the red flag.

It did not take long for the first emergency to happen. At about 10.00 pm, just as everyone was settling down to sleep in the tents, the bell rang out. The Toyotas – which by then had become a symbol of fear and violence – had returned and were driving up and down the road. It was pitch black outside. The only source of light was a smouldering wood fire, on which the women had been cooking. A Toyota tried to drive in, to be confronted once again by mass resistance. The villagers shouted slogans and brandished their implements. The vehicle finally backed off. After an hour or so of considerable tension, all the Toyotas drove off. It was a long night and few slept, but the gunmen did not return.

The next day was full of activity. The camp had survived the first crucial 24 hours and the news spread like wildfire in the region. People began pouring in from the neighbouring villages. A delegation arrived from Cruz de Reboucas, begging the MST to send another bus to the shanty town to pick them up, but Cicero was adamant: "The bus came for you on Sunday morning, and you weren't there. If you want to join our camp

arrested for trespassing before the police run out of plastic handcuffs.

>> **October 1** >> The longest strike in the United States steel industry begins against WCI Steel Inc. over diminished job security and deep cuts to pensions. Eight communities in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia buckle under the collective loss of \$5 million in weekly wages. Steelworker families in the Ohio and Mon valleys

are going to food banks instead of the grocery store. Strikers target banks and financial institutions linked to the corporation.

>> **October 16** >> The global day of action against McDonald's coincides with the UN's World Food Day. Actions take place in over 50 cities in 21 countries, and include distribution of the now-infamous 'What's Wrong With McDonald's?' leaflet. The leaflet prompts the

'McLibel' suit, which goes on to be the longest libel suit in British history.

>> **October 25** >> One million people take part in a general strike in Toronto, protesting against massive national health care cuts and the widespread homelessness exacerbated by a 50 per cent increase in evictions in the previous year.
>> **November 8-17** >> The World Food Summit is held

now, you'll have to find your own transport." Somehow they managed and a dozen or so families arrived a few hours later. More commissions were set up, with the people in the camp playing a more active role in the selection of their representatives. The new commissions were given a variety of responsibilities – to build more tents; to set up communal kitchens; to organize literacy classes for adults and children; to set up a women's collective; and to organize a young people's collective for collecting litter and for organizing games. Everyone was busy.

Still, the problems seemed immense. There was very little food. One activist was sent off to ask for food from MST settlements. Another MST delegation travelled to Igarassu and other neighbouring towns to make contact with the local authorities. Surprisingly, several mayors promised to send in some basic supplies of rice and beans, even though they were not sympathetic to the MST's cause. Even so, it was clear that food would run out if the camp continued to grow rapidly. Cicero, who has organized dozens of occupations, was unperturbed. "If necessary, we'll loot lorries on the highway," he told us. "It all helps to raise people's awareness, shows them that together we can overcome all obstacles. People have been kicked around by the plantation owners since the days of slavery. It takes actions like this to make them aware that they can throw off oppression."

There was also the challenge of training the new arrivals for future confrontations with gunmen. Again Cicero was unfazed: "People can change very quickly in these camps.

They gain a sense of their own power and become fearless. New leaders emerge and they soon take responsibility for running the camp and for preparing people for conflict. As you saw, we don't need to encourage them. We even have to caution them against running unnecessary risks."

By the end of the week there were 620 families living in the camp. Cicero had gone off to help organize yet another camp, set up spontaneously by families who thought that Nossa Senhora de Boa Viagem had become too crowded.

But, as the MST activists had thought likely, a major setback occurred. At 4.00 am on Saturday 100 police, accompanied by 200 gunmen, arrived at the camp equipped with a legal order, issued by the courts in the name of Votorantim, to re-occupy the land and to evict the villagers. The families refused to move and a long standoff ensued. The gunmen set fire to the tents. One labourer was seriously injured. Eventually, after mediation by a lawyer, Jessimar Pessoa Boracho, and a Catholic priest from Scotland, a compromise was reached. The local Catholic bishop agreed to open the doors of the long-closed church and the families moved into the area immediately surrounding the church. As the families had technically moved off the land under dispute, the gunmen withdrew. The priest and the lawyer, still convinced that the land really belonged to the Church, promised to challenge the legality of the expulsion order in the courts. The scene seemed set for a long legal battle.

Early on Monday morning, before the eyes of a small group of gunmen, the families, reinforced by seven MST

activists brought in from other regions, reoccupied the plot. They had to begin everything again. Many families had left, intimidated by the violence, so they had to send out the word that they were now back on the land. They had to build new huts, bringing in fresh supplies of black polythene. They had to construct another communal kitchen, another open-air school. Conditions were even worse than before, as the gunmen had infected the only stream bringing water close to the camp with dead animals. Undeterred, several of the workers began to clean the old well that had been used in the past by the village but was now heavily polluted with diesel oil. The long process of conquering the land – which could well involve further evictions and reoccupations – was underway.

Sue Branford and Jan Rocha have been accompanying the MST in Brazil since the first occupations in 1984. Both freelance writers, they are the authors of *Cutting the Wire: the story of the landless movement of Brazil*, from which this piece is adapted. Please acknowledge when reproducing.

Resources:

- » *Cutting the Wire: the story of the landless movement of Brazil*, Sue Branford, Jan Rocha, Latin American Bureau, 2002
- » Extensive multilingual information on the MST: www.mstbrazil.org
- » History and documentaion of Via Campesina: www.viacampesina.org

in Rome. The Hunger Gathering, a counter summit, brings together diverse groups ranging from Bangladeshi farmers to the Brazilian MST. Their work lays the foundation of protest against genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in Europe.

>> **November 20** >> Massive student strikes in Québec City, Canada take place, demanding an end to cuts in education funding, lifting of new restrictions on loan

qualifications, a tuition freeze, bans on administrative fees, and abolition of a restrictive enrollment policy.

>> **November 22 -25** >> Mass mobilizations against 'free' trade occur throughout the Philippines during the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit. The authorities ban certain foreigners (including Archbishop Desmond Tutu and former French first lady Danielle Mitterrand) from entering

the country as they might cause 'disharmony'. The government bulldozes shantytowns to create a fantasy of technological and social wealth for delegates. Protests include a march of 130,000 which is stopped by police blockades as it heads for the summit, as well as a massive blockade of the road connecting Manila to the summit site of Subic Bay.

>> **November 23** >> On the US' National Day of