

Interview with João Pedro Stedile

“Capital is imposing agribusiness as the only form of production”

For João Pedro Stedile, from the national leadership of the MST, this scenario is reaching completion under Dilma’s government, which is controlled by agribusiness

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by Joana Tavares of Minas Gerais

Brazil has never had an agrarian reform program that truly proposes democratizing access to land and guaranteeing land to the rural poor. João Pedro Stedile, from the national leadership of the Movement of Rural Landless Workers (MST), evaluates the current situation in the countryside. From his perspective, depending on the alignment of forces, “sometimes we advance and achieve more settlements. At other times, capital advances and prevents us from expropriating land. This is the current situation.”

Faced with this reality, more than 15 thousand MST militants will come together from February 10-14 for their 6th National Congress, in Brasilia. 30 years after the founding of the MST, the configuration of the Brazilian countryside points to the sharpening social contradictions that continue to accumulate, like a debt, throughout history.

“Amid this adverse situation, we have spent the last two years in discussions with our base, and we have built up the importance of popular agrarian reform,” Stedile affirms. He says this program includes the need for substantial expropriation of the largest estates, beginning with foreign enterprises.

In this interview, Stedile speaks about the current prospects for agrarian reform and the major challenges facing the working class this year. “Despite the advances of the last ten years with respect to neo-liberalism, the workers still confront serious problems, which also affect the country’s youth,” he says. He believes that the mobilizations, more than welcome, are necessary to create change in the country.

Brasil de Fato - What is the situation of agrarian reform in Brazil today?

João Pedro Stedile – Brazil has never had an agrarian reform program that truly proposes democratizing access to land and guaranteeing land to the poor in the countryside. So, depending on the alignment of forces, sometimes we advance and achieve more settlements. At other times, capital advances and prevents us from expropriating land. This is the current situation. We do not have agrarian reform, and the process of taking over land for new settlements has been stopped. This is due to speculation in the prices of agricultural commodities, which has increased the profit of landowning farmers and driven the prices of land sky-high. Capital is imposing agribusiness as the only form of production. And this scenario is reaching completion under Dilma’s government, which is

controlled by agribusiness. Those who advocate for agrarian reform within the government are a minority. And even worse, Incra has an unbelievable level of administrative incompetence, which keeps them from resolving the smallest problems, even for those who already have settlements.

How will the projected changes for the MST in the country impact people who live in cities?

Amid this adverse situation, we have spent the last two years in discussions with our base, and we have built up the importance of a popular agrarian reform that represents necessary changes for all the people, not only for landless workers. And we have incorporated into our program the need for substantial expropriation of the largest estates, beginning with foreign enterprises. We need to prioritize food production. We need to produce food without agricultural toxins in order for city dwellers to be healthy. We need to adopt ecological agriculture with a new production matrix that is in balance with nature. We need to create agricultural cooperatives, to give employment to rural youth, stop their exodus from the country, and distribute income. And finally, we need to democratize access to education at all levels. This, essentially, is our agrarian reform proposal.

You were recently at the Pontifical Academy of Sciences in the Vatican, at the invitation of Pope Francis, to discuss the issue of world hunger. What were your impressions of this meeting?

It surprised everyone; for the first time the Vatican convened two social movements, the MST and the Cartoneros (collectors of recyclable material) of Argentina, to debate with bishops, intellectuals, and scientists from the Academy about the causes of poverty, exclusion, and other economic problems. We presented our perspective on the current stage of international finance capitalism, which dominates the world and bears primary responsibility for these conditions. The 300 largest companies in the world control half of humanity's wealth. Unless we fight against this system, we will never have a more egalitarian, just, and democratic society. There will certainly be other developments at the seminary, with other encounters promoted by Pope Francis, who is surprising us all.

The MST has been the principal social movement in Brazil in the last few decades. Now youth are emerging as a major social force. What is your opinion about current youth movements?

Youth mobilizations in any society are a sort of thermometer of the temperature of society's indignation. Here it is no different. Despite the advancements of the last 10 years with respect to neo-liberalism, workers still confront serious problems, which also affect youth. And the youth took to the streets to say on behalf of all of us that we need social change. Change in the political regime, which doesn't represent anyone. Change in

political economy. And more, State and government meeting the needs of the people in terms of health, education, and quality public transportation.

How is the MST planning to dialogue or coordinate with these youth?

We try to get our activists involved in all mobilizations, even though our base is far from the capital cities. We continue encouraging youth to organize, to mobilize. And at the same time, we contribute by hosting statewide and nationwide plenaries of social movements that involve all sectors, from the labor movement to rural workers, so that we can discuss the direction of the country and the need for political reform.

Were you surprised by the size and impact of the June demonstrations led by these youth?

I was surprised by the way they happened, and how quickly. At the same time, all social activists knew that the problems faced by people in large cities were growing below the surface. One example is public transportation; people spend hours commuting and transportation is very expensive. Meanwhile, the government exempts drivers from IPI [Imposto sobre Produtos Industrializados, a basic sales tax] and incentivizes individual transportation, which is a boon for the multinational auto companies.

Our approach to public health is a disgrace. At least it led to the Programa Mais Médicos [More Doctors Program], which is a good thing. And in education too, we have major problems, from high levels of illiteracy, which affects 18 million working adults, to the fact that 88% of university-age youth cannot get into a university. On the other hand, institutional politics in Brazil have been held ransom by campaign contributors, who elect their hostages to office in the capital. And the people, the youth, no longer feel represented in parliament or in the political system. So sooner or later these problems would have come to the surface. And they surfaced in the perfect place: the streets! What better place for youth to learn about democracy?

What was the outcome of the June demonstrations for political struggle in the country?

In terms of real gains, it was small, because it only stopped the tax increase. But the political outcome is fantastic. They took politics back to the streets, they shifted the debate to necessary changes, and they put political reform and the need for a Constituent Assembly on the agenda. And they are still in process, and will continue to grow.

In the rest of 2013, the movements encountered some setbacks in national economic policy. What was the reason for these setbacks?

Federal economic policy is one of the central sites of class struggle in Brazilian society, because it distributes the wealth produced every day by the workers. And there has been constant pressure from banks and big businesses to take public money as interest or as a kind of favorable loan from BNDES [Brazilian Development Bank], through

parliamentary amendments and tax exemptions. And from the point of view of the workers, we need to fight so that these resources, which are public, are invested in education, healthcare, agrarian reform, and public transportation for large cities. And in 2013, I believe the people lost this fight. The banks gobbled up 280 billion reais from the treasury in interest. The Central Bank, dominated by banks, raised interest rates. The average citizen, business, and industry pay interest rates that range from 40% to 144% yearly. This is an outrage. And the government continues to administer, without the courage or strength to take on economic powers, because the government has been infiltrated by these interests.

Both Right and Left are betting that the demonstrations will return during the World Cup. Is there a risk that the demonstrations, which symbolize the desire for change, will bolster conservative forces? Could they be used as part of the electoral game?

Large mobilizations always help to facilitate political debate in society. The Brazilian right does not have a social base, nor does it have rhetoric and proposals that can mobilize millions. Because it would be mobilizing against the interests of the people. The demonstrations, more than welcome, are necessary in order to keep changing the country, to bring the state into the service of the people and get more resources for education, for healthcare. Those who fear the people are no longer close to their interests. No social movement in the history of humanity has occurred without popular mobilization. Change does not happen because of the “good will” of a politician or a guru. As far as timing goes, I hope that the mobilizations begin soon, because when the Cup begins the people’s heads will become confused — they will want to see the Cup, and that will diminish the protests and make them seem as if they are only about the money spent for the event. Of course the money spent on stadiums — close to 8 billion reais — could have been better spent. However, it represents just two weeks worth of the many resources that the government gives to banks. Every two weeks we give a World Cup’s worth of treasury money to the banks. They are our principal enemies; we should denounce and defeat them, inside and outside of government.

What should we expect from the 2014 elections?

Personally, I don’t believe there will be significant change, either in the politicians or in the proposals they advocate. The real changes will not depend on the electoral calendar, they will depend on the capacity of the working class to lay out a unified program of measures that society needs to be able to solve the everyday problems of the people.

Are the MST and other social movements planning to fly a political flag and hold demonstrations this year?

It’s already flying in the streets, since the second half of last year. We are part of a broad popular front, including CNBB, OAB, ABI, CUT [National Conference of Brazilian

Bishops, Order of Attorneys of Brazil, Brazilian Press Association, Unified Workers' Central], and other popular movements, fighting for political reform that changes the rules of the game, returns to the people the right to choose their representatives, changes the balance of power in society, and opens the door for other necessary reforms. Urban reforms, agricultural reforms, reforms guaranteeing that 10% of GDP goes to education, expanding resources for healthcare, and control over interest on the budget surplus.

Which of these issues would you bet on in 2014?

This is the political leap that we, the social movements, have to make. More than a specific list of demands, in which each social group fights for the needs of their base, it's fundamental that we build programmatic unity around political issues. This unity will help us create a national movement and do the base-building work of discussing with the people what kind of political changes we want. And apart from this debate, we are organizing a popular vote during the week of September 7, so that the people can vote on the idea of a Constituent Assembly, with sovereign elections, under other rules, exclusively to make political change in the country. I hope that we can mobilize millions of Brazilians for this, and thus bring together forces to put pressure on the Three Powers of the Republic to hold a Constituent Assembly in 2015.