

Paraguay, More than 50% of the rural population lives in a situation of misery

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A conflict between landless peoples and police in Paraguay on June 15th was unleashed by a land ownership reintegration operation where thirty landless people died and hundreds were injured. According to Perla Álvarez, member of the National Coordination of Rural and Indigenous Women (Conamuri), "The current government puts on the pretty face of a progressive government, but behind the scenes agribusiness is growing more than ever before". The following is an interview conducted by the MST website with Perla, who came to Brazil for the People's Summit:

How was the Paraguayan countryside before agribusiness?

Paraguay has a long history of struggle for land. The agrarian system was characterized, since the colonial period, by large extensions of land concentrated into the hands of just a few people. However, starting with the dictatorship of general Stroessner, this took on new dimensions because this is the moment that the capitalist system started to enter the countryside, giving way to agroexport companies who use peasant labor. We also saw the expansion of the Brazilian agricultural model across the border. This process began around 30 years ago. But with the development of the genetic industry of GMOs, soy monocultures began to spread starting in the '90s.

This is how the process of pushing peasants out of the countryside began and there was an extraordinary growth in these large extensions of land, which went from 2 thousand to 5 thousand to 200 thousand, all the way to one million hectares in the hands of just one landowner. Another problem in this sense is that a large part of these large landholdings are in the hands of foreigners or multinational corporations, mostly Brazilian landlords, who expand the cultivation of GMO soy into our territory. In the last ten years land concentration has worsened: we have approximately nine thousand farming families forced off their lands each year. These people migrate to cities, creating poverty belts.

Another problem is that there is no mechanism in place, a policy that could absorb all the members of the labor force who are left unemployed in the countryside; the current agricultural model doesn't generate income sources. There are people who, despite having their own land, cannot produce because their properties were affected by massive agrochemical use and the land degradation won't allow for development.

What is the life of family farmers in Paraguay like?

Farming families have to survive on what they produce in their harvests, which is self-sufficient production and provides a very small profit. But this profit is very small and is not organized, so commercialization becomes very difficult. So agricultural work is complemented by work outside the home. Men generally provide services in the fields or go to the city to do some sort of informal work, and the women either develop the production of small animals, like hens, or leave to work in domestic services. Today farming families cannot live just from their production like they did 20, 30 years ago. There's a strong bias against self-sufficient production, since the majority of land goes toward soy, sunflower or rice monocultures to be exported, all of which require intensive use of

agrochemicals. The quality of production is very low, and there is very little fruit. It is a system of production that does not improve family nutrition.

In Brazil, family-based agriculture is responsible for the majority of the food that we eat. ¿What is the situation like in Paraguay?

We have a huge problem with the internal market. Right now there is no real chance that peasant production can feed the whole population of Paraguay because we have policies that favor the importation of agricultural goods which poor national peasant production cannot compete with. Local markets are subsidized by peasant production, but aren't fully supplied by it. We don't have potato production and we have very little tomato production, because there is no support for those kinds of products. Where there is production, the goods often don't make it to market because of inconveniences like lack of transport and devalued prices. There is production, but the market is poorly organized and doesn't offer any security to farmers.

Peasant production could adequately supply our market, but given the conditions it is currently in, without any development of local markets, there is no possibility that it could fulfill that task.

How is the landless movement organized in Paraguay?

There is no landless movement, what we have are various peasant movements, and within them is a landless sector who is responsible for the organization of landless people in each movement. In Paraguay we have a land commission that makes claims on land on behalf of these families. As the legal issues develop, the landless people begin taking direct action, like the camps, which are occupations of the lands in question or of institutions. There is no mechanism that is not considered when it comes to the struggle for land, but the landless movement in Paraguay, I would say, is definitely fragile.

The kind of political education there is in Brazil is not taking place in Paraguay. What is more, there are many people infiltrating the landless sector, who often manage to delegitimize the struggle for land. This is what led to yesterday's massacre. The need for land is a reality for many peasant families. According to official data, there are 50 thousand landless people. According to our organizations there are approximately 400 thousand landless families. And this need, combined with the ineffectiveness of trying to pressure the government to enact Land Reform, led the movement to begin strategizing their struggle spontaneously.

A political sector disillusioned with the way that certain organizations and individuals were working took control of that mass of people in need. One sector of the political right took advantage of the situation by creating the Liga de los Acampados, who are brothers and sisters who do spontaneous occupations, and this Liga de los Acampados leads a large number of landless peasants to do these occupations without any previous training, defense strategy or alliances. All this has led to situations like the massacre.

On the other hand, all these popular movements that emerge from necessity are being used by the media to criminalize peasant struggles. There is a media campaign that characterizes the peasant struggle as delinquency. Aside from land issues, they call people citing peasant grievances terrorists. In Paraguay we have an antiterrorist law, which permits the use of force without real justification. Only afterwards is an action defined as a terrorist or delinquent act.

So we are in the middle of a very negative political context for the development of the land struggle and the peasant struggle in general. When we talk about Food Sovereignty, the media says we want to go back to the Stone Age. We are in a stage of the struggle that is very difficult. The current

government puts on the pretty face of a progressive government, but behind the scenes agribusiness is growing more than ever before. In 2010, the Paraguayan trade balance closed with a surplus of 14.5% of the GDP. But where is that 14.5%? It goes to a small group of people who get richer off agribusiness, while families are growing poorer: we have 50% of the population in poverty, and of these 50% who are in extreme poverty. On one hand there is a regression of peasants' organizing force due to the fact that many support the Lugo government's political process, and on the other hand we have a political right that wants to destroy all possibilities for the population.

This sad fact, which has cost the life of many brothers and sisters, can serve to reunite a peasant movement that should take into account that the struggle for land is a class option, not a sectoral one.

How is Paraguay affected by the presence of Brazilian large-scale landowners?

The Brazilian landowners in Paraguay are dedicated to monoculture soy or sunflower production. In Paraguay the problem isn't just land concentration, but also a very strong cultural subjugation because the Brazilian business elite has come into the country with all their Brazilian culture: language, money, gastronomy, music. These different ways to live are imposed on the educational system and the media in the region where they live. It is a rooted power in Paraguay that causes aversion and submission in the population, because behind it there is a huge economic power. In these spaces, where the presence of these Brazilian companies can be felt, the Paraguayan state is hardly present itself. This territory has been turned over to these Brazilians in a major loss for our sovereignty.

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