

## COUNTERING INEQUALITY: BRAZIL'S MOVIMENTO SEM-TERRA\*

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**ABSTRACT.** Data from a national survey of formerly landless peasants residing in federal land-reform settlements in Brazil (Pesquisa Nacional de Educação na Reforma Agrária—PNERA) confirm that the Landless Rural Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra—MST) has been far more successful than other settlement movements in assuring a better quality of life for its members. This superior performance is attributed to an organizational structure that demands and assures membership involvement, and a commitment to participatory education in an environment that fosters and supports MST's goals and objectives. MST's members have higher self-perceived social status than members of non-MST movements, have better residential environments and more material possessions, and experience an education that emphasizes the movement's principles of social justice, radical democracy, and humanist and socialist values. *Keywords:* *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra (MST), rural education, Brazil, Pesquisa Nacional de Educação na Reforma Agrária (PNERA), agrarian reform.*

As Brazil entered the final quarter of the twentieth century, a massive landless rural population, poor and uneducated, confronted it. To be sure, urbanward migration was running apace as the most enterprising headed to the cities, increasing the number and size of urban squatter settlements (*favelas*), but much of the peasantry remained locked to a countryside where half of the usable land was in the hands of less than 1 percent of the population. However, building on the successes of those establishing favelas in the cities, and amidst rising social consciousness stimulated by aggressive community organization, a number of settlement movements emerged that were committed to securing land for the peasantry, improving living conditions and housing, and ensuring at least a basic education for all. By late 2004, the National Research on Education in Agrarian Reform (Pesquisa Nacional de Educação na Reforma Agrária—PNERA), which was conducted by the Ministry of Education in a joint effort with the Ministry of Agrarian Development through the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (Instituto Nacional de Colonização e Reforma Agrária—INCRA) and the National Institute of Educational Studies and Research (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais—INEP), identified 5,595 rural settlements planted by these movements and legalized since 1985, with over 2.5 million residents—close to 525,000

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TABLE 1—INCRA SETTLEMENTS IN 2004

VARIABLE	BRAZIL	REGION				
		NORTH	NORTHEAST	SOUTHEAST	SOUTH	CENTRAL-WEST
INCRA settlement	5,595	1,082	2,546	843	680	444
Settled families	519,363	167,932	208,071	27,999	30,238	85,123
Settled population	2,525,102	842,303	1,067,301	131,314	136,122	348,062

Source: PNERA (2007).

households—spread among 1,651 municipalities. Sixty-four percent of the settlements, housing 75 percent of the families and 75 percent of the settled population, were located in the northern and northeastern regions of the country (Table 1 and Figure 1). By the end of 2005 there were a total of 7,381 federal land-reform settlements in Brazil, covering an area of 60,689,841 hectares, with a total of 667,230 families living in them (IPEA 2006). In addition to these settlements, which had gained land rights, there were many “encampments” where groups had successfully occupied land, but had not yet gained legal status.

In this paper we use data provided by PNERA (2007), the only available settlement survey,<sup>1</sup> —which was conducted in 2004 but not published until 2007—to explore the settlements’ success in improving living standards of the rural poor and providing access to education. More specifically, we compare the membership and accomplishments of the largest and best known of the movements, the Landless Rural Workers Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem-Terra—MST), with those of other smaller and more fragmented movements.<sup>2</sup> We conclude that MST, which had its origin in the south of Brazil, differs in several ways from other landless movements, many of which are northern or northeastern, including a higher level of bottom-to-top organization, members’ self-perception of being of higher social status than members of other movements, and especially the overarching commitment to education to ensure the next generation’s leaders. The MST is now active in twenty-three out of twenty-seven Brazilian states<sup>3</sup> and has about 1.5 million members living in more than 1,649 of the settlements<sup>4</sup> (MST 2006). To provide setting, we begin with a brief excursus into Brazilian history to provide background and understanding of why the problem of a landless peasantry emerged and why it has the scale it does. We then discuss the emergence of the MST and other movements, proceed to the PNERA comparisons, and then draw together the important lessons.

#### INEQUALITY AND THE LANDLESS

Brazil never had agrarian reform of any kind, inheriting from the Portuguese colonial period an unequal structure of rural landholding in which a small number of wealthy landowners controlled much of the farmland (Guimarães 1981; Ondetti 2008). In the sixteenth century, vast sugarcane plantations dominated much of the developed landscape and belonged to a few members of the colonial



FIG 1—Map of Brazil with regions.

society. When Brazil gained independence from Portugal, the agricultural oligarchy retained and increased its influence in politics. Thus, in 1850 the Lei de Terras (Land Law) limited popular access to land on the frontier and guaranteed a cheap supply of plantation labor (Silva 1996; Ondetti 2008). While the Land Law prohibited the use of slavery on these lands, it failed to distribute property to landless Afro-Brazilians, who comprised the majority of the population. Despite several efforts by abolitionists to introduce legislation that would provide a “small grant of land” to freed slaves, none received any (Donovan 2007). Thus the Land Law, by failing to redistribute any of the enormous properties created during the Portuguese colonization, reinforced the high concentration of land in the hands of few, who were generally the same owners as before the law (Marx 1991; Martins 2002; Donovan 2007). When slavery was completely abolished in 1888, freed slaves were not granted land. The massive agrarian oligarchies predisposed Brazil to engage in large-scale agricultural activities such as coffee and sugar production that required a large, cheap, and preferably docile and ignorant, supply of rural

labor. A prevailing attitude among the oligarchs was the popular notion that “rural workers don’t need education. [Education] is something for urban people” (Leite 2002, 14).

Societies with extreme inequality allow elites to frame institutions according to their personal interest, guaranteeing greater control and influence over political decisions, and rules and laws that advantage members of the elite. Brazil was no exception (Kousser 1974; Sokoloff and Engerman 2000; Acemoglu and others 2001). Land concentration rose after 1940: in 1985, 2 percent of farms greater than 1000 hectares in size occupied 57 percent of farmland (Hall 1990; Thiesenhusen and Melmed-Sanjak 1990). It was not until 1964, after the establishment of military rule, that the Brazilian military government included agrarian reform among its priorities, attempting to placate unrest in the northeast and south due to high levels of landlessness. In November of that year, President Castelo Branco enacted Law No 4.504, which included the *Estatuto da Terra* (Land Statute). This statute defined agrarian reform as a set of measures to promote the best distribution of land, with modifications in the system of possession and use in order to satisfy principles of social justice and increased productivity. The law assured everyone the opportunity to access land ownership, conditioned by their social function, and stated that it was the duty of the government to promote and create conditions facilitating land ownership by rural workers—preferably in the regions where they live—and ensure that land ownership perform its social function, promoting fair pay and worker benefits from increased productivity and access to collective wellness.

Later, in 1970, the INCRA was created with the primary mission of conducting land reform, maintaining a national register of rural properties, and managing public lands. However, at this stage, INCRA was nominal rather than exercising real powers, and the limited progress on this and other fronts led to the emergence of a multiplicity of social movements in opposition to the dictatorship regime, a rising tide that became stronger during Brazil’s “lost decade” of the 1980’s, which was marked by stagflation and unemployment. Migration from the countryside also forged links between rural inequality and squatter settlements in rapidly growing cities. While he was the head of the Northeastern Conference of Bishops, Dom Hélder Câmara condemned that region’s tenure insecurity, believing that rural inequity was responsible for the creation of favelas in the urban centers in the southeast (Bishops 1973).

The military dictatorship collapsed and was replaced by a new democratic government and constitution, but the change did not lessen pressures by political movements such as the Worker’s Party, the landless movement in rural areas, and urban movements, all advocating decent housing, improved infrastructure (transportation, hospitals), and education. In 1985, with the escalation of protests, the government of President José Sarney drafted the National Agrarian Reform Plan (PNRA) that had been provided for in the 1964 Land Statute. A federal agency was created called the Extraordinary Ministry for

Development and Agrarian Reform (MIRAD), but four years later the results were insignificant. In 1987, INCRA was abolished and MIRAD was extinct by 1989. The responsibility for land reform devolved to the Ministry of Agriculture. However, in 1989 the National Congress re-created INCRA, incorporating among its priorities the implementation of a settlement model and the legalization of new settlements for and by the landless.<sup>5</sup> With this, the settlement movement emerged in full force.

The MST began in southern Brazil in 1984 amidst the rise of popular protest movements and since then has expanded across the country, becoming the largest and most successful movement in Latin America. Other agrarian reform movements that emerged during the same time include the Worker's Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores—MT*) in Pernambuco, the Struggle for Land Movement (*Movimento de Luta pela Terra—MLT*) in Bahia, and the Movement for the Liberation of the Landless (*Movimento de Liberação dos Sem Terra—MLST*) in Pernambuco (Ondetti 2008). Because of its effectiveness in mobilizing workers, and its size and importance in Brazilians' minds, it is MST that has become synonymous with the grassroots struggle for land reform. Any person who lives in a settlement or encampment is referred to as "*sem-terras*," or "landless," and most Brazilians are unaware that some settler occupations of land are not organized by the MST. According to Gabriel Ondetti, this perception is a result of MST's unparalleled capability to mobilize workers, its boldness and flare for the dramatic, and its role in some of the most publicized social conflicts in Brazil (2008).

Social movements in urban areas pressing for decent housing paralleled the rise of social movements such as the MST advocating land reform in rural areas. Between the 1970s and the mid-1980s, Brazil was not only facing an increased number of land occupations in rural areas, but also an increasing mobilization of favela dwellers seeking access to urban land and housing. These urban squatting locations received a massive influx of rural people as a result of the economic, educational, and social advantages that cities offered. Although many rural migrants found themselves in situations of dreadful squalor in the city, for the great majority, even the most miserable *favelados*, things were better in the city than in the places they left (Morris and Pyle 1971). Favelas were originally formed close to city centers on previously unoccupied hillside land close to services and jobs, but most recently favelas have been formed in peripheral areas in the main cities (Fernandes 2002). Urban squatters face great hostility, but have been successful due to their numbers and the number of favelas is increasing rapidly. Private and public lands are invaded daily, focusing on those locations where government control of land development is not so strict. Many of the squatters are rural workers who, leaving the countryside, are often the poorest of the poor in the cities, including day-wage laborers, and those who work in low-wage jobs, such as street vendors, truck drivers, or construction workers (Ondetti 2008). Their desperate economic

condition makes them more disposed to join the MST, or other social movements advocating for property rights. In 1997, the MST organized the Homeless Workers' Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem-Teto—MTST) to act in cities with the goal of fighting for urban reform, equal rights, and housing rights. Today, more than 40,000 households live in urban settlements established by the MTST in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Minas Gerais, Distrito Federal, Amazonas, Roraima, Pará, and Pernambuco (Carvalho 2013). The alliance between MST and MTST has also contributed to significant migration of urban landless escaping misery and violence in urban centers to rural sites, giving rise to additional settlements and encampments (Ilha 2001; Feliciano 2003).

#### THE MOVIMENTO DOS TRABALHADORES RURAIS SEM-TERRA

The MST, originally focused on mobilizing the poorest segments of Brazilian society—mainly rural peasants—extended its reach to the unemployed excluded from urban labor markets. In so doing, it not only mobilized members to fight for land but also to be involved in initiatives to address severe social injustice, including lack of education for children and adults, lack of health care, as well as gender and racial discrimination (Fernandes 2002, 2004; Wright and Wolford 2003). A high level of bottom-up organization is manifested through the nature of the decision-making process undertaken by this movement, based on the principle of collective leadership. MST is structured into collective units from local to state, regional, and national levels. The units at the base of the movement are called *núcleos de base* (base nuclei), and consist of ten to fifteen families. These nucleos are responsible for addressing the issues that arise in the community through debate and consensus. Each member of the nucleo participates in a sector and is responsible for the organizational and educational aspects of settlement life, with the collective-leadership principle applying to division of tasks as well as decision making (Harnecker 2003). This organization, coupled with a focus on education, has been central to MST's success.

The PNERA survey provides a rich and previously unanalyzed accounting of the condition of the schools and nature of the educational process in MST and other settlements. Although there are studies of the landless movements in English,<sup>6</sup> none has used the PNERA dataset. Most studies have focused on the impact of external forces on the movements, concluding that media, protests, repression, and public opinion are important factors contributing to their growth (Gohn 2000; Hammond 2004; Ondetti 2006). Relatively unstudied are internal mechanisms, such as the nature of the educational process, which have contributed to increased militancy and movement growth by producing effective leaders who are committed to continuance of the cause and accomplishment of movement goals. PNERA provides a first snapshot of the living and educational conditions within the settlements, indicating the progress that has been made in INCRA settlements created since 1985 (PNERA 2007). The

information provided is an expansion from a sample survey in which three different groups were surveyed: teachers and principals of settlement schools, leaders of the settlements, and the families in the settlements. The community-leader survey interviewed leaders of the settlers' associations and cooperatives, giving priority to the leaders of the Association of Rural Producers, preferably their president. For this group of community leaders the number of interviews corresponds to the number of settlements (5,595), since only one interview was conducted per settlement. Within these settlements there were a total of 8,679 schools and a survey also was given to each school representative.<sup>7</sup> The family survey comprised 20 randomly selected settlements per state, a total of 510 settlements. In each settlement, 20 families were randomly selected to be part of the study, resulting in a sample of 10,220 households. This sample was representative of 524,868 households and a population of 2,548,907 landless people. The resulting data allow the following questions to be addressed:

- Who are the MST settlers? Do their personal characteristics differ from those in other settlements or from Brazil as a whole?
- Have the settlements improved their living conditions?
- What can be concluded about the quality of education in the MST settlements? Do these schools have curricula that differ from Brazil's official schools?
- What are the implications of the curriculum for the beliefs and behaviors of Brazil's youthful generations?

In what follows we address these questions.

#### SCALE, SETTLERS, AND LIVING CONDITIONS

The Friends of MST reports that over the last three decades, 370,000 families gained access to land and to a decent standard of living by joining MST settlements (Friends of MST 2013).<sup>8</sup> There were also approximately 90,000 families in MST encampments struggling to gain land rights. The PNERA survey indicated that among 5,595 settlements surveyed in 2004, 761 were associated with the MST movement.<sup>9</sup> Although previous scholars<sup>10</sup> have argued that MST's identity can fluctuate—members can participate at certain moments or distant themselves from the movement at other moments—for the purpose of this paper we consider to be members of the MST those who answered yes to, “Do you or someone in this household participate in an organized social movement?” and who then identified MST as the social movement that they participate in.

#### THE SETTLERS

According to PNERA, 2,724 individuals (609 households) out of the 10,220 surveyed claimed to be participants of the MST. Applying sample weights, this is representative of 83,340 individuals. The gender distribution is very similar in

MST and non-MST settlers: roughly 53 percent of settlers are men. Likewise, the age distribution is very similar among MST and non-MST settlers; most settlers are younger than thirty years old (63.85 percent of MST and 64.45 percent of non-MST). The majority of the landless are poor tenant farmers, but since the MST welcomes anyone who sympathizes with their ideals, the MST settlers' racial distribution is not unlike that of the national population; the membership of other movements is more heavily brown and black, suggesting a status difference in movements (Table 2).

Geography plays a role in the difference. MST started among the southern colonies in Rio Grande do Sul where there is a higher proportion of whites—the south is 82.8 percent white—mostly descendants of European immigrants. Many of the non-MST settlements were formed in the north and northeast, where the black and brown populations are, respectively, 75.6 and 69.9 percent. In fact, MST emerged in regions where small owner-operated farms were predominant and the majority of the population was of Italian, German, or Polish descent. Thus, many who joined the movement were of *colono* (colonist) stock (Stival 1987; Franco 1992; Zamberlam and Fronchetti 1993; Martins 2002; Ondetti 2008). In some cases, they entered the movement because their families owned farms but did not have enough to divide among all children, or came from families who had lost access to land. However, the core of the movement consisted of individuals and families not of traditional *colono* origin, but *caboclos*<sup>11</sup> or *brasileiros*, many of them slave descendants who were poorer, of darker skin, and who lacked a tradition of landowning (Ondetti 2008). Consistent with this, we found that in the south 93.49 percent of MST settlers were born in the rural areas and 83.1 percent said they were white, while in the in the southeast 71.96 percent were born in rural areas, but 46.2 percent self-classified as brown.

Why is this racial difference among movements important? In Brazil, there is a strong correlation between race and social standing: most on the top are white, most blacks are on the bottom, and mixed-bloods are largely in between (Skidmore and others 2009). This stems from the history of colonization. Europeans and their descendants imported and enslaved eleven times as many Africans as the United States (Telles 2004). In the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Brazil also received millions of immigrants from Europe.

TABLE 2—NATIONAL AND SETTLEMENT POPULATION BY RACE (IN PERCENT)

RACE	BRAZIL		SETTLEMENT
	NATIONAL	MST	OTHER
White	51.41	52.45	25.78
Brown	42.09	39.70	64.38
Black	5.90	7.63	8.84
Others	0.60	0.21	1.00
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00

Sources: IBGE (2004) and PNERA (2007).



Since then, light-skinned descendants have come to dominate their darker-skinned compatriots through discriminatory practices (Telles 2004). Institutions created during Brazil's Iberian colonization gave rise to a style of governance in which small numbers of European descendants had great power and wealth while the Afro-descendants, although the majority, were nonparticipants exploited by the elite (Stohl and Lopez 1984). Lacking access to wealth or political positions, nonwhites are still at the bottom of the social ladder (Telles and Lim 1998; Telles 2004; Schwartzman 2007; Skidmore and others 2009; Reiter and Mitchell 2010; Marcus 2012).

#### LIVING CONDITIONS

Consistent with the status difference, MST has made much more progress in improving settlers' living conditions than other movements. PNERA revealed that the majority of MST settlers—83.05 percent—lived in permanent dwellings rather than shanties or huts. Their houses generally had four or more rooms, and more than 86.61 percent of MST settlers characterized their house as either “good” or “average”; only 11.44 percent characterized them as “bad.” In the MST settlements, 75.08 percent of households had electric power (Table 3), and 87.38 percent lived in dwellings with a bathroom, although 24.18 percent did use an outhouse. Again consistent with the status differences, conditions were worse in the non-MST settlements, except for the provision of public water supplies, which was vastly inferior in the settlements to elsewhere in Brazil; 74.2 percent of MST households drank untreated water, only 6.23 percent had access to public water network, and 73.93 percent of households had a system for disposing of sewage. According to the leaders' survey, only 32.85 percent of MST settlements had a health clinic, and only 3.02 percent had mail services available.

Another indicator of welfare is the possession of durable consumer goods. Much like the infrastructure conditions, even by rural standards, MST and non-MST settlers tend to own less consumer goods than the nonsettler population, especially expensive goods such as cars and computers, and MST settlers

TABLE 3—SETTLEMENT INFRASTRUCTURE (PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS)

INFRASTRUCTURE	BRAZIL		SETTLEMENT		Z-SCORE
	NATIONAL	MST	OTHER		
Electric power	96.30	75.08	59.50		114.00**
Sewage treatment	93.50	73.93	57.78		117.50**
Public water network	82.20	6.23	8.23		26.19**
Trash collection	82.90	10.30	2.87		148.70**
Bathroom	93.50	87.38	69.67		139.40**

Note: Z-scores are calculated between MST and other settlements; \*\*significant at 0.01.

Sources: IBGE (2004); PNERA (2007).

possessed more durable goods than non-MST settlers. Thus, materially, MST has been associated with much better living conditions (Table 4).

While MST and non-MST settlers have a much lower standard of living than other Brazilians, landless settlers feel that their lives have improved since gaining access to land. When asked to assess the change in their overall living conditions, 91 percent said that they were better off: 79 percent said that they had better housing, 66 percent said they were eating better, 70 percent said that better education was available to their children, and 62 percent said they had more purchasing power (Heredia and others 2003; Ondetti 2008; Medeiros and Leite 2004). The overwhelming proportion of landless settlers who felt that their living conditions had improved had acquired land, providing them with a sense of autonomy and dignity that they lacked before (INCRA 2010).

#### THE STRUGGLE FOR EDUCATION

We attribute the PNERA evidence that MST settlers had better living conditions and possessed more material goods in 2004 than non-MST settlers to the fact that education has become such a central part of the MST movement. Since the beginning of the MST movement, sem-terras advocated support for the creation of rural schools in MST communities as a response to the lack of quality education in rural areas. The experience with education over the years led to the development of the MST's own Pedagogy of the Land (*Pedagogia da Terra*). National institutions such as the National Program for Education in Agrarian Reform (*Programa Nacional de Educação na Reforma Agrária—PRONERA*),<sup>12</sup> as well as international institutions such as UNESCO, UNICEF, and the Catholic Church, have partnered with the MST in projects to support these efforts (Wright and Wolford 2003). Through this educational system, created and maintained by the MST with state support within settlements and

TABLE 4—POSSESSION OF DURABLE CONSUMER GOODS (PERCENTAGE OF HOUSEHOLDS)

GOODS	BRAZIL		SETTLEMENT	
	NATIONAL	MST	OTHER	Z-SCORE
Stove	97.50	90.47	84.72	57.80**
Television	90.50	64.68	50.06	104.70**
Computer	16.60	1.61	0.44	58.90**
Radio	88.10	67.52	59.45	59.00**
Refrigerator	87.40	56.12	45.45	61.70**
Car	32.70	21.82	11.60	111.80**
Washing machine	34.50	28.33	7.19	272.30**
Fixed telephone	65.20	1.10	2.14	26.10**
Cell phone	16.50	37.38	13.00	248.40**

Note: Z-scores are calculated between MST and other settlements; \*\* significant at 0.01.

Sources: IBGE (2000 and 2004); PNERA (2007).

encampments, 180,000 children have received education in 2,000 schools, while thousands of adults have received literacy training (Plumer 2008).

Early on, recognizing the needs of children in the new settlements, itinerant schools<sup>13</sup> were established, led by the few qualified teachers among the landless and by educators from nearby towns (McCowan 2003; Camini 2009). As the settlements become permanent communities, itinerant schools are converted into officially recognized public schools. These schools are very different from traditional public schools. The schools' philosophy and pedagogy reflect the movement's principles of social justice, radical democracy, and humanist and socialist values (MST 1999a). In 1998, PRONERA was created to implement educational policies and actions destined for the people in settlements and rural areas. PRONERA<sup>14</sup> is described by academics as a fundamental step in the development of educational public policies for rural areas (Molina 2003; Freitas 2006). The objective of the program is: "To strengthen education in the areas of Agrarian Reform stimulating, proposing, creating, developing and coordinating educational projects, using methodologies geared to the specific rural need in order to contribute to the promotion of sustainable development" (INCRA 2004, 17).

Consistent with this, the MST settlement environment stimulated educational attainment (Leite and others 2004; Bergamasco and others 2005). A clear notion developed in the landless settlements of the important role played by education in the personal and collective development of people, in the construction of citizenship, in creating opportunities, and in the well-being of the community. MST settlers attach great value to education, and are capable of overcoming obstacles such as poor educational conditions and the difficulty of attending schools in the settlements (Abramovay and Rua 2000). MST also encourages the participation and involvement of the community in school activities and provides schools with a more active role in the community (McCowan 2003). The settlers are able to participate and contribute in several ways: being part of the school council or educational team, working on projects for school improvements, helping maintain the history of the struggle, inviting teachers to be part in community events, giving technical help to the schools, contributing their skills to the learning process in the schools, using the school space for meetings and courses, and adopting the school as part of the community (MST 1999b). Obstacles remain. Most of the schools in the settlements are municipal schools under governmental fiscal and administrative control. The teachers at these settlements are assigned by the official system and in many cases hold prejudiced views of the MST's educational work (Beltrame 2000). Many teachers are unable to grasp the specific issues confronting rural education or to understand how education plays a role in the landless-movement project of social transformation (Diniz-Pereira 2005). Likewise, there is antagonism between MST's educational principles—centering on the values of cooperation and Solidarity—and what the educational establishment would like

to transmit to the children: values of competition and individualism (Ribeiro 2001).

#### THE ESTABLISHMENT AND CURRICULUM OF SETTLEMENT SCHOOLS

The establishment of MST schools is very similar to the landless actions in forming settlements.<sup>15</sup> Sem-terras build a school with whatever material is available, find teachers among themselves who can teach, and after the school is running, a petition is sent to the Brazilian government to approve the school and provide funds or other needs, although the majority of schools try to be self-sufficient. Thus, even when the Ministry of Education sanctions schools, they do not follow the same curriculum as “regular” state schools. Likewise, the relationship between students and teachers is nontraditional. Students participate in all aspects of the organization of the school, including group work, collective decision making, planning, and collective evaluation (Harnecker 2003). MST thus encourages solidarity, discipline, camaraderie, collective work and leadership, and responsibility and love for the people’s cause (Harnecker 2003).

Mirroring MST organization, students are organized into study groups. Each group elects a representative who participates on the coordinating body together with the teachers and coordinators (Plummer 2008; Tarlau 2013b). In addition, students are responsible for maintaining the school—cleaning, organizing the library, agricultural work to supply food for the school—and generally dedicate five hours for study and three hours for these tasks daily (Plummer 2008; Tarlau 2013a, 2013b). Students are required to participate in an assessment where they critically evaluate the participation of others. They also have the opportunity to meet in general assemblies and discuss issues pertinent to their education (Plummer 2008; Tarlau 2013a).

Thus, MST schools not only function on the level of ideology, but are also the sphere of material reality (Tarlau 2013b). Students are encouraged to engage in both intellectual and manual labor to create a “new stratum” (Gramsci 1971) of farmer intellectuals in the rural areas (Tarlau 2013b). This rejection of separation between intellectual and manual labor originates from MST’s reliance upon Soviet educators such as Moisey Pistrak (2000) and Anton Makarenko (2001). Cooperation is also an important component to education in MST schools, consistent with Makarenko’s (2001 and 2004) educational philosophy: “Most of the time students learn the culture of individualism, . . . it is necessary to have education intentionally based on the culture of cooperation and the creative incorporation of lessons about the history of the collective organization of work” (MST 1999a, p. 8). This is an important educational component as it teaches the movement’s ideology of collective cooperation to future sem-terras.

In this manner, the schools’ curriculum is also tailored to emphasize the movement’s ideologies by including the works of revolutionary thinkers such as Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, Mao Zedong, Antonio Gramsci,

Simon Bolivar, Ernesto Che Guevara, and Mahatma Gandhi (Tarlau 2012). Practice also follows Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Schoolbooks use many analogies to reinforce the movement's ideology: for example, how one stick breaks easily, whereas many sticks together do not (Cerioli and Broilo 2003; Kröger 2011). The school classroom is used to reinforce *mística*, which is a politicizing practice involving mystical and emotional rituals, an important mechanism that perpetuates the movement's ideology by celebrating the movement while educating its members through dance, video, theater, songs, chants, and symbols (Wolford 2010a; Kröger 2011; Tarlau 2013a). In MST settlements, schools practice *mística* daily, both at the beginning and end of the school period, through artistic performances produced and re-created by the students.<sup>16</sup> The use of *mística* is a main component of the MST national pedagogy and a creative way to build the community and inspire members from an early age to fully embrace the movement's cause for social change.

The schools have proved to be effective mechanisms in the mobilization of the landless people. They help shape the sem-terra identity, providing commitment to the movement's ideology, deeper understanding of the social and political issues at hand, skills and capacities that benefit their communities, and promoting militancy. Traditionally, educational institutions in Brazil were not created for the working class and were never thought of as part of a social transformation (Camini 2009). The MST schools, on the other hand, are integrally connected to the struggle for social reform, while providing education for the working class supporting their struggle for rights.

#### EDUCATIONAL CONDITIONS: PNERA 2004

The PNERA survey was conducted in 2004 with the goal of better understanding the educational reality in landless settlements, and revealed that the level of education in all settlements remained very low. When the survey was taken, a quarter of the settlers had never attended school and 38 percent of the sem-terras indicated they had only elementary school as the highest level of educational attainment. MST had a higher proportion of middle-school students, but the proportion in high school or college was very small both for MST and non-MST settlers (Table 5). As a result, the illiteracy level is high among the landless—25.8 percent for MST and 27.2 percent for non-MST—while the national illiteracy level was 8.9 percent in 2004 (IBGE 2004). This is not surprising; the public educational system in Brazil today is extremely feeble. In rural areas, the conditions are worse due to complete neglect by the federal government. However, PNERA also shows that only 2.6 percent of MST leaders and 4.3 percent of non-MST leaders were illiterate. The reason lies in recruitment. A study in Rio Grande do Sul found that the entire leadership of the MST was of colono origin (Ondetti 2008). Although caboclos and brasileiros are a significant part of the movement base, they tend to be absent from leadership positions. Contributing factors include the strong social ties in

TABLE 5—EDUCATIONAL LEVEL OF LANDLESS SETTLERS (IN %)

EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	MST	OTHER	Z-SCORE
Never went to school; do not read or write	25.82	27.18	6.80**
Never went to school; but can read and write	2.14	5.03	29.70**
Early childhood education	6.97	7.18	1.81
Elementary education	38.13	38.49	1.65
Middle School	19.70	14.49	32.80**
High School	5.10	5.60	4.84**
Technical School	0.41	0.22	8.90**
College	0.18	0.41	8.10**
Other (adult education/literacy education)	1.56	1.42	2.60**
Total	100.00	100.00	

*Note:* Z-scores are calculated between MST and other settlements; \*\* significant at 0.01.

*Source:* PNERA (2007).

colono communities and their relatively high level of education, which encourages community involvement and favors the development of leadership skills (Ondetti 2008).

The results indicate that despite MST achievements and its emphasis on education, settlement schools need vast improvement. According to the MST community's leaders, 42.4 percent of the settlements had no school on site, while nearly 43 percent had only one school inside the settlement. However, only 14.6 percent of MST settlements did not have a school on site or close to the settlement. The vast majority of MST settlers considered the quality of the school as a whole to be "good" or "average." Likewise, only 37.6 percent disagreed with the statement, "The settlement schools offer good conditions for the student's learning experience," compared to 47.4 percent of leaders in non-MST settlements. About 72.1 percent of MST leaders and 75.7 percent of leaders in non-MST settlements agreed, or strongly agreed, that if it was not for the community, the schools would not exist and that the establishment of the schools was an achievement of the community.

Most landless settlements only offered elementary education. Only 9 percent of MST settlements offered high school education. This is problematic. Those wishing to continue their education must commute to a nearby city that provides such facilities or move closer to the school and away from their families and community. Consequently, many young settlers do not pursue higher levels of education. PNERA indicates that educational exclusion is manifested most clearly among youngsters between fifteen and nineteen years of age for both MST and other settlements. For this age group, only 69.4 percent of MST youngsters were in school, compared to 68.3 percent in non-MST settlements, even though compulsory elementary education was universalized for both groups: 97 percent of children between seven and ten years of age attended school in MST settlements and 96.4 percent in non-MST settlements, while

TABLE 6—SCHOOL ATTENDANCE BY EDUCATIONAL LEVEL (IN PERCENT)

EDUCATIONAL LEVEL	MST	OTHER	Z-SCORE
Middle School (5 <sup>th</sup> to 8 <sup>th</sup> grade)	33.85	28.01	21.79**
High School	8.10	7.39	4.59**
Professional education (basic)	0.50	0.08	10.65**
Professional education (technical)	0.83	0.23	11.80**
Adult education	7.03	6.30	5.04**
Special education	0.45	0.08	59.88**
University	1.66	0.73	12.95**

Note: Z-scores are calculated between MST and other settlements; \*\* significant at 0.01.

Source: PNERA (2007).

96.5 percent of adolescents between eleven and fourteen were in school in MST settlements, and 94.8 percent in non-MST settlements. MST settlements had significantly more students who were currently attending middle school, high school, professional and technical school, adult education, and college than non-MST settlements, but school attendance declined significantly among those who are twenty years old or older, only 1.66 percent of MST settlers were in university and 0.73 percent of non-MST. This differential result is significant at  $p < 0.001$  (Table 6).

When assessing the quality of the education, MST settlers perceived it to be much higher than non-MST settlers in many different ways. For every single school aspect, a higher proportion of MST settlers assigned “good quality” in comparison to non-MST settlers. MST leaders evaluated the quality of schools more critically than the settlers and indicated that quality of the schools’ infrastructure needed to be improved. MST settlers on the other hand, were more likely to assign “good” than to choose “poor,” in contrast to MST leaders. Leaders are, of course, more likely to be aware of the challenges that must be addressed, whereas settlers feel that their lives have improved and are more likely to evaluate their conditions in more favorable terms (Heredia and others, 2003). Non-MST leaders also were more critical than settlers and were likely to assign “poor” scores for most school attributes. The implication is that if movement leaders lead, further educational progress can be expected.

## CONCLUSION

What is clear from the successes of MST is that effective community organization can materially affect the welfare of even the poorest of the poor, but goals are critical: Brazil’s non-MST movements focus on material welfare whereas MST adds a major emphasis upon education. As a result, MST settlers not only have superior living conditions and possess more material goods, they also benefit from a better quality of education than non-MST settlers.

To goals must be added the means to achieve them. MST's bottom-to-top organization and the characteristics of its members have been central to the movement's progress. Genesis in the south yielded settlers who differ from members of other landless movements, a self-perceived higher status group focusing on perpetuating the movement through education, but also advocating social issues that are national in scope and go beyond the struggle for agrarian reform. The greater concentration of non-MST settlements in the north and northeast with lesser goals has, on the other hand, had the effect of perpetuating long-standing regional differences.

The educational process and its content are critical. While MST is tailoring students to remain in the community and to embrace the movement's ideology, there are national consequences. Once students graduate, they are relocated within the movement to sectors where their skills can best be employed. The goal is to educate young members capable of maintaining a self-sustainable community. But although the education available in the settlements has been instrumental in molding landless children to become devoted *sem-terrinhas* (little landless persons) via the embedded nature of the curriculum to which they are exposed (Caldart 2004), the resulting capacity-building mechanisms also are yielding future leaders who will not only continue the expansion of the landless movement, but also begin to address larger national issues. The effect for Brazil as a whole may be profound: growing numbers of young people committed to collective values rather than the individualism which is characteristic of the modern urban-industrial state will soon want their ideals to be projected to the level of the state. The fundamental polarity between individualism and collectivism will intensify (Triandis and Gelfand 2011). A more profound capitalist-socialist schism may well be in Brazil's future, perhaps with a repetition of alternating democratic and authoritarian governments, or more likely with a more lasting leftward slide that will redirect Brazilian development and change the pattern of growth.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> PNERA 2004 is the only survey with microdata available online that can be analyzed statistically. Other studies such as Sparovek (2003), Leite and others (2004), INCRA (2010), and Simmons and others (2010) do not provide microdata available for comparative analysis or robustness checks, although they present similar results to PNERA. An important difference is that these studies analyze all INCRA settlements without making a distinction between MST and non-MST settlements. The majority of studies on the MST, such as Simmons (2005), Hannah (2009), and Pacheco (2009), are based on participant observation, extensive interviews, or document/event analysis.

<sup>2</sup> In all, twenty-nine social movements are listed. Besides the MST, the most prominent social movements leading land occupation include the Federação dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura, Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura, Comissão Pastoral da Terra, Coordenação Estadual de Trabalhadores Assentados, Movimento Terra Trabalho e Liberdade, Central Única dos Trabalhadores, Movimento dos Pequenos Agricultores, Movimento de Libertação dos Sem Terra, and Movimento Terra Trabalho e Liberdade.

<sup>3</sup> The exceptions are Amazonas, Acre, Roraima, and Amapá.

<sup>4</sup> For current statistics and further information on the MST movement, visit the movement's website at [www.mst.org.br](http://www.mst.org.br) or the Friends of MST website at [www.mstbrazil.org/index.html](http://www.mstbrazil.org/index.html).



<sup>5</sup> See Wolford (2010b) for more information on the history of INCRA and its importance to the MST.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Branford and Rocha (2002), Wright and Wolford (2003), Ondetti (2008), Wolford (2010a), and Tarlau (2013a).

<sup>7</sup> Because the teacher's survey does not make a distinction between MST and non-MST schools, we only analyzed the leaders and families surveys.

<sup>8</sup> A previous study by Carter and Carvalho in 2009 estimated that 134,440 families had won land through MST land occupations since 2006.

<sup>9</sup> This number was drawn from the leaders' questionnaire. Leaders were asked whether the settlement had an organized social movement and the code for said movement.

<sup>10</sup> For more on MST's identity, see Wolford (2010a).

<sup>11</sup> Caboclo is a person of mixed indigenous Brazilian and European descent, while brasileiro is a person of mixed descent (indigenous, African, and European).

<sup>12</sup> When established in 1998, PRONERA was a federal program to provide youth and adults living in settlements with more access to schooling. A major component of this program was the creation of university courses specifically for settlement students. Today, PRONERA is defined as a public policy of the federal government whose main goal is to provide human development through education (PRONERA 2012). Some researchers continue to define it as a federal program (see Tarlau 2013b).

<sup>13</sup> For an extensive discussion of the Itinerant Schools, see Camini (2009) and Moraes and Witcek (2014).

<sup>14</sup> There are about 14,000 students living in settlements who have received their bachelor's degrees since PRONERA began in 1998. More than forty public universities have accredited PRONERA courses (Tarlau 2013a).

<sup>15</sup> For an extensive discussion on the establishing of schools in settlements, see Tarlau (2013a).

<sup>16</sup> For more on the use of *mística* in MST schools, see Tarlau (2013b).

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