9 The Movement of Landless Rural Workers in Brazil

INTRODUCTION

In 1973, under the directorship of Robert McNamara, the World Bank ‘discovered’ that one quarter of the world’s population, 800 million people, were ‘poor’, unable to meet their basic needs; and that close to half of these were in a state of absolute poverty or indigence. In this context, which included conditions of economic crisis in the rich industrialized countries of the OECD, and mounting pressures and movements for radical social reform and revolution in much of the South, the Bank formulated a global strategy to combat and alleviate poverty. This strategy, targeted at the basic needs of the world’s poor, was operationalized, and to some extent implemented, with measures designed to increase or ensure the viability of small scale enterprises with a high employment and income generating capacity; increase the productivity of producers and workers; improve the social infrastructure of health and education; support government social and income redistribution programs (more to increase social consumption than provide a social safety net) and even, if and where political conditions were available, to promote more radical (structural) forms of change (land reform, and so on).

In 1991, almost 20 years later, and after a decade of neoliberal free market policies and structural adjustments to changes in the world economy the World Bank, together with its sister IFIs (the IMF, the IDB, and so on) has come full circle in a re-discovery of poverty – in the discovery that its master program of Structural Adjustment Loans (SALs) not only increased widespread social inequalities in the distribution of wealth and income but exacerbated the world-wide problem of poverty, extending it to an estimated 44 per cent of the world’s population In 1980 the scope of poverty was estimated at 40 per cent of the world’s population, increasing to 44 per cent in 1989, and a staggering 62 per cent in 1993 (calculations by CEPAL, cited in Latin America Special Reports (SP-92-5), October 1992).

This ‘new understanding’ (see Finance and Development, December 1992), led once again to the formulation of policy measures designed in theory if not in practice to ‘protect’ the most vulnerable groups among the world’s poor, those who have had to bear the brunt of the inevitable social
costs of the global process of structural adjustment and market oriented reforms unleashed over the past decade.

The context of this ‘new understanding’ include:

- the recognition, in the words of a more recent President of the Bank, that the transfer of more than $230 billion from the South to the North in debt repayment, profit repatriation, licensing and royalty payments, and so on, in the 1980s was ‘probably premature… (and too much)’;
- the restoration in some countries (Chile, Mexico, Argentina, and so on) of growth in output and exports, macro-economic balance, political stability and other favorable conditions for foreign direct investment and the resumption of capital flows;
- the existence of large pools of capital poised for renewed productive and speculative investment, and loans for new ventures in the South;
- the dramatic spread and deepening of social inequalities in the distribution of income and an increase in the absolute numbers of those living in poverty;
- as the result of the latter, sometimes manifest but considerable latent forces of social discontent and political protest, with the clear potential for eruption in the form of political protest and mobilizations of movements for radical social change; and
- in response to, and in anticipation of, these developments, the design and widespread implementation by governments in Latin America and elsewhere of a New Social Policy (NSP), and a Social Investment, targeted at the poor and their communities.60

It is not within the scope of this chapter to evaluate either the impact of conditions generated by SAPs or the responses made to them by IFIs and governments in the region (Latin America) – to ameliorate the social costs disproportionately borne by the poor and to mute their social discontent and to stave off the organization and mobilization of their political response. However, these conditions and responses provide an important part of the context in which different organizations in the popular sectors of Latin America’s civil society are pursuing their struggle against the dominant neoliberal agenda.

In this chapter, we will briefly examine the struggle of one of these organizations in the current Brazilian conjuncture. The focus of this examination is the Movimento (dos Trabalhadores Rurais) Sem Terra (MST), an organization of landless rural workers that has been struggling since 1984 for land, land reform, and broader social – and political – changes needed to consolidate their victories and gains. In the current conjuncture, the MST represents an effective political response of a significant rural