

The International Peasant Movement and the Struggle for Environmental Justice in Brazil: An Interview with Cleber Folgado from Movimento de Pequenos Agricultores (MPA), Vía Campesina, Brazil

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Cecilia Carrizo Sineiro and Mauricio Berger (C.C./M.B.): What environmental injustice can you identify in Brazil today?

Cleber Folgado (C.F.)¹: Since the occupancy of our territories, Latin America is seen as a place to extract the necessary goods to guarantee the capital structure. From their point of view, they are extracting “natural resources,” we call them “people’s natural goods.”

This way of thinking and acting has generated what today is called agro-business, which is an alliance between transnational companies, capitalist landowners, and financial capital for the exploitation and expropriation of these assets.

For example, at the central region of Brazil in the states of Goiás, Mato Grosso (which is called the Brazilian *Cerrado*) a significant land clearing is taking place for monocultures, especially sugar cane for biofuel production.

In this way, a mechanism is being developed to take out all the farmers who were historically there producing food while ensuring the environment’s welfare and to implement this model of monoculture.

The agro-business model produces a large concentration of land, expels farmers, and uses heavy machinery destroying the soil. Moreover, the intensive use of agrochemicals pollutes water, soil, and towns. It’s a production to export. We think of environmental injustice and social injustice as the same thing as a result of this model.

C.C./M.B.: How do you organize to resist this model?

C.F.: Today, the main organization we have is La Vía Campesina Brasil (the international peasant movement) as social movements that work and guarantee the fight.

El Movimiento Sin Tierra (Brazil’s Landless Rural Workers’ Movement) organizes the workers towards having/owning the land. El Movimiento de Pequenos Agricultores (the Movement of Small Farmers), a group I belong to, organizes people who already have the land to resist. El Movimiento de las Mujeres Campesinas (the Rural Women’s Movement) works on the subject of structure and women’s role in agriculture to break with the patriarchal organization. There is also a pastoral rural youth movement constantly working so that the youth can identify themselves with the peasantry. The communication mechanisms are conducting a very strong process to discredit and demoralize the farmers, so the youth is losing its peasant identity. We believe it is necessary to resignify the youth’s role on the farm land and healthy food production.

There are other associations and resistance initiatives such as agronomy students’ and forest engineers’ initiatives. This resistance is organized in two fields.

One of those is the ideological field. How can we raise awareness of the model? How to see the capitalist system and its proposals to the peasantry? We organize the resistance based on the understanding of these aspects. How to understand and combat the agro-business from a conceptual point of view? Its proponents say agro-business is the most developed and technologically advanced model. We think we should contest that concept of development. Where? Where the people are suffering, where they are exploited and the peasants need to leave their land, or the environment is contaminated by a large amount of pesticides. Then: development for whom, for what?

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Concrete actions represent the other field of action: the healthy food production, clean food, based on agroecology. Actions completed to establish the relationship of peasants with the city. The urban population has no clue about the peasants' struggle. We have to build relations with city workers based on food production and cooperation in the fight against transnational companies. Working in the production and distribution of food, that is what we are doing together as *Vía Campesina*.

C.C./M.B.: How do you see the integration with other fights in Latin America and with the summits on climate change? How do you see those networks, those solidarity actions on a transnational level?

C.F.: La *Vía Campesina* has played a historic role as a protest instrument for peasants and working class in general.

There is a huge effort to articulate the protests currently taking place, that sometimes are made invisible. La *Vía Campesina* recognizes there are many protests going on in the continent and ensures their articulation.

With regard to the climate change and the rights of Mother Earth, I think we started to move forward in Cochabamba² with the introduction of scientific findings explaining the global warming issue. Today we are able to understand what would happen if the temperature increased two degrees, to know that the damages to the Mother Earth would be irreversible, such as 30% of the species would be in danger of disappearing altogether. It's very important to see that la *Vía Campesina* has posed these problems out there.

Regarding the connections with other networks, last year the Congress of La Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo-*Vía Campesina* (the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations) took place, and it was very important for this process of getting to know each other and analyzing our common situation, to identify our enemies and our potentials in order to draw up some fight strategies.

C.C./M.B.: About the work in Brazil—you work with the state health institutions and justice administration institutions, don't you?

C.F.: Yes, on the one hand we make proposals to the government and the institutions and, on the other hand, we confront those government agencies and institutions.

We know the State is a ruling class instrument in a capitalist society. Because of this, and regardless the kind of government that is ruling, whether progressive or not, it is hard for us to advance on a comprehensive agrarian reform and public policies in favor of the peasants.

It is also necessary to put pressure with occupation of roads and public lands. All those actions support and

push the negotiations for our proposals to advance from an institutional point of view.

We have short-term as well as long-term proposals for which it is necessary to fight. However, if we look at Latin America in perspective we can see a lot of improvement. For example, Ecuador's Constitution includes clauses on food sovereignty protection and natural goods protections. There is progress.

In general, what we propose to the institutions and as government policies is as meaningful as the confrontations themselves, and it depends on the joining forces of all organizations that are engaged in that fight. When you get the intended results, the achievements reach our comrades at the base and from there they may also have gains from an institutional point of view.

C.C./M.B.: In respect of the fight against pesticides in Brazil, there is a strong commitment on the part of workers and doctors regarding the problems caused by these pesticides. Also within the justice system, the Attorney General's office works on behalf of those affected.

C.F.: Our campaign against pesticides is supported by a set of organizations, people, and institutions. One of the main allies in this fight is La Agencia Nacional de Vigilancia Sanitaria (ANVISA) (the National Health Surveillance Agency), a governmental agency that is part of the Ministry of Health. This agency authorizes the pesticides to be used within the country.

In fact, there are authorities and institutions that support us but we face different problems. For example, at the Attorney General's office there are areas that make more progress than others. The key is to understand that even though there are people willing to contribute, the State's bourgeois structure has been designed for inaction, within certain limits.

Inside ANVISA, some committed investigators are presenting proposals from the agency that are later blocked by other structures of the Ministry of Health. A clear example: when colleagues contaminated by pesticides at work turn to the health system, usually doctors do not issue a certificate stating the link with pesticides. There are lots of people with problems originated by pesticides but doctors will never certify it; people that have died or have chronic and severe problems will never be issued a medical certificate. This problem is related to the fact that doctors are responsible for what is certified and generates a lot of difficulties.

One important thing we have achieved in Mato Grosso is an investigation conducted by the Mato Grosso University and coordinated by Professor Wanderlai Pignati. This investigation has detected the presence of pesticides in breast milk. From 62 women that participated in the study, 100% showed pesticides residues. Some colleagues had residue of pesticides the use of which has been banned in the country. It is an investigation on the effects of the agro-business model that has been greatly recognized in the country. This investigation led to a bigger recognition within public institutions and new ways of fighting pesticides, even to think of new legislation for this issue.

²World People's Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth, celebrated in Cochabamba, Bolivia, April 2010. <<http://pwccc.wordpress.com/>>.

C.C./M.B.: In Argentina we have the same problem: the consequences of this model and the fact that most of the workers are working off the book. We are trying to establish a 2,000-meter-protected zone around towns. How are you working from the campaign?

C.F.: Pesticides have been a historical problem in Brazil and have gained territory in the last years. Brazil is the largest pesticide consumer in the world, reaching two kilos per capita. During 2010, more than 30 organizations united to establish joint initiatives with respect to pesticides.

We organized a national seminar where we discussed historical and current topics related to economic, social, environmental, and health issues. We also discussed different fight perspectives and we decided to create a Campaña Permanente contra los Agrotóxicos y por la Vida (Permanent Campaign Against Pesticides and to Defend Life).

It is a permanent campaign because we recognize it is not just today's fight and that it is not going to end in one year or sooner. We know it is a long-term fight that requires us to get ourselves organized in different aspects. Moreover, it is not only about public denunciation. The campaign is about denouncing the model and also about announcing and formulating alternatives. For example, agroecology, production of healthy food, a different and viable production manner, concrete experiences that have proved to be possible.

We divide the campaign initiatives in three areas. One refers to the social actions from the organizations, which make those coexisting with the pesticides but who cannot see the problematic dimension about them. By denouncing and discussing the solutions, we make people be more conscious about the problem/raise people's awareness.

A second line of actions includes legal and institutional initiatives. Much of it has to do with what you are doing in Argentina and what La Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Rurales Indígenas (CONAMURI) (the National Coordination of Rural and Indigenous Women) is doing in Paraguay. It's about devising a new set of actions from a legal point of view to prohibit the use of pesticides. For example, in San Pablo, the House of Representatives has passed a law banning the sale of those pesticides which did not meet technical control requirements; or what happened in Santa Fe,³ which was a very big achievement. It's about thinking of new municipal legislation to protect communities affected by aerial spraying; of new legal and institutional initiatives to control the use of pesticides. We are working with ANVISA to stop the renewal of pesticides licenses in Brazil that have proven to cause health problems, and to pass new legislation to ban their use and marketing.

A lot of pesticides that have been banned in China and Europe are being used here, and also pesticides that have

been prohibited here are being used anyway. We are working in the building of stronger mechanisms from the legal and institutional point of view to stop the utilization of these pesticides.

The third focus is on society initiatives: denouncing these problems and alerting the consumers they are eating food contaminated with pesticides. ANVISA's database shows that the levels of pesticides in some foodstuff are 80% above the percentage allowed.

The idea is to link city people willing to eat healthy food with farmers that produce them by creating popular markets and fairs. We want to present alternatives to those who are against pesticides, offering them places where to buy healthy food. They are initially small initiatives but can grow in importance in the medium and long term.

C.C./M.B.: Could you explain more in detail the work of Vía Campesina in relation to food sovereignty and in opposition to the capitalist food security proposal?

C.F.: What the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations and the World Trade Organization propose regarding food security is absurd. They think that the quantity of food is the only concerning topic. The concept of security is based on quantity; it doesn't care about the origin of those provisions, how they are produced, or under what social circumstances the workers producing them are.

The major initiative of Vía Campesina is to build the concept of food sovereignty. We think of this food issue—food production—as something that has to do not only with the farmers that are producing it but also with the living conditions of those farmers, with the final conditions under which this food will reach the consumers, and with the consumers' conditions.

This concept will question the capitalist society structure, which supports the exploitation of human by human. Further, this concept will guarantee food for workers, produced under good and clean environment conditions and in connection with nature. There is no need for total destruction, for deforestation. The idea is to produce in a natural environment, just in the same way as peasants have been historically doing it.

In Vía Campesina there is a group of colleagues, a work team, who worry about healthy food production to feed the workers. I think this is one of the main axes within the national and international initiatives. Looking at the capitalist system crisis, which is a slow and advancing crisis that has not ended, we can predict we are going to have food problems as well as catastrophes. Look at Japan's disaster. People are having food issues and the country does not have food sovereignty; there is no food production quantity or quality.

It is necessary to advance not only in this concept idea but also in putting it into practice. Our communities should be able to produce food and place it among consumers as an instrument of urban-rural alliance against the capitalist system, which provides the structural conditions for maintaining this injustice.

³First Argentine verdict declaring a free-pesticide zone after a group of neighbors presented a writ of amparo in San Jorge, Santa Fe, Argentina.

C.C./M.B.: *Vía Campesina* is advancing in this initiative because it is doing not only on-site work, ensuring production within a food sovereign frame, but also because it is directly intervening in the world's political and financial structure that considers food a financial asset and not something leading to health, growth and happiness. It is important to highlight the climatic justice concept and the WTO's positions. Could you clarify these positions and lines of action for this year?

C.F.: In relation to climatic justice, the capitalist system has imposed on us the logic of competition, of progress, and unlimited growing, but this idea is completely separated and far away from the idea of what human beings and nature should expect.

The capitalist system establishes the idea of domination that turns everything into a commodity: water, soil, human beings, ancestral cultures, biodiversity itself. Everything becomes merchandise within this social structure.

In thinking about justice from an environmental point of view, it is necessary to resignify what peasants did historically. Peasants are nature guardians around the world. Under the capitalism structure, Mother Earth becomes a source of raw material and human beings have been turned into means of productions and consumers of what is produced.

What are we thinking to do for the next period? That the organizations of all countries can articulate beyond us, beyond *Vía Campesina*. We need to relate to other organizations, to other parts of society that are somehow fighting against this social model while looking for their place in the world.

We need to fight at a continental level, thinking of how to unify the fights around food production and the protection of natural goods, and relate everything to the fight against the capitalist society structure. It has to do with October 12, a date that each year

becomes a stronger reminder of Latin American occupation, of the territory of the people who were already here when the Spaniards arrived, and as the date of food sovereignty.

C.C./M.B.: About the discussions on biodiversity and patenting processes, nature comodification: is *Vía Campesina* working on that?

(C.F.): There are a number of proposals to deal with the issue of life patenting, to stop its transformation into a commodity. In Brazil, we are trying to fight it back even in institutional spaces, where the release of transgenic and other environmental issues are discussed. People from *Vía Campesina* and other associate organizations are confronting this problem. On the one hand, they are working from a legal and institutional point of view for the defense of natural assets as the heritage of those people at the service of humanity; on the other hand, they are working to raise people's awareness. Society at large has no knowledge of capital initiatives to seize life and natural assets. Several government institutions and committees are being financed by large transnational corporations. For example, EMBRAPA, the Brazilian Agricultural Research Company, receives a large amount of resources from Monsanto, one of the six largest companies dominating the pesticides world market. There is also a clear link with drug companies. If a governmental institution in charge of investigating production receives money from a transnational company, we have a situation in which, as we say here, the one who pays the band chooses the music.

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