
Land grabbing: Towards the unification of struggles

On April 17, 1996, 19 landless rural workers were brutally murdered by the police during a peaceful demonstration for agrarian reform in the state of Pará, in Brazil's Amazon region. If you visit the site of the massacre today, you will find a circle of 19 burnt Brazil nut tree trunks, which form a small forest. As well as serving as a memorial to the workers who lost their lives and the violence unleashed against them, the burnt trunks also symbolize the people's resistance and struggle against the violation of their rights, as well as the rainforest's resistance against deforestation.

Brazil nut trees are massive trees found in the Amazon region on lands where the rainforest has been almost entirely destroyed, a common practice in Pará. However, these same trees have difficulty surviving when they are not surrounded by an intact forest. In other words, they too demand the recovery and rescue of the forest that ensures the survival and well-being of local communities, also largely destroyed in many places in Pará.

Today, near the site of the massacre, thousands of people – comrades of the 19 who were murdered in 1996 – live in the “April 17 Settlement”. They have succeeded in exchanging a life of suffering and poverty for a life with a piece of land to till and feed their families, regaining their dignity.

This story, like so many others from places around the world where people are struggling and suffering the violation of their rights, needs to be remembered in order to serve as an inspiration to others. April 17 has been declared by La Via Campesina as the International Day of Peasant Struggle. More recently, it has also become a reference for the struggle against the process known as “land grabbing” in English, “concentração de terras” in Brazil, “usurpação de terras” in Mozambique, “acaparamiento de tierras” in Spanish, and “l'acaparement des terres” in French. It is a phenomenon in which companies, investment funds and financial markets in general are acquiring vast areas of land in countries of Africa, Latin America and Asia for a variety of different uses, including large-scale monoculture plantations, mining, tourism, hydroelectric power plants, and food production for export, among others.

This is not a new process; quite the contrary. What is new is the speed and size of these land grabs, which are directly linked to different strategies through which the capitalist system is seeking a solution to the crises it is facing. But as professor David Harvey points out, capitalism never solves its crises, it merely moves them around: seeking out new means of accumulation and speculation in the pursuit of profits, increasing the suffering of a great many people.

The current situation poses a number of challenges for struggles against all forms of land grabbing in the countries of the South:

- Greater articulation of these struggles with a new common denominator: the struggle against land grabbing, against the privatization of common lands used collectively by local, indigenous and traditional communities. It is the same struggle as these peoples' struggle for the recognition of their rights, although it reinforces the importance of joint action. We must also keep in mind the fisherfolk suffering from the advance of “sea grabbing” by private companies. While corporations and national

governments generally seek to divide communities who fight back, the phenomenon of land grabbing alerts us to the need for peoples to join together in their different struggles.

- Greater understanding of how the different struggles are interlinked and interconnected, if we observe the phenomenon of land grabbing.
- Greater understanding of how the proposed “green economy”, a central theme at the Rio+20 conference, is a new “opportunity” for the actors behind land grabbing to continue exploiting and grabbing not only land, but also the air, water and seas, whether to destroy them or to preserve nature as a means of supposedly “offsetting” this destruction.

This is why we must mobilize around a resounding NO to the green economy, to land grabbing, to “Earth grabbing” in general, extending to the land, air and water. And at the same time, we must defend the right of local communities to maintain and recover control of the areas on which they depend for their survival, on land or in the sea, not only in the countries of the South, but in those of the North as well.

- The need to strengthen support for and show our solidarity with the thousands of communities and peoples who at this very moment are struggling to defend their territories, rivers, forests other valuable ecosystems on which they depend for their survival.

For these reasons, we joined the call made by La Via Campesina to “all of its members and allies, fisher-folk movements, agricultural workers organizations, students and environmental groups, women's organizations and social justice movements to organize actions around the world on April 17 in order to display massive popular resistance to land grabbing and highlight the struggle against corporate control over land and natural resources.”

And together with La Via Campesina, we stress the need to unite and fight in order to:

- Stop land grabbing and reclaim grabbed land – the land should be in the hands of tillers.
- Implement genuine agrarian reform in order to bring about social justice in rural areas.
- End the control over billions of people's lives exercised by a few investors and transnational companies.
- Strengthen the agriculture production model based on family farming and food sovereignty.

We are confident that the death of those 19 peasants in Pará in 1996 will continue to inspire us in the resistance struggle to stop land grabbing, to maintain and reclaim control of territories, and to recover forests and other ecosystems, to ensure the well-being of the peoples who depend on them, today and in the future.