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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

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## **RAIZ FORTE (Strong Roots)**

The Landless Worker's Movement in Brazil  
Directed by Maisa Mendonca (2003: Global Exchange)  
Portuguese with English subtitles (41 minutes)  
Transcribed by Darrell Moen

**Caption:** The Landless Movement (MST) started in 1985 in response to the unequal distribution of land in Brazil, where 46% of all agricultural land is controlled by 1% of the people. The big landowners prioritize cattle ranching, which destroys the environment.

While Brazilian land lies fallow, 4.8 million families have no land, and 35 million Brazilians live below the poverty line. Brazil is one of the few countries in the world that has never had agrarian reform.

The MST is the most important social movement in the country. It has won 16 million hectares of land for 300,000 families. It has built thousands of food production cooperatives and schools.

The MST struggle is grounded in Constitutional law, which decrees that land must fulfill a social function. Today, 100,000 families prepare to occupy land in order to feed themselves. They live in plastic tents, waiting for the chance to work their piece of Brazilian soil.

**Folote (Pasmado Camp, Pernambuco):** Agrarian reform is on paper, not in our hands yet. We'll only be satisfied when the land is in our hands. They never paid for this land. Did Jesus leave a document that makes them the owners of this land? The owner of this land is first God, and then us.

**Crispim (Marajozinho Settlement, Pernambuco):** All I had was an old iron cart, my friend. My life in the city was hunting for cardboard. One day a person from the Landless Movement came saying, "Let's go to the land."

**Luisa (Marajozinho Settlement, Pernambuco):** We were living under a tree, wondering what to do. I met someone from the Landless Movement who was organizing a land occupation. He invited me to join the Movement. I had no other choice.

**Sonia (March 26 Camp, Para):** I used to work as a maid. I cleaned houses and washed clothes so I could get by with my five kids in the city. I'd seen the Landless Movement on TV. Very pretty, eh? Then I met that guy and I thought the best solution for me would be to go along and get land.

**Pascoal (March 26 Camp, Para):** This is our lunch my child - and it's very good! My wife over there likes this [fishing]. If she catches something we will have fish, okra and pumpkin. That will be lunch. She's from Maranhao and I'm from Ceara.

**Rosa (Bonito Camp, Pernambuco):** Ever since I was small I wished to have some land. When the guy told us there was land I went to get my things. I said, "Hey, let's go everyone!"

**Pedro (March 26 Camp, Para):** Before I know the Landless Movement I said, "They're hooligans!" Now I don't talk like that. I came and I felt their strength. Many people left, but I'm still here.

**Unidentified man:** Here's my wife, my sister, my nephews. This is our life and our home! Until God says otherwise. I only ask God to give happiness to all my friends. God bless us all!

**Tiago (March 26 Camp, Para):** This is a farm. The government will give us the land. When it's planted, when the crops grow and then, they'll give us the land.

**MST representatives:** Hello! Good afternoon. May I come in? Do you have a dog? We're here to invite you to a meeting of the Landless Movement right down there. We are representing the Landless Movement. If you want a little piece of land we're going to do some occupations around here. We'll explain how it works. It's Sunday at 4:00 pm - hope to see you there.

I said to my wife, "I'm going to end up dying and leaving you nothing." She said, "That's rubbish. Are you going to join the Landless Movement?" I said, "I'm going" and she said, "Go, I support you."

**Bartolomeu (Campo Verde Settlement, Pernambuco):** Giving land to people was something new. I said, "I'm going to that meeting." I was hooked from that day on.

**MST organizer:** The change the Landless Movement can offer you is occupying the land, placing it with you, and you produce on it. You'll go through what I went through. I was in a canvas tent, but today I have a good house. I don't depend on anyone. I live my life with my children. You need to go home and think about it.

**James (MST State Office, Pernambuco):** That's the beauty of it. You take a person who has no prospects for the future, with a huge and hungry family, and they

get this thing about rights in their head. You talk, propose an occupation, propose leaving behind their apathy and fighting for a larger goal. That's the spirit.

**MST organizer:** Come on, let's go to the meeting. The meeting is now - come on! Bring your personal belongings. A team will come to take down the tents. Get your belongings - you have 15 minutes.

**Unidentified mother:** Get your knapsack. Let's hit the road, child!

**MST organizer:** Today is the day we've all been waiting for - the occupation of the land. Every poor Brazilian dreams of it. We're here with our sickles, hoes, machetes. There's not a single gun [among us]. Violence won't get us anywhere. But with our work tools we can plant and harvest the food that will feed our kids.

**Jane (Para):** Every time there's an occupation, there's waiting [for the right moment].

**Occupiers chanting:** Occupy! Resist! Produce!

**MST organizer:** We've stepped onto the Promised Land. You can consider yourselves owners of this land. We have to be well organized in order to keep it. It's ours now, but we have to be very sure. I want to know if you really want to stay here.

**Maria (Tamarana Camp, Parana):** Finally! We've been waiting so long. If this camp fails, God forbid, I'll [end up] living under a bridge. I have nowhere else to go.

**Levino (Tamarana Camp, Parana):** We're here to give support We're already settled [elsewhere]. It's a current that can't be stopped. Other people helped us who already had their own land. Now, it's our turn to help those who need land. It's an endless battle. That's it, it's an endless current [that's getting stronger]. As long as there is land, we'll fight for it.

**Vitor (Santa Maria Settlement, Parana):** We only go to land about to be disappropriated. There are rich people who have 7 thousand to 10 thousand acres of unproductive land! [It's just sitting idle while people are hungry] Is that fair? Brazil is very rich, but the land is in the hands of a half dozen shameless people.

**Damasceno (Landless Workers' National Board):** The Constitution states that at least 80% of the land has to be productive and 20% has to be set apart to be preserved. And they must comply with workers' rights laws. So that's the social role of the land. If the government is serious about this, it will be possible to settle all of the 4.8 million landless families in Brazil [who want to work the land].

**Sebastiao Salgado (photographer):** The movement is very important for Brazil. I don't see anyone in the government acting seriously about this, fighting for the citizens. This movement increases the responsibility of its participants.

**Cristiano (Santa Maria Settlement, Parana):** I lived in the camp since I was one year old and until I was six, I lived under a tent.

**Valmir (Santa Maria Settlement, Parana):** We talked about it at home. "Let's go to the camp," my dad said. My mother didn't want it. [and said], "It's crazy to go to the camp." My sisters and I were happy: "Let's go to the camp!" It's gonna be a party, a river nearby, a waterfall, woods. We lived in the city [and had nothing]. Then the problems began. First, there was no work, then a shortage of food. Water was 2 kilometers away from the camp and people had to get it in buckets.

**Unidentified mother:** It's very hard under the sun. It's so hot, your brain cooks. It's not easy.

**Solange (Santa Maria Settlement, Parana):** It was a long way from the city - 26 kilometers. To get the bus, you had to walk 12 kilometers through the woods in order to get past the gunmen.

**MST organizer:** At first, there were 220 families here with no way to make a living. We were hungry and there was no solution in sight. We chewed on sugar cane, but we always felt hungry.

**Elias (MST State Office, Bania):** When we set up a camp, we organize it in groups of families. And we organize the camp's production that will guarantee our survival and resistance. This will show those who didn't have the courage to come this time that when we get organized we create stronger roots with the land.

**Pascoal (March 26 Camp, Para):** I'm here to get a little piece of land. We've got onions by the road. I've picked greens, fresh corn, dried corn. There's lots of corn and the onions are this high!

**Bruno (March 26 Camp, Para):** We have beans, fava beans, pumpkin, rice, corn. This corn has good grains. Look at it.

**Irene (March 26 Camp, Para):** Corn, pumpkin - we eat everything that grows here. The fields are like a mother that we harvest and harvest again [with love]. This is our tradition.

**Verusia (Argroisa Camp, Pernambuco):** We've been here two years. It's a marvelous camp. The boldutree is good the liver, kidneys and intestines. This is meracilina, an antibiotic.

**Maria (Canta Galo Camp, Bahia):** Some people think that because we live in a tent we aren't neat. But just like you clean your house, you have to clean your tent. When we have visitors, we offer them water and sometimes some cornmeal. It has to be neat.

**Unidentified woman:** It's impossible to sleep - the kids can't sleep with the police watching us. They bring in horses and dogs [in order] to kill us at night.

**Irene (March 26 Camp, Para):** When the police arrived, there were children there. They were there to sing. They always do that. When the children began to sing, the police rushed in, hurt kids and threw a girl against a barbed wire fence and she was seriously injured. And a woman had her knee twisted.

**Unidentified federal police officer:** I have my orders and I'm going to carry them out!

**Preto (Terra Vista Settlement, Bahia):** The policemen were coming towards me. I tried to get up and run, but I couldn't. The [police] sergeant said, "Let's go up there!" And the other policeman said, "No, we don't know this place." And they left. It was lucky for me. I don't know how they missed [seeing] me!

**Unidentified police officer:** Cowards! Get in the bus!

**Saete (Figueira Camp, Parana):** They came in brutally, hitting us and the kids, shoving people around, shooting rubber bullets and tear gas bombs. Then they pulled me away from my kids - this girl and my boy.

**Marcos (Figueira Camp, Parana):** He was shot right here. It left a mark. I was running and I was shot.

**Antonio Tavares' funeral procession (*Tavares was killed by local police*):**  
[singing] This is our country, this is our flag, It is for love of Brazil that we continue to fight

**Rubenita (Eldorado dos Carajas, Para):** It was very difficult. We walked for three days. On the fourth day we got here and decided to camp.

**Garolo (Eldorado dos Carajas, Para):** The police got here and started shooting and throwing bombs. One guy had fallen on my back. I looked and saw that he was shot in the forehead. I said, "They're killing our comrades!" And my friend said, "There's nothing we can do."

**Rubenita (Eldorado dos Carajas, Para):** When I got shot I said, "My God, where am I going?"

**Garolo (Eldorado dos Carajas, Para):** I ran in circles and the bullets whizzed past my ears, my legs. Then, I was shot in the leg. I fell to the ground and said, "They got me!"

**Rubenita (Eldorado dos Carajas, Para):** A lot of people were shot. They were lining up the dead people inside the plastic of the tents.

**Franxinete (April 17 Settlement, Para):** A friend of mine said that my husband was dead. I said, "I can't believe that." My friend said, "He is. Let's go in." I said, "No, I can't."

**Rubenita (Eldorado dos Carajás, Para):** For me, they weren't dead. I couldn't accept that. I preferred to think they were wounded. What killed him was a bullet that went in his forehead and exited through the neck. I think they beat him up pretty bad because he was all purple, he had broken ribs, and his chest was crushed. I held him in my arms. Then I removed his necklace.

**Unidentified boy:** When we got here, there was sugar cane everywhere. The entrance was paved and there was a road. The land was poisoned [with agricultural chemicals]. It was bad land.

**Peada (Campo Verde Settlement, Pernambuco):** After we occupied the land, we had no resources. We took out the cane by hand and planted the fields. We still go hungry, but don't stop working.

**Raimundo (March 26 Camp, Para):** I'm planting only white seeds - rice, beans, manioc, potatoes and yams.

**Unidentified woman:** I planted bananas, coffee, manioc, beans, corn, and others.

**Unidentified man:** I plant rice, corn, pumpkins, beans, okra, and other things but no manioc.

**Unidentified woman:** Rice, pumpkins, *cuchaĩ*<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>

**MST organizer:** It's amazing to see comrades today with bank accounts. Many already have cars. If you ask how their lives were 3 or 4 years ago they say, "You won't have the courage to listen" - because they suffered very much.

**Unidentified man:** By Monday, we had run out of food. My wife said, "We don't have milk for the kids." I said, "Stay here and I'll be back with food." I went out into the trash dumps hunting for old sandals or whatever I could find to sell [for food]. We were so hungry that sometimes we'd have to eat the food I found in the trash.

Today, we're having what we have everyday: beans, rice, manioc, mashed potatoes, chicken, and salad. Several types of salad. Except for the rice, everything is locally grown.

**Chicao (Santa Maria Settlement, Parana):** My family and I were invited to be part of the group, to organize a cooperative. Now we're here, producing, manufacturing, and selling.

**Unidentified man:** In some settlements the land is individually owned, but they use machines collectively or buy a tractor or a crusher together. Other settlements have

communal organization. They do work together or deliver milk through a collective. Our camp is a cooperative. All the land and the means of production are collective.

**Unidentified woman:** Today as an individual you can't buy equipment. You can't get financing. It's very difficult. With a group, you can even get a line of credit. We can get financing. This improves conditions and we can make more money.

It's been very hot and we have to use two liters of water a day for each passion fruit tree. If it were only one tree, it would be easier. But there are many trees. Look at this fruit - it should be bigger. Seven passion fruits should weigh 1 kilo.

**Bartolomeu (Campo Verde Settlement, Pernambuco):** After you plant the rootstock, it ripens in six months. You get a branch from the other vine that's already producing and split it here, wrap plastic around it, and it's joined. It'll grow from here up to the wire. After six months, you do the first pruning.

**Unidentified man:** We're producing a lot, really. Last year we produced 200 tons of grapes and this year we've already got 50,000 kilos. Our plan is to plant coconuts and guava. But we don't have enough water yet. We're planning to build an aqueduct.

**Mergulhao (Campo Verde Settlement, Pernambuco):** The government wants us to do things their way but when things go wrong, they blame us. It's the workers who have to try to get financing. Winter's already here and we don't have a tractor to prepare our land. We're doing it by hand. There's no credit for work. I don't have any money and the government says they don't have it either. So, how can we progress?

**Jaime (Landless Workers' National Board):** The first step is solving the subsistence problem. The second step is getting to the market. We have a saying in the movement: We can't go to the larger marketplace to compete with the big producers. We have to reach out to the market of the masses. So we have to produce cheaper and healthier food for the whole population.

**Zumbi (Santa Maria Settlement, Parana):** In Rio Grande and other places we're producing chemical-free, organic seeds, like pumpkin and carrot. We've already noticed a difference selling products that are completely organic, without any venom [dangerous and toxic chemicals]. [That's what people want.]

**Unidentified man:** I work a lot. I start at 5 in the morning and at 10:30am I go back home, when the sun is too hot. [On days] when it's cooler I work until one in the afternoon. And then, back to the market. Today I have good food, a place to sleep. I have whatever I want. And we are growing.

**Unidentified woman:** It isn't easy because we were brought up to think that each one of us had to look out for himself or herself. But when you change and get organized, you start thinking collectively.

**Person 1:** Wherever I do, I don't conceal my name. I'm Antonio Severino da Silva, known as Folote.

**Person 2:** I'm Maria Zacarias da Silva Pessoa.

**Person 3:** My name is Manoel Berto Santos, known as Mergulhao.

**Unidentified woman:** Just because I'm fighting today doesn't mean I won't fight tomorrow to help others.

**Group of women:** When I was born I was really red. My grandpa said, "She looks like a red mango." Ever since, they've called me Rosa. My name is Maria Jose Gomes. I'm Maria da Conceicao Silva Alves. My name's Raimundo Nonato Alves. I'm Irene Taveria. I'm Pascoal.

**Rosa (March 26 Camp, Para):** Landless, with pride.

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**Note:** To get more information about the Landless Workers Movement in Brazil, please visit the Global Exchange website at:  
[www.globalexchange.org](http://www.globalexchange.org).