

A LITTLE BIT OF MY STORY IN THE LANDLESS STRUGGLE

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Translated by Nisha Thapliyal¹

Remembering...

I remember that we cousins would gather and go catch *Lambari* fish, race carts, hunt birds, play ball in the paddock with our neighbours. We were constantly exchanging visits with cousins, sleeping at one another's homes.

It is impossible to forget the millions of people who have passed through our imagination and memories and maybe even to connect and reflect on every real lived moment. This [my²] story is a story about struggle, family, new friendships and new learning. Through hard experiences, we have learned about what it really means to seek new ways of life, to fight for our basic needs, and search for better days.

Growing up landless...

I am the daughter of landless workers from the northwest region of the state of Rio Grande do Sul, in the border region between Brazil and Argentina. I was born on August 28, 1968 in the city of Horizontia, during the military dictatorship in Brazil.

¹ For the sake of clarity, I have occasionally made some additions in parenthesis and indicated accordingly.

² Inserted by translator

It was a time of great violence and massacres. Everything was forbidden. My parents worked hard work in the sun to sustain our family. They worked under the sun in the tobacco and soybean fields, full of pesticides and fertilizers. Very early I learned to work and fight to be able to complete the first eight years of study .

As a teenager I became involved in the liberation theology of the Catholic church. It was a way to express my indignation with the injustices of the time. I spent most of my youth participating in religious, pastoral youth events and local community activities to challenge the prevailing order. My parents did not really want me to because I was a female child. With great difficulty I managed to complete primary school at 18 years of age.

The community where I lived was emptying out , the young people were leaving to look for other ways of life , they were moving to the cities to work in city halls , markets , companies , and other salaried jobs, others were moving to Argentina to look for land and labor. Others liked the idea of the MST and were fighting for a piece of land. At the age of twenty-one, I decided to radically change my story. In 1989, I joined together with another 1,800 landless families in an MST camp.

The first night we went to the camp was long and full of memories. This is when I found my true destiny - to find myself as a human being, as a woman. We were all together and I have no doubt it was one of the best times I had in my youth.

We formed a single camp in Boa Vista Incra in Cruz Alta , in the area of Pinheirinhos . There were 1800 families. In a short time was a great city. Here we organized ourselves and then carried out several actions. For example we occupied land at Santa Fe, Sao Pedro and the Matriz Square. We marched to Cruz Alta and to Porto Alegre and many other actions.

Learning in the movement...

Thanks to these experiences in the MST [land occupation³] camps, I was able to continue studying. I can say that this was my biggest dream. I became an educator in the Itinerant Schools and later I was the Coordinator of all the schools in the state for almost ten years. During this time, when the Itinerant schools were "in vacation", I completed my secondary education and became a qualified teacher (Magisterium). Later, I went to university to study Pedagogy and Latino Studies.

For the last 25 years I have participated in the MST, studying and learning every day, and contributing to the landless struggle for education. I consider myself a victorious woman to have been given this chance in life - to have lived these lessons, to be part of a movement where life is a priority and part of a struggle against this system of oppression and misery.

When we face the challenge of looking at the whole of our pedagogical practices, it is possible to reflect and develop new opportunities. We can say that we

³ Inserted by translator

are apprentices of the journey, and as we journey we construct new educational possibilities. When you have only finished elementary school, or eight years of study in municipal and state schools, this is a journey full of serious difficulties.

We face a situation where there are only a few of us who can contribute to the education of hundreds of children who have no other opportunity to learn, if only with the little or no knowledge we have acquired through our own schooling.

We have been exploring our experiences to understand the reality in which we find ourselves and our roles therein. The advances and setbacks in the movement create a spiral motion that allows us to count and learn every day more and more. The struggle for land and the opportunities we have been given allow us to learn from our lived experiences and keep fighting for better days for all mankind.

In the long history of the MST, with all our occupations and achievements, we have always had to overcome the challenge of continuity. Changing people's lives also involves influencing the various dimensions of the human being. From inception, the struggle for land, is connected to the struggle for education and school. This is the context in which we are. The challenge is to understand and question the social functions of schooling from the perspective of the working class and to engage and occupy [transform⁴] the school.

⁴ Inserted by translator

In times of ‘black plastic’⁵, we organized ourselves to learn to fight collectively and to confront the obstacles that arose along the way. Our goal was to overcome our difficulties encountered with joy and creativity; despite the lack of conditions necessary for human survival such as basic sanitation, food, medical care, clothing, minimal shelter, and school.

Today I live in a ‘settlement’ - in Chapel Settlement in the municipality of Nova Santa Rita in Rio Grando do Sul, along with my family (parents, siblings, partner and three children). I live and work with thirty other families as a collective. Together we have built our homes, our schools and agricultural collectives that produce organic agricultural products. Together, we also construct culture, decent living conditions, a permanent place for young people in our community, solidarity, companionship, values, education, cooperation and the hope of continuing the struggle for social transformation.

I work as an administrator and teacher in a nearby state government public school teacher named the New Society State Higher Secondary School. It is situated in one of the agrarian reform settlements and is considered a school that values and reflects the peasant struggle and identity.

I also work in the state education collective of the MST and contribute to activities in the area of education.

⁵ This is a reference to the black rubber material and bamboo sticks used to build tents in which families live during occupations. See Introduction to the MST

We are part of the experience that has constructed and established alternative schools and given rise to new understandings of what it means to education to transform reality.

I am an MST activist and above all believe in the unity of the workers and the power of people in struggle. I am part of a collective struggle for an education that educates, humanizes, liberates and transforms...that makes people actors in their own history. I am a militant in formation -- for life.

TO LIVE MEANS TO FIGHT FOR SOCIAL CHANGE!!!!