

Women Reversing Desertification

Via Campesina Takes on Aracruz Corporation in Brazil

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Une action dirigée contre la corporation Aracruz, une plantation d'eucalyptus, et menée par les femmes de Via Campesina au Brésil à l'aube du 8 mars 2006. a provoqué l'admiration et le scandale. Cet article explore ce qui a motivé cette action et décrit le contexte et les stratégies tout en arguant que cette action qui défendait la terre, l'eau, la biodiversité, la culture et les droits humains était appropriée.

The pre-dawn direct action against an Aracruz corporation eucalyptus plantation carried out by the women of Via Campesina – Brazil on March 8, 2006 provoked both outrage and admiration. This article explores the reasons for the action, describes the context and strategies, and argues that their action in defense of land, water, biodiversity, culture, and human rights was appropriate. While strategies are particular to location and context, the ecological destruction of the corporate production agenda is as widespread as the reach of the multinational corporations that perpetuate it. And hence the objectives of the action in seeking to protect land, biodiversity and rural livelihoods has application here in Canada and elsewhere in the world.

The Via Campesina is a global movement of peasant, small-scale farmer, Indigenous, landless work-

er and women's organizations focused on food sovereignty and the protection of peasant agriculture. Founded in 1993, it has 141 member organizations in 56 countries, representing millions of people of the land. The Via Campesina organizations in Brazil include, among others, the women peasants' organization (MMC) and the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST). These organizations have led the struggle for land and progressive social and agrarian reform in Brazil for almost three decades. Through occupations, negotiations, and a great variety of political activism they have settled hundreds of thousands of landless families and become a potent peoples' force. Challenging destruction, inequality, and injustice has led to confrontations with the corporate and political elites of Brazil. This article highlights one such strategic confrontation.

The actions of the MMC illustrate that focused, collective feminist actions can change the political dynamic in powerful ways. This serves as inspiration for feminists everywhere. But beyond the inspiration of such an example, the presence of international actors was an intentional, concrete way of demonstrating that the global reach of corporate players can be met and countered by organized solidarity

that also reaches beyond national borders. Via Campesina organizations, including the National Farmers Union of Canada, share the burdens and benefits of this global solidarity.

Canadian feminists who value ecological and cultural diversity have a role to play both here at home and elsewhere in the world in protecting these. Understanding and supporting the struggles of the mmc in Brazil against a rapacious corporate giant is a practical part of defending our own place against those same forces.

The Action

Rising before dawn to begin seeing to the family's food needs is not unusual for peasant women. But the pre-dawn work for food security that some 1,500 rural women in Brazil undertook on March 8, 2006 was without precedent.

In a swift, well-coordinated action, women from the Via Campesina organizations in Brazil, with support from some of their international counterparts, entered a large eucalyptus plantation owned by Aracruz in Barra do Ribeiro, Rio Grande do Sol and destroyed millions of seedlings as well as the on-site lab. By dawn, the 40 buses carrying the women were heading into Porto Alegre where the participants

joined a massive march celebrating International Women's Day. Mud was washed from hands and shoes, little purple bandanas were stuffed into pockets or bags and the actors joined thousands of women and men on a march toward the Catholic University where the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization was holding a conference on Agrarian Reform.

When we reached the conference site, pressure to gain entrance provoked an intense flurry of negotiations that resulted in permission for 50 women to clear security and enter the official conference venue. Two leaders from the MMC (Peasant Women Movement) read a "manifesto" to the assembled delegates, calling for genuine integrated agrarian reform, an end to violence against women, gender equality, justice and solidarity:

We are against green deserts, huge plantations of eucalyptus, araucaria and pinus that cover thousands of hectares in Brazil and Latin America. Where the green desert thrives, biodiversity is destroyed, soils are deteriorated, rivers are dried up and huge pollution of the paper factories threatens human health and water.... If the green desert keeps on growing, soon there will be no water and land to produce food. (Manifesto of the Peasant Women, Via Campesina – Brazil)

The women's direct action against Brazil's largest cellulose¹ corporation in defense of food production resources, biodiversity, environment and community provoked a strong reaction. Our Via Campesina press conference at the Catholic university two days later drew a barrage of hostile questions from some of the local press. Five representatives from the international leadership Henry Saragih (Indonesia), Ingeborg Tanageras (Norway), Juana Ferrer (Dominican Republic), Paul

Nicholson (Basque Country) and Nettie Wiebe (Canada) presented the Via Campesina case for "an integrated Agrarian Reform instead of green deserts." We explained that the action against Aracruz was taken in order to deliver a strong message against the development of the disastrous monoculture of eucalyptus.

The monoculture of eucalyptus

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displaces peasants on a massive scale, creating poverty and misery, converting soil that is good for food production into green deserts. The cultivation causes irreversible damage to the soil and will make impossible any agricultural production in the future. It destroys natural resources that are essential for the local population. ("An Integral Agrarian Reform Instead of Green Deserts!")

Although we had anticipated a strong reaction from the corporate sector and the local government, I was taken aback by the aggressive confrontational stance of the local press. The press conference ended with members of the press physically blocking our exit while one reporter was engaged in an urgent cell phone conversation. Moments later, plainclothes police officers arrived

to deliver warrants requiring the Via Campesina speakers to present themselves at the police headquarters for interrogation. But only three warrants were issued. Although the action was organized and primarily carried out by women, the two male speakers from Indonesia and the Basque country were named, as well as the Via Campesina woman representative from the Dominican Republic. For reasons that were not articulated, the two women who had taken the lead at the press conference, a colleague from Norway and myself from Canada, had been left off the list of the accused.²

The "Green Desert" Agenda

Aracruz first arrived in Brazil in 1967 to establish a eucalyptus plantation in territory occupied by the Tupinikim and Guarani Indigenous peoples. In the course of developing plantations and constructing pulp mills, more than 30 villages were removed and the land that had afforded them subsistence farming and hunting was converted to growing eucalyptus trees.

By 2005, Aracruz had become the world's largest producer of bleached eucalyptus pulp, which is used to make tissue, writing paper and paper products. The company now owns more than 400,000 hectares (approximately one million acres) of land in four Brazilian states, of which in excess of 250,000 hectares are planted to eucalyptus forests. And, while the forestry industry in Canada and other northern countries is in decline, the cellulose industry based on eucalyptus is expanding rapidly and profitably.³

The growth of this industry is attributed to several factors. Cloned hybrid eucalyptus seedlings reach maturity in the tropical climates of South America in a mere seven years. Such rapid growth requires a very high consumption of water (an average of 30 liters per tree per day), which is absorbed from the tropical rainfall, ground water and rivers.

Vast tracts of land for the plantations have been acquired at low financial cost and soil fertility is augmented with the use of chemical fertilizers. The comparatively lower labour, environmental and industry standards characteristic of a developing country have also added profitability to this industry.

But the experience of Indigenous peoples and peasants stands in sharp contrast to the positive business commentary offered by the company. Land that was once used for human habitation, local food production and hunting has been converted to the production of an export product. The intensive forestry methods used result in such severe soil degradation that it is uncertain whether those soils can be ever be recovered for food production. The heavy draw on water deprives surrounding villages of their wells and streams. Effluent from the milling operations is credited with major pollution of nearby rivers, streams and aquifers. Stories of displacement, injustice, ecological devastation and violence have been accumulating for almost four decades.

From 1979 onwards, there has been active resistance to the Aracruz strategy. Displaced peoples have used demonstrations, occupations and legal challenges to regain some of their former territory. As the Tupinikim and Guarani chiefs and elders lament in an open letter:

With the arrival of Aracruz Celulose we lost our lands, our forests and our rivers. We gradually became poorer and “prisoners” of the Aracruz project.... Up to the present we have been able to get back only a small portion of our land. Approximately 11,000 hectares are still in the possession of Aracruz Celulose, under an illegal Agreement that authorizes the company to exploit and degrade our land, which is our mother and on which

we have built our dignity and identity.⁴

For its part, Aracruz is acutely aware that the unsettled land disputes with Indigenous peoples are becoming a major public relations problem for the corporation. It is attempting to respond with press releases and other information highlighted as “Aracruz and the Indians

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issues” on their home page <http://www.aracruz.com.br/en/index.htm>.

Along with their Indigenous counterparts, many of the women of the Via Campesina – Brazil have experienced displacement and the destruction of their peasant societies and livelihoods with the intrusion of the corporate plantations. The struggle to rescue land from ruinous exploitation in order to use it for growing food is not a theoretical construct but a visceral social, organizational and personal commitment.

The women who undertook the action against Aracruz took great risks. Aracruz, the largest cellulose producer in the world, is an important and powerful corporate player in the Brazilian economy. It ranks fifth in the Brazilian manufacturing sector as a generator of foreign exchange earnings. The national government of Brazil as well as state level gov-

ernments aided the establishment, and actively support the continued expansion of this enterprise with tax concessions, infrastructure funding, favourable government agreements, policing services and direct investment. Brazil’s state-owned National Economic and Social Development Bank holds a 12.5 per cent share in Aracruz. And in 2004, the International Finance Corporation of the World Bank gave Aracruz a U.S. \$50 million loan.⁵ Confronting Aracruz in Brazil is confronting a mighty corporate giant that has powerful friends in high places.

Preparing the Ground

No individual can affect the kind of social and economic change necessary to transform deeply rooted, unjust social and economic relations. It requires the collective work and solidarity of many to begin to challenge the dominant economic model of concentrated corporate power, backed by police forces, state governments, media and investors and augmented with neo-liberal trade agreements.

The dominant model has been particularly harmful in rural areas where its concerted attack on peasant and small-scale agriculture delivers social, economic and ecological destruction, forcing migration and displacement. Brazil’s peasant organizations, many of which are united into the MST, have a long history of resistance to this destructive model.⁶ But persistent efforts to negotiate fair, sustainable land tenancy and use arrangements, as well as legal challenges and political pressure, have yielded uneven results. The basic human rights and dignity, and even the mere survival, of tens of thousands of people continue to be undermined by extreme poverty, exploitation, insecurity and lack of access to land and other resources. And in Brazil, as elsewhere, women and children suffer disproportionately under these conditions.

The women’s organizations of Via



International Women's Day march in Porto Alegre, March 8, 2006. Photo: Eduardo Seid.

Campesina – Brazil are unified into a national movement, the MMC, which is made up of autonomous local and regional peasant women's organizations drawn together to "fight for a society which is based on new social relations among human beings and their relations to nature."⁷ They describe their principle aims as follows: "Our central aim is the fight against the neoliberal and chauvinist male mode, building a socialist mode. We Demand: A popular project of agriculture—a special credit for women; protection and conservation of the biodiversity; land reform.... Extension of social rights—the right of health, education, public and universal welfare; access to personal and professional documentation.... Political participation of women in society—valorization of the women in every part of the society." The MMC is part of the large peasant and landless movement of Brazil, the MST.

The women's action could only be effectively carried out from a position of collective and organizational strength. Building such organizational capacity and strength has

taken years of commitment, leadership and solidarity.

The early morning direct action against Aracruz on March 8, 2006 emerged out of this context of commitment and organization. It was carefully planned and targeted. Far from being a wanton or spontaneous outburst of vandalism from a renegade group of militants, as Aracruz and some press reports claimed, the action was undertaken only after many other initiatives to reverse the exploitation had failed. The history of resistance against the Aracruz monoculture plantations stretches over almost four decades and includes a vast array of efforts to curtail their "green desert" agenda.

The decision to take direct action signals the urgency of the struggle to protect and reclaim land from eucalyptus plantations. Along with the destruction of biodiversity, the unsustainable draw on water resources and the degradation of soils, Aracruz plantations pose a new threat with the research and use of genetically modified seedlings. As our experience with GMO canola in Canada confirms, once genetically modified

organisms are released they cannot be confined or recalled. Genetic pollution can be self-replicating and irreversible.

Once the necessity of taking direct action was established, a lot of analysis and collective strategic thinking followed. Targeting Aracruz, the largest cellulose producer and exporter in Brazil, had particular symbolic significance. As described above, Aracruz is a poster-boy corporation for monoculture, concentration and power in the Brazilian context. Aracruz is a corporate success story with its highly profitable, competitive, export-oriented production, rapid expansion and high rates of return on investment. It has also had the power to externalize environmental and social costs. Aracruz is representative of many of the key characteristics that define the contemporary capitalist corporate sector.

Targeting Aracruz was also practical. As Aracruz noted in its press release of March 16, 2006,⁸ the seedlings and lab will be costly to replace, the cloned hybrids which were to be used in commercial plan-

tations for added productivity gains will be delayed, and the planned expansion of milling operations in the state are uncertain. Financial losses, negative publicity and a critical international focus on their industry can be effective strategies for changing corporate behaviour.

The timing of the action worked to increase the public impact and information while decreasing the immediate danger to the participants. The FAO conference on Agrarian Reform in Porto Alegre ensured that the action gained widespread international attention, as the international press was already there. The presence of international dignitaries and delegates to the conference also limited the possibility of an immediate violent police response to the action. Neither the state nor the national government could risk images of police beating unarmed peasant women being broadcast globally from Porto Alegre.

March 8th is International Women's Day (IWD) when women around the world remember their many struggles for justice, equality and dignity and celebrate the strength, joy and beauty of their aspirations and achievements. The women of Via Campesina – Brazil added a significant page to that proud history in their courageous action to protect land, ecology, and people's rights.

Reversing Desertification

Women's direct action against Aracruz was effective in demonstrating the deep-seated, widespread peasant opposition to the "green desert" agenda. It illustrated that women are so determined to counter that destructive agenda that they are prepared to take great risks to challenge it. The strategic timing, the element of surprise and the context of a UN conference and an International Women's Day march revealed the care and intelligence with which the tactics had been prepared.

Despite the vigorous efforts of the

right-wing press to paint the action as violent vandalism, banditry and terrorism,⁹ the action was in fact very targeted and limited to those specific items of property Aracruz uses to perpetrate its industry. Peasant women are hardly a segment of society known for vandalism or wanton destruction.

Much of the hostile commentary focused on condemning the "vandalism" and the "barbarians" that had carried it out and worrying about the threats to further corporate investment, without engaging in the political and environmental message of the action. Details on land and water use, destruction of biodiversity, or the release of GMOs were scarcely mentioned. Instead, the critics sought to criminalize the action and those supporting it, even denying that the actors could have been farmers, presumably on the grounds that farmers don't match the favoured gangs/criminals/terrorists categorization well enough.¹⁰

The reaction of authorities was somewhat muted in the presence of the United Nations conference participants. Initially, public funds for education and services in MST communities were frozen, the Via Campesina press conference was disrupted and a few interrogations were conducted. But two weeks after the action, on March 21, 2006, police broke into the MMC offices and seized computers, documents and office items while threatening the women and children in the office with guns. Subsequently, police have indicted 37 persons (mostly women).

The list of those indicted was widely circulated along with a manifesto in the form of a poem, "The Seedlings of Silence," on the International Day of Peasant Struggle, April 17th. Using cultural expression to integrate and articulate social and political activism and commitment is a key distinguishing characteristic of feminist movements everywhere. Women of the Via Campesina articulate their po-

sitions and demonstrate their aspirations through song, dance, visual art, drama and many other forms of cultural expression.

The most powerful, long-term aftermath of the action will be what it modeled regarding the ways in which feminists organize and carry out actions. There were no violent confrontations. No persons came to any harm. The action was entirely focused on destroying the property and instruments used to implement the "green desert" agenda. The IWD march through the streets of Porto Alegre was lively, energetic, colourful, and vibrant. An atmosphere of love, peace, and solidarity expressed the life-giving diversity and hope at the heart of the struggle.

In sharp contrast to the monoculture, male control and concentration of power over economic and biological processes that characterizes the Aracruz enterprise, the women of Via Campesina – Brazil advocate, struggle for, and model, diversity, cooperation and equality.

The Aracruz development model results in the devastation of desertification, albeit in a temporary green guise. Halting this form of desertification requires strategies such as direct physical intervention in its spread. But a long-term reversal of green desertification requires genuine agrarian reform, moving away from a disintegrated view of land and water as resources to be exploited for economic gain to a peasant model of agriculture that protects and enhances biological and cultural diversity. The struggle to contain the expansion of the cellulose industry and regain land is based on fundamental differences about the values and appropriate use of land and water. It is also a struggle for social justice, cultural diversity, respect and basic human rights. In the action against Aracruz, the women of Via Campesina – Brazil took another step in trying to reverse desertification and make room for the rich abundance and variety of life of a healthy, vigorous tropical forest.

As in Brazil, our Canadian landscape and rural communities are in the process of being undermined and reshaped by a similar corporate “development” model. Clear cut forests, displaced farmers, dying rural communities, unsettled Aboriginal land claims, degraded soils, and the loss of biodiversity are telling signs of our version of desertification. Here, as there, feminists, farmers, and citizens who value ecological and cultural diversity, social justice, equality, and a healthy future must find effective ways to stem the destructive onslaught of corporate exploitation and monocultures. Here, too, some pre-dawn organizing may be required.

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¹Cellulose is the organic material that forms the basis for pulp and paper production.

²The two persons bypassed by the state police are both white women from industrialized, northern countries with strong legal systems. Although no explanations have been offered, economic power, gender and race appear to have played a determining role in how the list of accused was drafted.

³See www.aracruz.com.br/web/en/aracruz/ara_cruz-perfil.htm for information on Aracruz.

⁴This letter was dated March 4, 2005. The complete letter and other documents are available at www.carbonradewatch.org.

⁵Information on Aracruz is readily available on many CSO and business sites, for example: <http://biz.yahoo.com/ic/51/51076.html>. The IFC- World Bank reports that Aracruz has repaid the loan early. Their disclaimer came in the wake of some violent evictions of Indigenous people on behalf of Aracruz in January

2006, cf.: <http://www.brettonwoodproject.org/art.shtml?x=531822>.

⁶The Movimento Sem Terra (Landless Movement) is a well-articulated, well-organized peoples movement known for its successes in modeling practical land reform through negotiations and land occupations. Thousands of impoverished, landless families have built productive agricultural communities with health, education and social services in these MST settlements. See: <http://www.mstbrazil.org/>.

⁷This excerpt as well as others in this paragraph are taken from the Movimento de Mulheres Camponesas (MMC) pamphlet.

⁸ See: www.aracruz.com.br/web/en/imprensa/noticias/noticias167.htm. Accessed May 30, 2006.

⁹Much of the press commentary availed itself of the “vandalism” terminology and while some searched to express outrage with other terms, as in the following excerpt: “The barbarians and the future of Brazil—Barbarism! Unacceptable, unforgivable and criminal! Adequate adjectives, despite still insufficient, to define the wrongful behaviour of the women of Via Campesina and MST in their terrorist act against the Aracruz Celulose laboratories undertaken at dawn on Wednesday, at Barra do Ribeiro” (Vanoni de Gogoy 31).

¹⁰“Action was carried out by vandals, not farmers, says representative—Yesterday, federal representative Júlio Redecker, (PSDB), condemned the action by militants of Via Campesina and the MST, who, this Wednesday, destroyed Aracruz Celulose’s Technology Center, 1 million of eucalyptus and Pinus seedlings and the tree nurseries of the Company, at Barra do Ribeiro. Redecker approached the issue yesterday from the rostrum, and asked for measures to be taken. ‘I can’t believe that they were farmers. That was an action by vandals,’ stated the representative” (2).

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