

Markus Kröger, Post-doctoral researcher in Political Science, University of Helsinki

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Recent Landless Movement – Veracel Struggles in Eunápolis, Brazil

MLT, the Movement for Land Struggle, and the MST, the Brazilian Landless Movement, joined forces in the 8th of March, 2011, occupation where 1,500 peasant women cut down a 120 hectare piece of eucalyptus cultivation, planting food crops and setting up a semi-permanent pressure camp for tens of families. The area was on a state land close to the city of Eunápolis, which the company had bought from an “owner” who did not actually have legal titles to the land, which had been illegally grabbed in the past. Those currently controlling land access in the region see the rising state and civil society attention given to rural zoning, tenure, and land rights clearing, and cleverly sell the land to the pulp company craving for plantation expansion, and ready to use almost all means and take high risks. The region was heavily logged off its millennial Atlantic Rainforests since the 1950s, particularly from the 1970s until the early 1990s, mostly by illegal or military-government-backed large-scale land grabbers, but also by pulp company directors, who now dominate the local political and economic systems.

In 4 April 2011, the MST occupied also another large land area, which Veracel alleges to own, cutting down eucalyptus and blocking the company access to a wide area of fiber it urgently needs to run its mill. The company claims they are incurring severe losses due to the occupation; and the movement claims that the land is state land, illicitly occupied by Veracel (see press releases at www.mst.org.br, and www.veracel.com.br).

Traditional rural communities and families, grouped together by an alliance of local and national research centers, human rights and environmental NGOs, and efficient landless movements, are about to get thousands of hectares of eucalyptus-occupied lands returned to them via the official and peaceful channels of the Brazilian land reform program. The families moved to the nearby cities’ favelas 15 years ago in the pinnacle of plantation expansion, facing the impossibilities of illiterate rural workers in integrating with the urban economy of declining peripheral rural centers. Unaware of their rights to the lands on those days, these families, many of which had lived for decades as tenant farmers and landless rural workers on the lands cleared and customarily held by land grabbers since the 1960s, are now ever more conscious, organized and supported by a fleet of institutions home and abroad.

Such is the case of the MLT Baixa Verde camp in the proximity of Eunápolis. Around 1970, the recently cleared land had been settled by cattle-ranchers, wood loggers, and small-scale tenant farmers. Meanwhile, at least part of it had been registered as a private property, while it clearly had a ‘terra devoluta’ status, i.e. was state land to be used for parceling to farming families – as was later proven by the authorities of Bahia, the Coordination of Agrarian Development (CDA). Around 2000, the alleged owner forced the settlers to move; and the area was planted with eucalyptus. Eucalypt plantations were then quickly extended to the settlements lands. In 2006, the same area was completely occupied by eucalypt, which had been planted even on a communal

cemetery, without required permits, and without respect to the local community. All of the villagers' houses had been demolished and they were living in the urban misery. Now, they have returned, taken over the area where the company had retrieved eucalyptus, on a blitz occupation during one day, having planned the action with MLT coordinators joining desperate families ready to return to the countryside. Black plastic bag shackles housed tens of families, waiting for appropriation of the lands that were now officially declared as state land the company could not had appropriated for its use. The land area in question (Fazenda São Caetano, 1,333 hectares), is not Veracel's, even though it so alleges, but State Land (terra devoluta) officially deemed as such by the competent public authority, CDA, and will be delivered back to the farmers.

The MST, another movement from which the MLT separated, demands Veracel and Fibria (who has own extensive plantations in the very South of the region, providing fiber for the ex-Aracruz, now Fibria pulp mill in the neighboring Espírito Santo state) to cede 10.000 hectares of land in the Extreme South of Bahia for its landless families waiting for land in the roadside camps in the region. As of now, the MST has already managed to negotiate a pre-agreement with the Brazilian Development Bank BNDES, Votorantim Group and free-floating stock owned Fibria SA, the world's largest eucalyptus pulp producer (interview with Preto, regional coordinator of the MST, 24 March 2011, Eunápolis). In this sense, Fibria has been the most helpful, having already identified six good land areas for appropriation; Veracel and Suzano, on the other hand, continue on a more hardcore line, with the worst relations with Suzano, alleged the MST coordinator. This could suggest for example that: a) Stora Enso has a more hardcore line than Fibria, which makes Veracel less ready for dialogue than Fibria, or b) Veracel's managerial decisions and attitudes are not a sum of Stora Enso and Fibria guidance, but the joint venture is autonomous. Besides the MST demands comes the pressure by a blend of other movements such as the MLT, conservation groups, indigenous groups, and, perhaps most severely, the public authorities.

The land occupations are part of a greater political game in Brazil, which has become routine within the political system as a form of interest remediation and ensuring of bureaucracy functioning: the Brazilian Land Institute INCRA officials said in interviews that "we do not do anything if the movements do not pressure us". The occupations are severe symptoms of the underlying unequal land tenure and power relations and the haphazard legal environment and lack of policies to redeem the gaps, but can be handled via contentious and private politics between the state, business and movements. Some companies are gradually coming to terms with this, already because of the embedding of the movements within the state and governments, and due to the impossibility of solving the problem by any other mean except land concessions. All other means, starting from ignorance and intimidation and ending in cooptation, have been tried and found mostly unsuccessful, merely aggravating the problems.