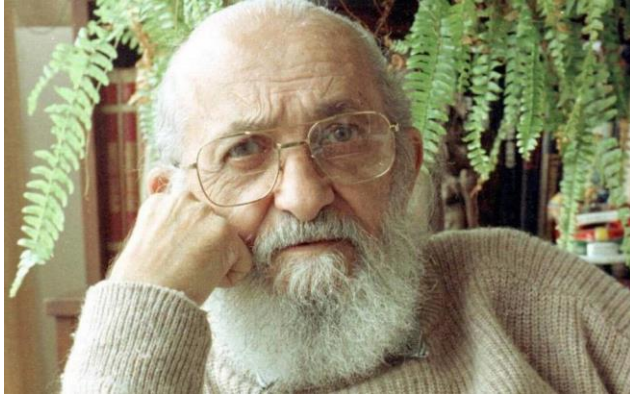


## Paulo Freire's Meeting with the MST

Isabela Camini<sup>1</sup>

João Pedro Stedile<sup>2</sup>

*But I, who wrote Pedagogy of the Oppressed, how can I not go where the oppressed are writing their pedagogy? Paulo Freire. Conquista da Fronteira Settlement, Hulha Negra, 1991.*



Celebrating Paulo Freire's Centenary is a must for the MST. It is an extraordinary historical period for reflection on social and educational practices that were built collectively and have become his legacy. We will be partners in solidarity of thousands of activists, educators, and many collectives so that throughout 2021 we can celebrate and cultivate the teachings of this educator of the

people. We want to evaluate and update our praxis, in the light of the life lessons of the educator who crossed borders to meet with peasant communities in the northeast of Brazil, in Chile, in Africa and many other places where he was building his pedagogy. That same disposition brought him to the MST Settlement "Conquista da Fronteira", in Hulha Negra<sup>3</sup>, Rio Grande do Sul, in 1991. Regarding the invitation to write this paper, we will commemorate his educational presence in our environment, seeking to understand how he came to us, and how, in our struggles, we are reinventing his and our pedagogy over the course of four decades<sup>4</sup>. In this way, we intend to dialogue with the readers of the work in which this paper appears.

### **An encounter that comes from afar**

Paulo Freire's encounter with the MST comes from far away. Perhaps it was sown from Paulo Freire's identity with the peasants of Angicos, Rio Grande do Norte, and with all the work of the peasant leagues, before the bitterness of exile. And it existed even before the MST was constituted as a Movement.

As we know, the struggle for land was resumed in the second half of 1978, when in different parts of Brazil, land occupations carried out by Landless families began to spring up. These occupations

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<sup>1</sup>Professor. PhD in Education from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul. From the Education Sector of the MST.

<sup>2</sup>Economist. Postgraduate degree in Political Economy from the National Autonomous University of Mexico. From the National Coordination of the MST.

<sup>3</sup>Hulha Negra at the time was a district of Bagé. It was emancipated in 1993.

<sup>4</sup>Edgar Jorge Kolling and Roseli Salet Caldart also contributed to the systematization of this memory.

were organized, requiring a certain amount of preparation, meetings, and conversations. Remember that we were still experiencing the civilian-military dictatorship and repression was used to prevent any mobilization of the masses and social struggles for their rights. There was a generalized climate of willingness to fight for the re-democratization of the country, with the right to amnesty for the persecuted (won in 1979) and the right to strike, among other struggles. That was how urban strikes and mobilizations arose, along with mobilizations in the countryside. All of this led to the campaign for *direct elections now*, and the fall of the dictatorship in 1984.

Land occupations and other mobilizations for social rights in the countryside were organized by grassroots activists who worked in rural workers' unions, in the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), or as pastoral agents in various churches and dioceses and leftist activists who acted autonomously. Or even under the mantle of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (MDB), the only opposition party that was allowed.

From 1979 to 1984, there were many land occupations and resistance struggles in the countryside. The CPT played an extremely important role in starting to promote the meeting of the popular leaders of this process. Several regional and state meetings resulted and consolidated the first National Meeting, held in Cascavel, PR, in January 1984, which gave programmatic and organizational outlines to the MST that it still has today.

In all these activities, gatherings, meetings of activists and leaders, Paulo Freire could be seen. He was present in the method used in grassroots work: knowing reality, listening to the needs of the people and discussing land occupations as an alternative to the problem that many had. He was present in the spirit of the collective and self-managed organization of the landless groups, which were constituted to organize the occupation, then to organize the encampment and, after winning the land, to organize the settlement. He was present in the human posture of valuing the solidarity and contribution of each person, each family. Paulo Freire was there, feeding the hope of those people whose struggle was just beginning.

His pedagogy also inspired the theoretical training for activists and agents who worked during this period. In conversations and meetings, moments in which the activists made themselves known through their stories and the exchange of knowledge, references were made to his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which was already widely circulated and became a classic. And the access we had at the time, the text, still mimeographed and in Spanish, that Paulo Freire had collectively built with the experience of political work in Chilean Agrarian Reform was very important. A paper that was later also published as a book in Brazil, *Extension or Communication?* is still widely read today. At that time, it was a precious guide for us to rethink the form of pedagogical work with peasant families, called "rural extension", and based on a concrete experience with Chilean peasants.

Different experiences advanced the resumption of the struggle for land. In 1981, we organized a large encampment in Encruzilhada Natalino, in the municipality of Ronda Alta, Rio Grande do Sul. During the encampment we learned a lot, having to face with much difficulty, the daily repression

from the hands of the well-known “Coronel Curió”<sup>5</sup>. This encampment had national repercussions, brought together almost a thousand families, and became a peasant entrenchment against the dictatorship. Having defeated Curió in 1982, an area of 110 hectares was obtained where we organized a more “peaceful” encampment, almost a pre-settlement, to continue to pressure the state government without the risk of repression. The encampment was called Nova Ronda Alta, in reference to the municipality of Ronda Alta where it was located. In this new location, families continued to resist and pressure the government to expropriate some areas, and thus won several areas of unproductive farms in different regions of the state, where they were being transferred. Only ten families were later settled in the Nova Ronda Alta area.

Having overcome the initial difficulties to some extent, the encampment was consolidated. We began to dedicate ourselves to improving its organization, raising the educational and cultural level, developing many collective activities from production to the organization of educational work with children, which was a new feature. It was urgent to think about teaching, a different school to serve the countless children who accompanied their parents in the struggle for land. And when we started working with infants, we realized that there were many adults who were illiterate. Another great challenge that the struggle for land posed for us and that continues with us today.

We immediately thought of asking for help from the educator Paulo Freire, who had recently returned from exile. With the mediation of friends from the church in São Paulo, we made the first contact. The encampment was already known nationally, and we explained the need and the importance of the education work that was being started there.

We dreamed of the possibility of Paulo Freire coming to the encampment and organizing a workshop to prepare literacy trainers. However, because he was reorganizing his life in Brazil and taking up teaching at Unicamp, his schedule did not allow the trip at that time. Then he kindly assigned this task to Vera and José Carlos Barreto<sup>6</sup> from his work team. We had several work sessions with them, studied and discussed texts by Paulo Freire. Mostly we wanted to understand the literacy method, how to choose the themes, the key words. We started the exercise of thinking about how to teach literacy and raise consciousness at the same time about our reality, which generates big questions and lessons.

Inspired by Freire's readings, one thing was certain for the first educators in these encampments—Maria Izabel Grein, Maria Salete Campigotto and Lúcia Webber (today Vedovatto)—they needed to value the families’ struggles, teaching through concrete experiences of love for the land, work, the struggle. For this, they chose the words that had meaning in their vocabulary: shack, land,

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<sup>5</sup>Sebastião Curió Rodrigues de Moura. The nickname “Curió” was later formally appended to his name. He was a member of the army forces that fought the [Guerrilha do Araguaia](#) in the Amazon between 1972 and 1974. Perhaps that is why he was “assigned” to the operation against the encampment.

<sup>6</sup>The same couple who went to pick up Paulo Freire at the airport when he returned from exile on August 7, 1979 (cf. HADDAD, 2019, p. 148).

struggle and bell. At that time, the word bell was the strongest, because it had a symbolic meaning since the Encruzilhada Natalino. The ringing of the bell was the sign that called people in the encampments to prayer, warned of the arrival of visitors, and in a special way, warned that it was time to organize against the coming repression ... However, the word *barraco* (shack), moved a lot with the learning of children and adults: what is the right of a human being regarding where to live? Is it in a canvas shack, unprotected, at the mercy of the wind, heat and cold? Struggle, land, marches, latifundia, were also words that generated knowledge and action.

We remember that because there was no structure for the school, children and teachers gathered in shacks lent by families, or under trees that served as shade. Shadow that protected them from the hot sun, not always the same as that mango tree that served as a cushion for Paulo Freire, in the backyard of his home in Recife, where he learned to spell his first words, and to read the world.

Even today, it is perhaps in this social space of struggle, that his pedagogy finds the most significant words that generate knowledge that raises awareness, liberates, humanizes. At first, it is in this reality, from an encampment in struggle, that the educators begin the dialogue with Freire's pedagogy, a force that continues to move us. That is how Paulo Freire got into our education work in a practical way, and he never left ...

#### **An historic in-person meeting: Conquista da Fronteira settlement, 1991**

We would like to share with you the details of the first and only collective in-person meeting we had with Paulo Freire. It was at the Conquista da Fronteira Settlement, in Rio Grande do Sul, at the launch of our first Youth and Adult Literacy Project.

Waiting for a person who had been arrested and exiled because he worked to see the people free from oppression, and back in Brazil after 16 years, admired for his works, considered one of the greatest personalities in education was a wait full of expectations and anxiety for the young trainers, educators, students, settled families, priests and brothers, politicians, and leaders, among others, on Saturday, May 25, 1991. To hear his words, his thoughts on the course of literacy teachers, added to the expectation of meeting him in the flesh, of receiving him in the heart of an MST settlement.

At the beginning of that day we were disheartened, because it had rained incessantly during the previous two days. The poorly maintained roads were impassable and a small bridge that led to the settlement had been carried away by the waters. Frei Sérgio Görden, coordinator of the Project, soon communicated with Paulo Freire's team if the visit would happen, with confirmation that he would come in any weather conditions. The attitude of an educator who has always maintained consistency, even when it cost him the bitter taste of prison and exile.

The day was the launch of the Youth and Adult Literacy Project, graduation of the first group of trainers and the MST wanted to find, listen and, above all, tell Paulo Freire about the Literacy Campaign that was starting in Rio Grande do Sul, inspired by him and then spread in different

ways across the country. Experience in which the words encampment, land, settlement, seed, vegetable garden, crop, road, cooperative, association, which grew out of our reality, took on an awareness and humanizing meaning.

Although he was busy, and always zealous with his writing tasks, and at the time Secretary of Education of the city of São Paulo, when he heard Frei Sérgio on behalf of the MST<sup>7</sup>, offer him the invitation, Paulo Freire listened carefully and with interest that the MST, along with the Franciscan Friars, had taken on the task of launching a Literacy Project for their people, having the option of working with the pedagogy systematized by him. The challenge to participate in this festive day was immediately accepted, an invitation made just a few weeks before the 25th of May.

Impressed by the invitation, Paulo Freire did not even ask where he would be taken, and what the conditions would be to reach the settlement. He came with an open heart, unarmed, and full of hope to meet and listen to young people who were courageous and willing to do, 26 years later, a little of what he dreamed of doing in the 1960s. A dream interrupted by the dictatorship. In his company were Ana Maria Freire, his wife, and Ester Grossi, then Secretary of Education in Porto Alegre.

The Conquista da Fronteira Settlement, located at the time in the district and today the municipality of Hulha Negra, is approximately 380 km from the capital, Porto Alegre. As Rita Zanotto, coordinator of the MST Literacy Project, tells us<sup>8</sup>:

Bringing Paulo Freire into a settlement, with the proposal of continuing to transform with him, was a dream fueled by the processes of political education, in the reading of his books, of his texts that were laying the groundwork for action. It was difficult to arrive in those distant lands, difficult to access where there were no passable roads on rainy days. On May 25, 1991, he arrived in Bagé and there was no way to go to the Conquista da Fronteira settlement. With this difficulty, we thought of having the meeting in the then District of Hulha Negra, but we understood that we could not deny so many settlers, who hoped to meet Paulo Freire, who had prepared the infrastructure in the only shed that was divided between production and the creation of a space to welcome the community. To

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<sup>7</sup> The details of the memory of this day and its preparations are in a statement recorded at our request by Frei Sérgio Görden on October 4, 2020. Frei Sérgio told us that he was the person assigned by the MST to meet Paulo Freire in São Paulo, to invite him and schedule a visit to the MST / RS Settlement. So he was the one who received him at the airport in Porto Alegre and accompanied him to the Conquista da Fronteira Settlement. The phrase by Paulo Freire, which we put as an epigraph, is part of the memory of this meeting.

<sup>8</sup> Rita Zanotto, from the Education Sector of MST / RS, was the coordinator of the Youth and Adult Literacy Project, along with Frei Sérgio Görden / Franciscan. In 1991, a first group of 25 trainers was being organized. In 1992 a second class was organized, with 40 trainers. These were all youth from the encampment or sons and daughters of settlers, willing to move to areas where there was a need to teach people to read and write. They are called “trainers” because they did not have a teaching qualification. Rita wrote this testimonial on October 12, 2020.

do it in Vila would be to deny them the opportunity to meet Paulo Freire, the great educator.

That day, still in doubt as to where the meeting with Paulo Freire would be held, at the headquarters of the settlement or in the village of Hulha Negra, in front of the Franciscan Church of São José many people were waiting for him and were eager to see him, embrace him, listen to him and photograph themselves at his side, as if they could fix him in their memory forever. At the same time, the trainers and many other people were waiting for him at the headquarters of the settlement. Frei Sérgio tells us that on arrival at Hulha Negra, he assessed the difficulties of continuing with him along the precarious roads to reach the Conquista da Fronteira settlement. They decided to ask if he would be willing to face the challenge of the mud and mire. They could guarantee an experienced driver, but he was not sure they would be able to reach their destination.

Paulo Freire heard about the situation and it was then that he calmly said: “But, I who wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, how can I not go where the oppressed are writing their pedagogy?” His answer helps us to reflect: Why set a limit when one wants to listen and dialogue with subjects who are capable of writing their story? Retreat in the face of difficulty is not part of the journey of women and men who are nourishing their necessary dreams.

The route to get to the place where we would meet the young literacy teachers, as expected, was not easy, even with a driver from the region, Luiz Fernando Mainardi, who was accustomed to traveling in these conditions that are common there. When arriving at a certain stretch of the road where the small bridge had been repaired by the settlers, the car that was carrying them could not accelerate and got stuck in the mud. Immediately the Landless “on duty” on the road, hitched Paulo Freire's car to a tractor. So they followed the path to the settlement headquarters and he arrived there a little late and with the same serene countenance with which he agreed to make the trip. Undoubtedly, this must have been one of the most unusual experiences in the life of a person who had already crossed borders to meet with the people.

Regarding this memory, we have asked ourselves: what motivated Paulo Freire to leave São Paulo and go to a peasant organization, still young and getting started in the struggle for land and education? Today, reviewing his legacy, we are sure that the desire was mutual: we were to meet him, and he was to meet young landless people, literacy trainers of other young people and adults in the MST. Struggling men and women that did not know their letters yet, but who already tried to read the world; however, not always with the courage to say their words. By joining the letters and reading the world that oppressed them, these young people were strengthened to continue studying and fighting.

In this historic meeting Paulo Freire heard from Lucas Monitor Cupsinski<sup>9</sup>a phrase he would never forget as he reminded us in the testimony he recorded for the MST in 1996:

I never forget a beautiful phrase from an educator, literacy teacher, a landless peasant, from a huge settlement in Rio Grande do Sul where I went: one day, due to the strength of our work and our struggle, we cut the barbed wires of the latifundio and we went in, but when we got there, we discovered that there are other barbed wires, like the wire of our ignorance ... (MST, 2020, p. 112).

Undoubtedly, in this personal meeting with the MST, Freire was meeting again the young peasants with whom he lived in Angicos, in Pernambuco, in Chile, in Africa. With this visit, the doors of a long path and struggle for the literacy of our people opened up, people who sought the combination of the pen and the hoe, announced in verse so many times, and that day sung to Paulo and Nita. The forceful idea was to try to reconnect knowledge separated and hierarchized by the form of society that we still have. His presence motivated us even more to put in our energy and enthusiasm, building possibilities and bridges of unity for this project to move forward.

Teaching someone the alphabet, to decipher the world that oppresses him and thus to achieve liberation, is a noble gesture of solidarity. A quality of the people's educator, who worked tirelessly throughout his life with a project of education as a practice of freedom.

In his testimony Lucas Cupsinski told us how he met Paulo Freire in the training course and about the emotion of meeting him in person:

In the course we studied about who owned the land, about illiteracy in Brazil. We read and commented on Paulo Freire's books. Welcoming him there on that graduation day was a thrill. Paulo Freire, a special guy because his visit valued us, came to hear us. As we were in the encampment we were not seen and valued, and he came to meet us. At that time he had many young people and adults who became literate in the MST. Because before, during the dictatorship, we didn't have a school, we just had to work hard. Just the fact that Paulo Freire encouraged the education of young people and adults in the MST, so that we could continue studying, for us it was very important, valuable. So we were able to guide the children. If I had not become literate, and then taught other people, at that time, my children would not have studied. And because of studying, I have a son who is a lawyer, working today at CIMI<sup>10</sup>, in Brasilia.

Paulo Freire's presence among us, inspiring and challenging, deeply marked us. And we believe that we also marked the educator who cared and said that the issue of agrarian

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<sup>9</sup> Lucas Cupsinski, 39 at the time, father of 4 children, was willing to teach young people and adults at the Santa Elmira Settlement. He taught a class of 18 adults to read and write. And according to the testimony given by phone to Isabela, on September 28, 2020, the majority continued to study. Lucas is now settled in Santana do Livramento, RS.

<sup>10</sup> CIMI – Indigenous Missionary Council based in Brasilia.

reform needed to be addressed in the countries of Latin America. For all this, his name is recorded in many schools, training centers, in different states of the country where the MST has set foot in the struggle for Agrarian Reform and Education.

Looking at this historic moment today, we see that Paulo Freire came to reaffirm us as his heirs in the dream of teaching the nation to read, through awareness, dialogue and love for humanity. Thus, it sowed among us a deep desire to not stop teaching people to read and write until there is not a single illiterate man or woman among us. As Rita Zanotto tells us:

Having Paulo Freire inaugurating an education process was of the utmost relevance, because his thinking and his constructions had already formed, they had already demonstrated that education has to take place there in reality, from reality, with the elements that reality provides to transform the place where we live. That is why the initial question from the education sector was right: What education do we want for the MST? What education do we want for ourselves?

Those who listened carefully to him that day understood better why he was denounced, accused of subversion, imprisoned and then exiled for 16 years. He told us that during his first imprisonment, in April 1964, a young lieutenant asked him to take advantage of his time there to teach a group of recruits to read, as there was a huge number of illiterates among them. The lieutenant had not yet understood that Freire was in prison precisely because he was teaching literacy. In the encounter with the young trainers in the settlement, he recalled the prohibition that the dictatorship had imposed. However, without resentment, and with the usual serenity, he reflected with us:

I have no doubt, maybe I am not humble, but humility is not always worth it. Because of struggles like these, I spent 16 years banned from returning to Brazil, I was arrested, I was expelled from the university where I worked, I was forced to leave the country, precisely because I believed it was necessary and possible to have afternoons like these (MST, 2020, p. 107).

His visit to the Conquista da Fronteira settlement, on May 25, 1991, treading through mud to get to the place, possibly gave him hope once again that his work, interrupted by the military dictatorship, was being realized in struggles like those of the MST. In the comments he made to Frei Sérgio on his return to Porto Alegre, he seemed to have the impression that he had found people with the courage and determination to do it! He said: "I saw here what I have not seen anywhere in the world where I have been. I have seen crushing poverty, with a bowed face, humiliated. But here I collectively saw a poverty with its head held high, with dignity, ready to face the world".

Perhaps this explains his answer to a young university student in Pelotas, on the way back to Porto Alegre, who asked him: "How can we students help to teach literacy to the landless"? According to Frei Sérgio, he was blunt: "The first thing is to go there and learn



to read and write in their alphabet. They have their own alphabet. Don't go to take what you know there. Go there to understand and learn what they know". Listening to this report today, we can imagine how much this response got these young people thinking. And how this dialogue teaches us about the importance of trusting the people and of an education that makes them the subject of their own liberation.

### **The Pedagogy of the Oppressed continued to guide our educational work**

The first schools in encampments prepared the soil and sowed the idea of a different school among us Landless. Different from the one that the parents rarely attended, far from life, disconnected from reality. Later, with the expansion of the MST, and having many children in encampments, in 1996 the Movement won the recognition of the Traveling School<sup>11</sup> from the State Education Council of Rio Grande do Sul as a method of basic education for public schools.

The dream of making a different school was taking a concrete form. Because it is traveling, the school could be organized in each encampment, with educators also in the encampment, and accompany families in the movement and the struggles needed to cut down the fences of the latifundio and knowledge. Schools drenched in concrete reality, which challenged educators to return to the works of Paulo Freire and put him in dialogue with other pedagogical reflections, such as that of the Russian pedagogue, Pistrak<sup>12</sup>, to recreate his pedagogy as pedagogy of the struggle for land, as a school of living work, of collective organization, fermented in the culture and history of the oppressed people.

In the precarious conditions of the encampments, in makeshift shacks, under the shade of trees, or on marches, they practiced the school that Paulo Freire spoke about, without even knowing that in the same period the educator wrote about his own literacy experience in the work *À Sombra desta Mangueira*, in the mid-1990s (Freire, 2000). A very different experience, but one that recalled that of the Landless.

Paulo Freire had his first contacts with reading in his home, in the shade of mango trees. Freire himself reported that, in the shade of the mango trees, and with sticks of these, he traced his first words in the backyard of his house, on Estrada do Encantamento, 724, in the neighborhood of Casa Amarela, in the capital of Pernambuco, under the guidance of his mother Edeltrudes and his father Joaquim. The ground was his blackboard, and the sticks, his chalk. Paulo Freire reports that in his house there were two mango trees, very close to each other, which allowed his father to set up the hammock, and also, underneath these, he learned to read and write

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<sup>11</sup>On the history of the Traveling Schools in the MST cf. CAMINI, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> His work "Fundamentos da Escola do Trabalho" was also among the studies of the educators who constituted the MST education sector. See CALDART, R. S., 2017.

with words from his daily life and his world (Andreola and Ribeiro, 2005, p. 15).

In the Traveling Schools, educators from the encampments themselves studied Paulo Freire, trying to decipher how to educate based on his works. The possibilities of access to these books and their study came from their participation in training courses organized by the MST. They came to understand that the educator who does not know his students and the reality in which they live, has no way to dialogue and think about their education in order to make a difference in their lives. And because they also perceived themselves to be socially oppressed, lacking basic rights, including land and school, they would have to build their pedagogy of liberation together with all the landless people.

Between 1996 and 2009, the period in which this form of Traveling School germinated and expanded to other states, the Traveling Schools named after Paulo Freire multiplied. And this choice was not made by chance. Some of his works were read and discussed with the school community and later in assemblies, they discussed and decided on a name. Paulo Freire, when he was nominated, almost always won, because he became known, read, and was a friend of the Landless. He came to be considered a strong ally and inspiration for our pedagogical creation and our resistance to oppressive forms of education.

In the teaching and then pedagogy courses that the MST organized in its schools or in partnerships with other educational institutions since 1990, one of the common study activities was reading and discussing classics of pedagogy<sup>13</sup>. And Educator Paulo Freire was always among them. Especially his works *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, *Education as a Practice of Freedom, Consciousness, Letters to Guinea Bissau, Extension or Communication?* and *Pedagogy of Autonomy* were guaranteed to be in libraries and read by many of our students throughout Brazil. It was beautiful to see young people and adults poring over their works in reading time, at six o'clock in the morning, in the cold of the southern winter or with the sun already high in the northeast. Certainly these readings marked their political education, inspiring their practices today.

In July 1997, the MST held the First National Meeting of Educators of Agrarian Reform - I ENERA, at the headquarters of the University of Brasilia. Paulo Freire would be one of our distinguished guests, but he ended up dying on May 2 of that year. It couldn't be otherwise: the main homage of I ENERA was to him, a human being and a social work.

At the opening ceremony of the meeting, all participants were able to make their entrance beside a painting on a large panel of a figure in white pants and a blue shirt, carried by young educators from the back of the plenary to be placed as one of the members of the opening table<sup>14</sup>. Paulo Freire present! Soon after, following the order of the speeches at the table, we heard his voice

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<sup>13</sup>See an example of a methodology for studying the classics in MST training schools in CALDART, R. S. et al., 2013, ch. 4, "Organização do estudo para além do ensino".

<sup>14</sup>Panel painted by the popular artist Irlei de Jesus Leal.

through a recording that had been made with him at the end of the previous year, with words later repeated on many other occasions: "Live for me, since I cannot live the joy of working with children and adults, who with their struggle and with their hope are managing to be themselves..."<sup>15</sup> It would have been the second in-person meeting of MST educators and educators with him.

In May 1998, the MST held the First National Meeting of Educators of Youth and Adults of Agrarian Reform - I ENEJA, in Olinda, Pernambuco, with the presence of a thousand educators from all regions of the country, bringing their experiences with youth and adult education. Freire was there as well, honored and present, a year after his death. The painted panel with his image, was once again part of all activity. And his texts and his example continued to strengthen us in the task of continuing his work, recreating the Pedagogy of the Oppressed in all spaces occupied by the Movement.

Our commitment is to educate all young people and adults in the Agrarian Reform areas, so that we can build a decent and fair Brazil for all. A nation where everyone has the right to work, the right to land, the right to housing, the right to education and the right to health. We will work as militant educators to build settlements as territories free from illiteracy. We will break with the fences of the latifundio, of capital and of illiteracy (...). Paulo Freire, your art of educating has the taste of freedom. We live for you<sup>16</sup>.

A similar *mistica* was also part of the opening of the 1st National Conference for Basic Education in the Countryside, held in July 1998 and since then, Paulo Freire has also followed the path of construction of Rural Education, such as education of the land, the forest, the waters, which in 2021 completes 23 years as part of the history of Brazilian education.

The painting of Paulo Freire continues to accompany us in gatherings, seminars, in our meetings. It has already been reproduced in several states, encampments, schools, Institutes of Education, cooperatives. It is a symbolic way to keep his memory alive and the orientation for us to recreate and reinvent it in all concrete social practices, fueled by boldness, courage, decision, discipline, and humility.

At each moment of *mistica* in which we read an excerpt of his works, new challenges spring to our eyes. He spoke to us yesterday, speaks to us today and will speak to us tomorrow. That is why we continue to study his works, and those that update his legacy. They are not exhausted in any way. On the contrary, the more we live his teachings in practice, the more challenges are placed on our horizon. With him, we strengthened the struggle for a world where it is less difficult to love, a thought with which he concluded his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in exile in 1968.

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<sup>15</sup>Documentary video "Testimony of Paulo Freire to the MST", recorded in November 1996.

<sup>16</sup>Letter of Commitment from MST Educators and Youth and Adult Educators. Olinda-PE, April 25 to May 2, 1998.

We do not ignore the appeal that a young man made in the early 1990s, at the *Uma Terra de Educar* School in Braga<sup>17</sup>:

You can't imagine, teacher, how important school is to us. For us it is much better for comrades to have four years of school than none. Comrades who do not know how to read suffer a lot, have limitations. But it would have been much better to have had eight years of school than four. You can believe that we would turn the latifundio inside out if all the comrades had eleven or twelve years of school. We know that the school is not good. But don't tell me that we only want to go to school when it is good. We want to be at school even when it's bad. We will not expect it to be good, exactly the way we want it, before we go in. (Belato, 1995, p. 17).

That appeal was understood by Lucas as he reflected today on his work as a literacy teacher:

I taught a class of 18 students to read and write in the Santa Elmira settlement. I stayed there for a year. The young Benedito dos Santos, I taught him how to read and write, and he never stopped studying. Today he is a teacher at the school of the Conquista da Fronteira Settlement. This young man always studied in the MST schools.

Undoubtedly, when following the story of a young man who became literate, and for that reason never stopped studying and acting, Lucas understood what Freire meant when he said that education does not transform the world but changes the people who can transform the world.

At a certain point in the course of the MST education work, we felt the need to make Paulo Freire known among the Landless children. We understand that they had the right to know this educator who was studied by their teachers and so respected by so many people. We then made a special request to the educator Carlos Rodrigues Brandão, a profound expert on the life and work of Freire and a great collaborator of the MST, to write his story for the children.

This is how the story of *The Boy Who Read the World* emerged at the beginning of 2001 and, in addition to making Paulo Freire known among the Landless children, crossed borders and ages and has been reissued several times<sup>18</sup>. A beautiful work that now is also in the backpack of the activists who deliver food, books, and a good dose of hope in the urban slums in this pandemic period. And it continues to be read by children and adolescents in schools and by young people and adults from different places where literacy processes are developed.

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<sup>17</sup>This school was part of the Rural Education Department of the Development, Education and Research Foundation of the Celeiro Region, FUNDEP, an entity in which the MST participated between 1989 and 1995. It was the first initiative to create a formal school for young people and adults directly conducted by popular social movements linked to the MST. See CALDART, R. S. et al., 2013.

<sup>18</sup> It was first edited by the MST in its collection Making History n. 7 first edition in February 2001, and now integrates the publications of the publisher Expressão Popular (Cf. BRANDÃO, 2014.).

Although it takes work and discipline to get to know him in all his greatness and humanity, a good part of the Landless knows who Paulo Freire is and which side of the story he has always been on. He is the educator who crossed borders, talking to the people and helping to organize emancipatory education processes in various parts of the world. He is the boy who read the world and left us a legacy that requires a long life to take care of him. He is an example of commitment to working people, of deep respect for human beings, capable of loving anyone, any people, any race. And that is why racists, fascists, intolerant and arrogant people are so uncomfortable with him.

Paulo Freire is the Brazilian who has received the most honorary degrees from all over the world. And, humble as he was, he did not flaunt them at any time or place. It is worth noting that Paulo Freire and the MST, at different times, received the King Baudoin Award<sup>19</sup>. Freire in 1980 and the MST in 1997. Possibly the repercussion of the MST's March to Brasília influenced the awarding of the Prize to the MST. And who knows, as indicated by Paulo Freire himself, whose wish it was to be walking with the people on the march, if his health had allowed it.

Since the beginning of the 2000s, the educational work of the MST came to be known by the name Pedagogy of the Movement<sup>20</sup> and this “baptism” was inspired directly by the Pedagogy of the Oppressed. The “of the” was particularly noteworthy: it is not “for” nor just “with”. As Paulo Freire himself explained in a 1983 interview:

one of the intentions of writing this book was to show that the oppressed need their pedagogy, which I am not proposing to be the one I wrote, you know? (...) I used to say that this pedagogy has to be forged by them, the oppressed (...). And it has to be done, elaborated, reworked, in the practice of its liberation ... (Freire apud MST, 2020, p. 98-99).

Upon reflecting more closely on our path, we realized that we were, after all, building a pedagogy based on educational practices reflected collectively in dialogue with the historical construction of pedagogical theory with emancipatory purposes. Pedagogy of the Movement is built by the MST, its social and human subjects (Caldart, 2004). And the word movement also indicates the pedagogical strength of being on the move: “in the incessant struggle to recover their humanity ...” (Freire, 1987, p. 32).

Paulo Freire continues to inspire the work of the MST and with a special place in Youth and Adult Education. We have national youth and adult literacy brigades working in different states of Brazil, putting Paulo Freire in dialogue with the Cuban method *Sim, eu posso!* (Yes, I can!) and Pedagogy of the Movement. In Maranhão, for example, the “Salette Moreno” brigade, in

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<sup>19</sup>The King Baudoin Foundation, Belgium, awards the international award for development every two years. The first to be awarded was the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, in 1980. In 1997, the prize was given to the MST “for the essential role in carrying out agrarian reform in Brazil, allowing, through the return to land, to give least favored a new life project”. *Folha de São Paulo*, São Paulo, March 20, 1997.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. MST: vídeo-class “Pedagogia do Movimento e Reforma Agrária Popular”, September 21, 2020.

operation since 2016, has already taught more than 20 thousand people to read and write, in a partnership with the state government (Cf. MST, 2020). In one of the graduations, the book *The Story of the Boy Who Read the World* was presented to more than two thousand literate people. Many were thrilled to touch it, to smell it, because it was the first time in their life that they had a book in their hands ...

### **The Pedagogy of Solidarity and Popular Work**

Our memory of Paulo Freire tells us that he lived simply, always off to the side, never distancing himself from his people. A man who studied and wrote until the end of his life, capable of being angry at the injustice committed anywhere in the world. Let us remember his last, unfinished writing, left on the table, in the form of a Pedagogical Letter, which deals with the murder of Galdino Jesus dos Santos – a Pataxó Indian, in Brasília. So he said goodbye to us: “Disrespecting the weak, deceiving the unwary, offending life, exploiting others, discriminating against the Indian, the Black, the woman, will not be helping my children to be serious, just, and loving about life and others ... ”(Freire, 2000a, p. 67).

Paulo Freire is an educator who respects the people, who listens, and who loves the people. This is revolutionary. He doesn't just teach by what he writes. He teaches by dedicating himself to the people he passed through. He is a sweet, dear, giving, simple person. The way he treated and treats people, there is nothing false about Paulo Freire. (Friar Sergio Görden, testimony in October 2020).

His example of solidarity was visible to those who read it or found it. For Dom Pedro Casaldáliga (1928-2020), another great inspiration for the work of the MST, who was dialoguing with Freire about the literacy work of the poor and oppressed people he encountered in Araguaia, “Paulo Freire is the chief educator of Brazil, and in good measure of the whole Third World, and also a suitable re-educator of the first world in solidarity. Thanks to him, education was made aware and liberated” (MST, 2020, p 12).

For the Landless, Paulo Freire is an example of an educator who taught solidarity in himself as a human value, and as a pedagogy for those who care about the pain and suffering of others. A sensitive man, open to the world. From an early age he cultivated solidarity detached from welfare. In solidarity with the victims of oppression, he warned us not to deceive ourselves that to get out of the condition of oppression it is enough to move to the place of the oppressor. Big mistake! By changing roles, nothing changes, no one breaks free. Only awareness and the consequent change of praxis, without revenge, will free us from the virus of hatred that inhabits both the oppressor and the oppressed.

He suffered hard and was sympathetic to those who still did not know how to read and write, and above all, he suffered immensely when meeting someone who was hungry. And once again the MST is inspired by him in the solidarity actions carried out in this tragic time of the pandemic, with the health actions and the distribution of food produced in the settlements and encampments for the working families that live in the urban slums. We seek to carry out actions

of generosity that help us to understand the needs and forms of resistance of these people and help them to think about how the logic of social life can be more just and how we can organize and fight for this. We can go so far as to build a society in which, as Pope Francis now exhorts us, we will be *fratelli tutti*.

Paulo Freire was deeply sympathetic to the peasants of Brazil, Chile, Africa. He approached them to hear them and help them to read the world. He was supportive when he came to meet the young trainers in 1991 and accompanied the Landless in March to Brasilia, in 1997. Not being able to be there, which was his wish, he watched from his home on television, walking from side to side, as Nita always tells us. He vibrated with each step taken by the marchers. He believed that the MST on the march was crossing the frontiers of fear, submission, illiteracy, acceptance of oppression. He was happy and proud of the courage that kept the MST on the road for days and days, marching with his own legs, with his feet bleeding, non-stop, fighting for human dignity, not only for himself, but for the working class. He considered the Landless people's dedication to duty and the right to change the world:

To them, the Landless, their nonconformity, their determination to help democratize this country, we owe more than we can sometimes think. And how good it would be for the expansion and consolidation of our democracy, especially for its authenticity, if other marches followed yours. The march of the unemployed, the wronged, those who protest impunity, those who cry out against violence, against lies and disrespect for public affairs. The march of the homeless, the school-less, the hospital-less, the renegades. The march of those who know that change is possible (Freire, 2000a, p. 61).

For the MST, Paulo Freire's example and reflections on grassroots work with peasant communities have been particularly important. His book *Extension or Communication?* written in 1968 and read by the founders of the MST, continues to be read and reread by a good part of our activists, especially those who work in the settlements. It is a reference in the task that we have undertaken to train teachers of production, health, culture. In his work with the peasant communities, his reflections inspire a new way for the technicians to act: "If you are unable to believe in the peasants, to commune with them, you will be in your work, at best, a cold technician. Probably a technician; or even a good reformer. However, never an educator of and for radical transformations". (Freire, 1977, p. 93).

This reflection guides the Knowledge Dialogue, one of the basic work methods built to advance the practices of agroecology in agrarian reform settlements. In this work, learning to dialogue is fundamental because

technical assistance promoting "cultural invasion" is contradictory. The political orientation of the Production, Cooperation and Environment Sector (SPCMA), of giving priority to agroecology, opens the way. However, overcoming the "anti-dialogical" and prescriptive relationship places other demands on the training of

technicians. Faced with the magnitude of such a challenge, the philosophical and epistemological basis of the Knowledge Dialogue seeks to intertwine historical and dialectical materialism, Paulo Freire's liberating pedagogy and agroecology (Tardin, Guhur and Resende apud MST, 2020, p. 128).

Speaking to the MST in 1996, a few months before his death, Paulo Freire continued to call on us to reflect on what we are doing:

Basically, the agrarian reform process inaugurates a new history for men and women. It inaugurates a new culture, the culture that is born of a process of transformation of the world, and for that reason, it implies social transformations. (MST, 2020, p. 111-112).

For all these reasons, for all who assume themselves, like the MST, to be guardians and supporters of the construction of Pedagogy of the Oppressed, he will always be the Patron of Brazilian Education. "As much as they attack him, we will fight for his memory and his history"<sup>21</sup>. Paulo Freire became a cause. That is why the elite do not want him as a patron. He represents the people of D. Elder Câmara, D. Pedro Casaldáliga, D. Tomás Balduino; of Darci Ribeiro, Josué de Castro, Florestan Fernandes. Of the people in encampments, in settlements, building schools, teaching literacy, producing food without poison, a culture that educates for freedom that is only realized with the guarantee of preservation of life.

Our commitment is to help ensure that no fence or wall prevents Paulo Freire from being among the people. In 1964 we did not have the strength to prevent his imprisonment and exile for 16 years. In today's authoritarian times, we will have to join forces to prevent them from imprisoning his legacy. And the best way to do this is to reach out with his works to the oppressed of our time, helping them to understand the contradictions present in this relationship of oppression, and therefore the possibilities of overcoming it, which is only achieved through popular struggle and political education that is liberating, humanizing.

We know that the beauty of his legacy is germinating all over the world, in the celebration of the centenary of his birth. This legacy forges and strengthens liberating, humanizing practices. In these four decades of struggle for land, we have struggled for education, for dignity, for the autonomy and liberation of the people. Our task continues: yesterday, today, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow.

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<sup>21</sup>Chico Buarque de Holanda in honor of the patron of Brazilian education Paulo Freire. Tweet - CNTE Brasil on September 19, 2020 - Paulo Freire Freireana Week.



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