

# Mounting massacres against rural workers and indigenous groups in Brazil

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At least ten rural workers from a settlement in the western Brazilian state of Mato Grosso were brutally killed in a violent massacre on April 19. Government officials suspect that the massacre was linked to a land dispute in the region, and executed by assassins hired by local landowners and farmers. The assassins attacked the peasants with machetes and guns. Several of the victims' faces were disfigured in the attacks.

Less than two weeks later, another massacre occurred, this time against members of the *Gamela* community, an indigenous group in the northeastern state of Maranhão. The attack was just as brutal as the previous one—at least one victim had his hands chopped off.

Both tragedies were widely condemned by social movements and by the pseudo-left parties. In a note on the tragedy, the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST) recalled the deaths of the peasant leaders Josias Paulino de Castro and Irani da Silva Castro, who were murdered days after they denounced threats made by landowners to the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) two years ago. The MST's note stated, "Mato Grosso cries knowing that other deaths were announced, and that nothing is being directed to prevent these new tragedies."

Religious leaders of São Felix do Araguaia, in the countryside of Mato Grosso, also expressed indignation against the attack, stating that "The massacre happened at a historic moment of usurpation of political power through an institutional coup, resulting in the loss of fundamental rights for the Brazilian people."

The current government of President Michel Temer will likely do nothing to punish the perpetrators and prevent future attacks against indigenous communities, peasants, rural workers and *quilombolas* (residents of *quilombos*, rural settlements created by escaped African

American slaves). Though the attacks have intensified over the past few years, the roots of the violence are in part a reflection of the politics of the pseudo-left Workers Party (PT) administrations of Presidents Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff.

The escalation of land disputes in Brazil is linked to the political alliances between the government—including under the Workers Party—and private corporations. These agreements benefit both domestic and foreign companies by allowing for the exploitation of rural areas—including indigenous lands—with minimal oversight.

One example is the Belo Monte Dam, which was originally planned by Brazil's military dictatorship and is currently under construction on the Xingu River in the state of Pará. The construction of this dam is responsible for the displacement of thousands of indigenous people, as well as for causing irreversible negative impact to the environment.

In 2014, President Dilma Rousseff went so far as to appoint Kátia Abreu—head of the country's most powerful Big Agro association, the Agriculture and Livestock Confederation of Brazil—as Minister of Agriculture. This was the result of a political agreement between the PT and a variety of powerful groups including construction conglomerates, agribusiness entrepreneurs, landowners and fundamentalist evangelical groups, all who have openly opposed the rights of indigenous groups and rural workers.

Such agreements were also used to drive the Growth Acceleration Program (Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento), known as PAC, a major infrastructure initiative launched on January 28, 2007 by Lula da Silva's administration. It is believed that this program is also responsible for deepening conflicts between indigenous groups and landlords.

The history of violence in rural areas also stems from agribusiness control in the region. One example is in Maranhão, where agribusiness companies continue to benefit even with the current pseudo-leftist PCdoB (Communist Party of Brazil) state government. The recent attacks that took place in Maranhão were cynically minimized by the state Governor Flavio Dino of the PCdoB, who declared that the government would not be held responsible for the recent clashes. Such statements only prove that the indigenous groups will be unlikely to see any punishment of their attackers, let alone any protection from them.

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According to the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), in 2016, 360 conflicts were recorded in the Brazilian countryside, with a total of 13 people killed and 72 others issued death threats. However, during the Workers Party governments between 2003 and 2016, very little was done to quell the land disputes in the countryside, as land reform was put on hold.

Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff's administrations are also known for doing little to improve indigenous land demarcations. According to a 2012 report by the Indian Missionary Council (CIMI), the average number of indigenous lands approved per year has been declining with each successive government. Under the government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002), from the PSDB (Brazilian Social Democracy Party), the total number of approvals of indigenous lands was 18 per year. Under Dilma Rousseff's government, that number dropped to only five per year.

A recent report entitled "Conflicts in the countryside, Brazil 2016," released by the Pastoral Land Commission, revealed that Brazil recorded 1,536 conflicts related to land, labor and water in 2016, 26.2 percent more than in 2015. The number of murders also increased from 50 in 2015 to 61 last year, up 22 percent. The number of conflicts related exclusively to lands occupied by indigenous groups, peasants and *quilombolas* rose to 1,295.

It is expected that tensions between rural workers and landowners will only intensify with the new fiscal and labor reforms proposed by President Michel Temer. Neither the Workers Party nor the pseudo-left parties that orbit around it have any genuine response to the

ongoing political crisis, in large measure because the PT leaders are allied with the landowners and agribusiness. Only a revolutionary, anti-capitalist party of the working class in Brazil would truly represent working people and defend the indigenous population, *quilombolas* and rural workers against the attacks of the ruling class and their deepening neoliberal agenda.



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