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# Beyond the Peasant International

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As ongoing struggles confront new conditions in the escalating crisis, fighting will be concentrated along two main frontlines. Once the struggles along these two lines merge and communicate things will heat up: it could be the precondition for finally putting an end to this system and starting something new and better! At one frontline the urban working class of the highly productive web of factories, offices and informal economy will have to smash the increased polarisation between over-exploitation and unemployment. At the second frontline all those will fight who were **subjected to and subjects in** the silent and invisible revolution of the last decades: the rural proletariat of the global south. The main division of any previous revolution has been dissolved, the division between the urban working class and the peasantry. During the last decades the personal relations of exploitation of the soil and village life have been replaced by a mass existence of semi-proletarianisation: more than two billion people on this planet live under this condition, depending both on wage work and small-scale agricultural activities. Many of **those on this ‘second frontline’ frequently migrate back and forth across the boundaries between countryside and town, boundaries which are themselves increasingly blurred by this labour mobility and by the spread of infrastructure**. Current mass lay-offs in the Chinese and Indian export zones on one hand, and the increasing push of the rural poor towards the promises of urban life on the other will engender huge social waves in both directions. When the anger and desire of these two sections of the proletariat meet, the end of this system will become visible. And those in power know about this: the main concern of the Chinese and Indian ruling class was to prevent a situation in which the overproduction crisis of the global north and the ensuing flow of cheap agricultural products would increase the turmoil in the countryside. The WTO summit in July 2008 failed’ at least in propaganda terms’ when it came to the question of the poor Indian peasants. Currently the Indian and Chinese states are coming up with history’s largest ‘land-reforms’ (China)

and work schemes (NREGA in India), in order to control the re-production and movements of the rural poor. They need a calm hinterland for these times of crisis, and they have to make sure that the urban/rural divide will remain as their last steady pillar of power. The food riots this summer all major think-tanks, ranging from agribusiness to the French government to the UN, warned that too quick a demise of the small peasantry could cause even heavier trouble in future. They helplessly suggested a revival of the small rural petty producer, who would exist at starvation level, but at least in a stable, isolated and controllable starvation. While those in power are engaged in an existential battle with global proletarian mobility, large sections of the left still haven't abandoned the ideological notions of the long-gone world. They still ponder in Maoist and Leninist terms about possible alliances between workers and peasants, or they create new ideologies of small-scale subsistence as a social alternative.

On these two front-lines, merely 'anti-neoliberal' ideologies and the 'peasant romanticism' of the left will do the most harm to **prospects of** radical change. In the current social turmoil these ideologies will become handy tools in the capitalist rescue-kit rather than helping us to grasp the potential for liberation within the ongoing developments. With the following text on the 'agrarian question and peasant movements', published this summer in issue 82 of the German magazine *Wildcat*, we want to contribute to the debate for a revolutionary change and to help make the waves meet. Let's spill!

\* \* \*

The WTO summit in July 2008 failed — at least in propaganda terms — when it came to the question of 'the poor Indian peasants'. In the supplement to this issue of *Wildcat* [n.82] we emphasise that the situation in the new industrial centres in India and the dynamics of the local class struggle can only be understood against the

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whose conditions are immensely diverse, but who exist in direct relation to each other. Against the background of an absolute and relative (to the total world population) increase of wage labour in the north, south, east and west, in the towns, in the country-side, in the factories, call centres and agro-factories, we have to try to capture the global perspective within forms of exploitation and work and of course within the struggles against the subordination under the global capital relation: how does a global working class constitute itself within global social cooperation as an acting subject?

At the beginning of this article we advocated finally getting rid of Leninist and Maoist perspectives. We also have to get the perspective of 'the struggle against neoliberalism' out of the heads, the reformist notion of wanting to 'tame' capitalism.<sup>12</sup>

Formulating his thesis of a 'New Proletarity' in 1994, K.H. Roth tried to initiate a debate on the global 'homogenisation' under a global capital relation. Given the formation of a global working class he posed the question of 'the tasks of the left'. The attempt failed, the thesis of 'homogenisation' was misunderstood as a global alignment of living conditions, the question concerning the formation of a global working class was made defunct by petty theoretical quarrels. Now would be the right time to restart from the 'global patchwork' of exploitation<sup>13</sup>, after fifteen years of experiences with and within the 'new peasant movements', with ten years within various no-global movements, against the background of the current food riots, the food crisis and the so-called 'climate-question'.

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<sup>12</sup> For further reading: Richard Greeman, *Dangerous Shortcuts* – can be downloaded here: [www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com)

<sup>13</sup> K.H. Roth compared the spread out centres of industrialisation, the patches of development and underdevelopment with the spots of a leopard. K.H.Roth: *Die Wiederkehr der Proletarität, Dokumentation einer Debatte, ISP 1994*

background of the situation in the rural parts of the country. Furthermore in recent years the 'New Peasant Movements' have repeatedly been the focal point of global campaigns. Their struggles raise the really fundamental questions – the conditions of the majority of the (poor) global population, environmental problems, the question of how we produce our food – and they give answers! By appropriating means of production and livelihood, e.g. by occupying land, the possibility of 'another world' seems to manifest itself in a direct manner. Within the experience of 'centuries' of struggles led by 'small factions' of this movement, e.g. by the Indigenas in Central and South America, the history of 500 years of capitalism is condensed. By fact the global movements fighting against agro-corporations, the WTO and World Bank are the new 'International' – in contrast to the the globally fragmented situations of exploitation in factories, call centres and offices. Juxtaposed to this view, the historian Hobsbawn proclaimed the 'demise of the peasantry' in the mid 90s. For him the fact that the majority of humanity is not engaged in direct production of means of subsistence any more constitutes the 'most significant transformation of class relations since the Neolithic'<sup>1</sup> In earlier phases of history humans used to produce their means of subsistence in small communities and they were dependent on the natural fluctuations of production. In contrast to that capitalism created the world market right from its start, and its main productive force (machinery) is itself a product of human labour. The general context of a global society becomes the basic condition of our existence and reproduction ('Second Nature') and in this sense it is the *real human community*. Only since humans' livelihood started to depend on social rather than on indi-

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<sup>1</sup> 'The most dramatic and far-reaching social change of the second half of this century, which has separated us from the world of the past for ever, was the death of the peasantry... Once the countryside gets deserted, the towns begin to grow. The world of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was urbanised on an unprecedented scale.« (Eric Hobsbawn, *The Age of Extremes: A History of the World 1914 – 1991*)

vidual labour have we been able to raise the question of collective appropriation of the means of production at all – and nowadays actually on a global level! In contrast to the Russian Revolution and to the phase of ‘National Liberation Movements’ after 1945, today the ‘alliance between peasants and workers’ is not the issue anymore. We finally have to get the Leninist (‘workers’ vanguards form alliances with the peasants’) and Maoist (‘surrounding of the towns by the rural masses’) perspectives out of our heads; both perspectives were ideologies justifying the development dictatorships of capitalist catch-up. Today it’s not about capitalist development ‘from above’ anymore, but about re-composition as a global class from below. The following article wants to contribute to the debate by trying to assess the so-called ‘New Peasant Movements’.

## The End of the ‘Peasant Question’

The global process of proletarianisation, meaning the separation of producers and means of production and the transformation of the producers into wage labourers, is a violent act. But the proletarians themselves have been and still are driving force towards complete proletarianisation: capitalists have often tried to avoid having to bear the total reproduction cost of the labour force. It is in particular this fact – the fact of the driving force behind proletarianisation – which is neglected by those arguments presenting ‘subsistence’ as a social formation opposed to capitalism. These arguments emerged, for example, during the debates about the IMF riots in the 1980s, during the romanticizing discussions concerning the ‘indigenous communities’ in Chiapas and in the current theorisations of the ‘new commons’.

One reason why struggles of the ‘New Peasant Movements’ and/or the ‘subsistence perspective’ are politically presented as being opposed to the thesis of proletarianisation is the common equation of ‘proletarian’ with ‘white, male, permanent factory worker’. This

During the last 35 years of crisis-attack the peasant movements have seemed strong; firstly, because the workers’ movements have been weak; secondly, because the ‘new peasant movements’ took as its starting point the ‘uneven and nonuniform’ character of proletarianisation. Some political approaches try to capture the relation between surplus value production in the form of industrial commodity production on one side and the production and reproduction of labour power – the precondition for capitalist accumulation – on the other. In the 1980s some of them seemed able to bring together these two poles (Fortunati, Caffentzis, Meillassoux, Federici). Just like the factory as location for the struggle of the producers, the labour market and family are places of struggle over the production and reproduction of the commodity labour force. In the meantime, based on this debate, G.Caffentzis from the Midnight Notes has developed a ‘Labour-Power Production approach’. He argues that the defence of ‘guarantees of subsistence’ against the attacks of capital (expulsion from the land, cuts of welfare-state benefits, the dismantling of the countries of the former real-socialism) and the struggles over the ‘commons’ are the global front-line. This seems to be an attractive approach given that it doesn’t seem to be too difficult to place oneself on the right side of the barricade, but this idealising perspective is less and less able to clearly see and understand the actual struggles. This perspective drifts towards a moral denunciation of the working class in the north and by only focussing on the ‘defence against the attacks of capital’ misses to notice the potentials which emerge, e.g. in the class struggles in India or Egypt (see related articles in the German issue of *Wildcat*). In China, as well, the second generation of migrant workers, for whom the return to the countryside is less and less of an option, indicates a political re-composition of the working class.

Compared to such brand-new releases of ideology production, Marx’s effort to relate the crisis of the Russian village community to the crisis of capitalist production is way more up-to-date: today we actually experience the formation of a global working class



this development. In this sense, e.g. James Petras assumes that the 'New Peasant Movements' are the vanguard against imperialism in Latin America. And in this sense since Chiapas and Seattle the anti-globalisation movement sees the 'New Peasant Movements' at the front-line of the struggle 'global south against global north'.

Our short glimpse at the social composition of the various peasant organisations sufficed to refute these assumptions. Disregarding all theoretical-political differences the findings — be it of left-wing/Marxist agro-experts or of 'mainstream economists' — are the same: 'semi-proletarianisation' is the prevailing form of proletarianisation, a situation which results in subsistence often not being available as a 'fall-back option' any more. 'Traditional farming'<sup>10</sup> hardly exists anymore, and at the same time wage labour increases on a global scale, including factory wage labour.<sup>11</sup>

Even the followers of an independent political representation of the small peasantry criticise the 'subsistence perspective' as a view from the ivory tower (e.g. Wienold 2007, Inkota letter 144). It has been the strong point of the 'peasant movements' that they take the real developments as their starting point instead of starting from ideologies ('subsistence') and romanticised pictures which are projected onto them.

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<sup>10</sup> 'Traditional farming' is a heavily debated notion. In the 'west', due to industrialisation, farming wasn't that 'traditional' any more from very early on. The current modes of farming in the periphery are products of colonialism. Today 'traditional farming' is commonly understood as a unity which employs only little or no alien work-force, which produces for itself or only sells a small surplus product (family farming)

<sup>11</sup> ILO figures from 2007: in 2006 there was an official working population of 2.9 billion, this is 16 per cent more than in 1996. In 2006 out of these 2.9 billion 22 per cent work in manufacturing industries, in 1996 it has been 21.5 per cent. The number of people working in agriculture has decreased from 43 per cent in 1996 to 38 per cent in 2006. In the same period the share of service industries has increased from 35 per cent to 40 per cent. (lot of 'industrial work' is hidden behind the numbers for agricultural work and service)

equation is a legacy of the traditional labour movement and the communist parties, an equation which has always been far from matching reality — today more than ever!

We want to make five points arguing that the 'peasant question' has ceased to exist today, as much as 'peasants' have disappeared as a social class detached from 'workers' or 'proletarians'.

- Since the 1970s agricultural work increasingly becomes wage labour.
- More and more agricultural workers produce for the world market.
- An increasing part of the agricultural work-force tends to live in small and medium-sized towns — in Chile, Brazil, and Venezuela about 20 per cent of the agricultural workers live in towns.
- The growing rural proletariat reproduces itself shifting between temporary wage labour, migration, farm work on their remaining land or on land of others, and informal service work — this rural proletariat can not be understood as 'peasantry' anymore.
- The economic importance of agriculture in the global south is shrinking — e.g. in Latin America only 10 to 20 per cent of the GDP stems from agricultural production.

A superficial look at agricultural production suffices to show that the equation of 'food producers' with 'peasants' is far from the truth. Nowadays global grain production takes place in the metropolitan countries and it is highly mechanised. In the US the annual productivity of a agricultural workers is up to 2,000 tons per head; half of the three billion small peasants worldwide produce less than one ton of grain per head per year — which does not allow them to survive. In the periphery peasants grow labour-intensive

products like vegetables or flowers – commodities which would not serve them for their own nutrition. Industrialisation further aggravates the miserable conditions of reproduction of the small peasants and agricultural workers: by reducing the number of jobs available, by causing falling purchase prices for agricultural products and by displacing people from good soil.

Since the most remote rural regions are connected with the (world) market, money has become the means which makes everything available: everything which is necessary for survival, which makes work easier or increases the crop, which allows mobility or access to the global consumer goods (for example radios, bicycles, scooters, new food items or other stimulants).

Given the connection to the market, wage labour becomes the precondition for a life without hardship, independently from the vicissitudes of nature.

After the crisis at the end of the 1960s to mid-1970s the process of proletarianisation accelerated. Since then only in a few regions proletarianisation has meant direct transformation into capitalist wage labour. In the countryside itself ‘informal’ small and family businesses, proletarianised agricultural work and wage labour become increasingly significant. Or people leave and move directly to the factories, which are concentrated in a few regions. The world market factories and special economic zones are classical concentrations of workers; in 2006 more than 60 million workers were employed in these concentrations, 40 million in China alone (ten years ago there had been only 27 million).

Migration is the most important mode of proletarianisation: globally millions of proletarians are on the move, searching for a better life.<sup>2</sup> In relation to the general population the flux of

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<sup>2</sup> Since 1960 the absolute volume of transnational migration has doubled: in 2005 185 million migrants were on the move, this was three per cent of the world population. The regional concentration of migration corresponds to the increasing polarisation of the global society: while in the 1970s only half of the total increase of migration reached the metropolitan countries, in the 1990s nearly

IFAD (International Fund for Agricultural Development, another UN institution).

In the meantime the gains are evaluated according to self-defined criteria: did we manage to impose the topic? Was it possible to put pressure on political actors? Did they change their attitude? Did this result in real changes? Criteria from the world of networking. But even if we apply such criteria we can state as a matter of fact that quantitatively not much has been achieved. Essentially there are two reasons for this: Firstly, the form of the network too often replaces ‘a political analysis of reality, often even impedes it (Riles, 2001, Edelmann 2008). Secondly, the initial strength of the movement (multi-faceted composition) has turned into a weakness (class differentiations and political differences). In the Philippines and India the situation is downright ‘blocked’, e.g. in India the KRRS and the BKU (see above) are the main organisations of Via Campesina. These two organisations often keep smaller, mostly proletarian groups ‘out’. In consequence during the past years there have been various rows inside the organisation.

## Revolution instead of ‘Alliances’

The question of how workers and peasants would be able to get together has been one of the questions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps the main one. And for a long time the answer of a major part of the political left was peasant revolution of one kind or the other. Even after the global movement of 1968 Maoism seeped into the towns of the western world – if only in the form of ridiculous attempts of party formation of various self-proclaimed new CPs, but after all that was a global phenomenon! In the long term however, ‘1968’ was the final blow for Maoism, as for any other developmental ideology. Today the peasants are not pressed into service for catch-up capitalist development, today they are called on as a force to check

while consumer prices increased by over ten per cent. For the small peasants this meant that they are forced to eke out a living changing between subsistence farming and work migration in a 'double sense': some of them migrate to the US or to the industrial areas of the Maquiladoras in Latin America; the survival of their relatives back home is based on their money transfer. As a consequence more and more people leave their soil, looking for different sources of income. The production on their own patch of land just about covers the daily need for food-stuffs.

## La Via Campesina

*...when it was founded in 1993 La Via Campesina was an expression of the broad base and strength of the 'New Peasant Movements', but fifteen years later the limitations concerning its political content ('the peasants') and organisational forms ('networking') have become obvious.*

It was not by chance that La Via Campesina was formed 1993 in Central America and that between 1996 and 2003 the main office was situated in Honduras. La Via Campesina was product of an initiative of peasant organisations from North, Central and South America and Europe. The 1990s were 'the decade of the NGOs': many of the initial member-organisations of Via Campesina were financially and organisationally dependent on these NGOs. La Via Campesina learnt from this and made an effort to become more independent. Since the 1990s the 'global campaign for agrarian reform' was a focal point of its activities. Via Campesina criticised the impact of the land reforms sponsored by the World Bank ('reforms determined by the market') and opposed these policies with demands for a 'true land reform': the strategy of the organisation can be summed up as 'expose and oppose'. A strategic blend of media campaigns, well-publicised presence at big global events and local support of peasant movements, but also meetings with representatives of the FAO (the agrarian organisation of the UN) and

transnational migration is not higher than, e.g., one hundred years ago. The national borders and migration laws restrict transnational migration heavily, but even more important is the fact that they regulate it: The illegal status or legally worse status of the migrants results in them doing the bad jobs while the local workers manage to keep their status (downward rigidity of the division of labour).

The ability of capital to stratify another layer below the local working classes in order to valorise them productively and control them politically depends on a continuous influx of new labour power: contrary to the view of migration as endless, I. Wallerstein assumes that the global reserve of fresh labour power will be exhausted 'by 2025'. Already today 'shortages of labour power' point to this trend: the limits of the 'labour reservoir' in Eastern Europe, in China and India are becoming visible.

## Karl and Vera today

The argument made above is only valid once proletarianisation is understood as an irreversible process. Historically there are only a few exceptional cases of reversion, e.g. the settler colonies. Proletarians who have got to know the material potential of capitalism through migration and wage labour will not accept being palmed off with less. The struggles within the process of proletarianisation are not struggles against proletarianisation, but rather about its conditions. In the history of the capitalist world system the peasant/agrarian question has been raised in a political sense four times, and each time it has also been a debate about reform or revolution: first during the transition from feudalism to capitalism (the French Revolution was an urban revolution against the peasants); then after the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it emerged within the context of pro-

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the total increase of migration ended up in Asia, Europe or the USA. Most of the Latin American countries have become 'deployment countries'.

letarian revolution ‘in the west’ and in Russia; thirdly after World War II within the National Liberation Movements; and now again since the ‘neoliberal crisis attacks’ and the emergence of the ‘New Peasant Movements’.

The first three times the question was raised it was about how a minority would be able to seize power by forming alliances with others. The party of the minority (the urban workers) drew their claim for a vanguard position upon their ‘historic mission’, which could only be accomplished by entering in a temporary alliance with the majority (the peasants). This is ‘classical Marxism’ – or namely what Kautsky and Lenin turned Marx into. The current debate can not be led in that way.

In 1899 Karl Kautsky developed this ‘classical position’ in his works ‘The Agrarian Question’: the decomposition of peasantry, the primacy of large-scale agriculture in socialism. Lenin focused on the struggling industrial proletariat, which was in the position of a minority and only had a chance to make the revolution by joining forces with the peasants: ‘We have to support the peasant insurrection in every way up to the confiscation of the land, but never up to abstract petty-bourgeois projects. We support the peasant movements to the extent to which it is a democratic revolutionary movement. We prepare ourselves (immediately, instantaneously) for the fight against it, in case that it takes on a reactionary, anti-proletarian character. (Lenin, *The assessment of the Russian Revolution, The lessons of the revolution*, 1908, 1910)<sup>3</sup> Loren Goldner clarifies: Lenin wanted the ‘workers’ state’ to realize consciously and humanely what, historically, the capitalist state had realized blindly and bloodily: the transformation of the agrarian petty producers into factory workers. (It was left to Stalin to realize this transformation consciously and bloodily.)<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> This quote stems from the German version of Lenin’s works, it does not seem to appear in the English translation of the mentioned two texts.

<sup>4</sup> Preobrazhensky posits that the ‘workers’ state can consciously and realize what, historically, the capitalist state had realized blindly and bloodily –

now they don’t want to return to the land and bear the hard life in the camps.<sup>9</sup>

## Bolivia

In Bolivia there is a landless movement, too. The Movimiento Sin Terra (MST) was founded in 2000. Similarly to the MST in Brazil the organisation comprises proletarians who ‘live in between countryside and town’. Its strongholds are in the eastern provinces, where the polarisation between agro-factories and landless/rural proletariat is the most pronounced. Land occupations have been successful time and again despite repression, and have resulted in the membership of the movement increasing to 50,000. Shortly before Morales’ government took over, the MST split: amongst other reasons over the question of whether the movement should continue the land occupations in future. This controversy was the entry point Morales’ government tried to use to get a foot in the door: The movement’s participation in the governmental debates concerning the constitutional assembly [*verfassungsgebende Versammlung*] was only granted on the condition that the land occupations would be suspended.

## Central America: Honduras

There are two main reasons for the collapse of subsistence farming among small peasants in Honduras: international agricultural regulation and the proximity to the US. At the beginning of the 1990s rice – after corn and beans the third most important foodstuff in Honduras – was produced by 25,000 rice farmers; by 2005 their number had shrunken to 1,300. The reason behind this development is the imports from the US. Between 1994 and 2000 the prices of the five leading rice importers decreased by 40 per cent

<sup>9</sup> Quotation from the MST, quoted in the German newsletter *Inkota* 144, June 2008

of the black tarpaulin). They grow food or work in the surrounding areas, and their children go the school in the nearby settlements or towns. In many cases a broad support-network is built, with bus connections established. The camps are the starting point for land occupations. The second part of the MST lives on the actual occupied land, the settlements of agrarian reform. During the first decade of its existence the MST tried to set up 'production cooperatives' in those settlements. In most cases these efforts have been stopped since the mid-1990s, given that differentiations along the boundaries of family clans occurred and that many people didn't see the 'return' to the land as being permanent. Mainly the younger folks leave again, with about 30 per cent of the families leaving the settlements after a few years.

Once Lula took over government the MST got under double pressure. The MST always emphasised its independence from any political party, first of all from Lula's PT. Nevertheless the MST always received support from the state, and agrarian and welfare policies are of major importance for the MST's ability to mobilise. The promised land reform did not take place under Lula either: the government bets on production for export and of agrofuels. In 2004 as many people were expelled from the land as got hold of land through agrarian reform. Despite this fact the numbers of land occupations have drastically shrunk since Lula took over government in 2002: in 2003 there were still about 300, in 2004 there were 150, in 2007 not even 50. The numbers of acampamentos have allegedly decreased by 60 per cent since 2003. Instead of carrying out land reform Lula redistributed welfare money on a low level: today about eleven million families receive the so-called *Bolsa Familia*, a kind of 'family benefit'. As a result the life in the towns becomes more attractive again, compared to the 'hard life' in the camps. 'The people from the urban areas have always been our target group, but

It is symptomatic that in any historical period or region once the peasants become a minority the communist mass parties disappear as well (or turn into social-democratic parties); they are (or were) the parties of forced capitalist development and they had their main strongholds in the countryside (e.g. as late as 1960 the majority of the CPI membership was formed by agricultural labourers!)<sup>5</sup>

Marx himself focused on the revolutionary potential of the rapidly growing, visible and struggling working class for a long time, but after the defeats of 1848 and 1871 had destroyed the hope for a quick victory, the center of his analysis shifted towards finding out what made capitalism 'unstable and stable' at the same time. Once more he had a close look at what was happening in the world. In the exchange of letters with Vera Zasulich he wrote about a 'specific historical opportunity: When the crisis of the 'Asiatic form of production in Russia coincides with the crisis of capitalism in the countries of western Europe there is a chance that the struggles of the workers come together with those of the rural population. As a result of this, something revolutionary and 'new' could develop. Marx had elaborated the 'inherent dualism of the Russian village community: collective property and the private production. A revolution in Russia could be able to stop the demise of the village community, and once the collective moments in the given 'historical surroundings (the crisis of the western capitalism) come together with the 'workers' revolution' they might become the starting point of a new form of communisation [*Vergemeinschaftung*]. Usually these letters are taken as evidence that Marx did not have a 'deterministic view of history' after all or that he wanted to propagate the 'direct leap' out of

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the transformation of the agrarian petty producers into factory workers. (It was left to Stalin to realize this transformation consciously and bloodily.)" The article originally appeared in: *Critique* 23, 1991

<sup>5</sup> See: Wildcat article 'Which way to the revolution please?' or Loren Goldner's article 'Communism is the material human community' [www.wildcat-www.de](http://www.wildcat-www.de) [www.geocities.com](http://www.geocities.com)

the pre-capitalistic communities [*Gemeinwesen*]. However, more important is the way how Marx approached these concerns. Marx tackled the question through notions of 'global recomposition' – however, today we are able to, and must, debate this question in a different manner, e.g. today it will be less about 'the coming together of the best of two different worlds'...

Since the 1990s the 'New Peasant Movements' have been conceived as being the global vanguard of the struggle against 'neoliberalism' and as being an important part of the anti-globalisation movement. Their forms of struggle are diverse and spread out into all corners of the planet: peasant unrest in China, Vietnam and Egypt, land occupation in Brazil or elsewhere, blockades, actions against 'large-scale development projects' to the point of armed struggle in Latin America, Mexico, India and in the Philippines. Within this movement organisations comprising hundred or a thousand members (e.g. like the rural labourers' union SOC in Andalusia) are active along with mass organisations like the MST in Brazil or the Indian peasant/farmers' organisations whose membership touches a million. Since 1993 Via Campesina, an umbrella organisation, coordinates the global peasant movement and the actions of its affiliated organisations, including participation in World Social Forum and the presence at/against the G8 summits. In terms of power politics the 'shift towards the political left' in Latin America (Brazil, Bolivia) is attributed to these movements.

The uprising in Chiapas was decisive in this development. The EZLN did not place their emphasis and hope on the potential and realities of proletarianisation, the experiences of rural and urban wage labour, the experiences of migration.<sup>6</sup> Despite the fact that their own base is composed of (re-migrated) rural proletarians, the Zapatistas right from the start emphasised the values of

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<sup>6</sup> For further reading about the intense debate about Chiapas: [flag.blackened.net](http://flag.blackened.net)

live off their land, and 4.5 million households don't own land at all. Officially the number of rural proletarians has halved since the 1970s. As a consequence of mechanisation, wage-labour is on the increase in agricultural factories, even in the form of permanent employment, while workers of small/family businesses change employment between rural labour, wage labour in agro-businesses or other kind of wage labour. At the same time the increasing number of agro-factories and marginalised *minifundias* results in forms of bonded labour becoming more common again.<sup>8</sup>

The MST was founded in 1984. The organisation has a membership of two million, although there are sources which state significantly lower numbers. In October 2007 17,000 people took part in its 5<sup>th</sup> National Congress.

The issue of land occupation was on the agenda right from the beginning. The organisation refers to article 186 of the Brazilian constitution according to which there is the legal right to occupy 'unproductive land'. The occupations are part of an effort to form a broad-based organisation as part of the union movement. Three political-organisational problems are at the centre of this effort: the relation to the Brazilian Workers Party (PT), police/military repression and the 'education' of the organisation's own rank-and-file membership. Parts of the MST membership are former rural labourers, children of small peasants, migrants for whom the city ceased to be a destination. They gather in camps pitched up alongside the central roads. It is an intentional practice of the organisation that they are gathered, educated and trained in the *acampamentos*, visibly at the road-side. They live in simple huts made of plastic tarpaulin, and are known as '*filhos da lona preta*' (children

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<sup>8</sup> In recent years in Brazil 4,000 to 6,000 cases of 'debt-bondage' or 'new slavery' are officially denounced each year, most of them in the bigger agro-businesses during the peak period of the harvest. The penalties can be paid from the petty cash. In contrast to the 'old slavery' there is no legal ownership of the person in question. Labour is enforced by violence and 'indebtedness' (e.g. 'advanced food-stuff' has to be paid, meaning worked off).

cohol abuse and for the same right to land ownership. Shetkari has its own women's organisation – in 1986 about 150,000 women gathered during a meeting – while the BKU represents the rather patriarchal north.

In general the agrarian elite – the big and medium farmers, the upper landowning castes – dominates the movement. Right from the beginning for the majority of the rural proletariat these movements offered only limited future promises. Shetkari regularly spoke positively about the potential of the global trade agreement and during the founding conference the issue of the 'situation of the agrarian labourers' was dropped from the agenda. During the Bombay textile workers' strike in the 1980s Shetkari had better relations with the associations of the small entrepreneurs of the trade and transport sector than with the urban unions. The BKU didn't even want to discuss the minimum wage for agricultural labourers. During the end of the 1980s the more militant actions were renounced more often given that it had become clear to the leadership of the organisations that the leap into official politics was about to happen (e.g. Shetkari-boss Joshi got the status of a minister in 1989 and the chairman position of the permanent government council for agricultural questions).

## **Brazil**

Originating in the colonial plantation economy, an extreme polarisation between large-scale land ownership and a class of landless workers developed. Only in a few niches are small peasants able to sustain themselves. Along with the doubling of the amount of land used for agricultural production since the 1940s, the number of *minifundias* (small family enterprises) doubled too. These enterprises are not a 'product of disintegration', but rather the outcome of a *latifundia*-based economy (*latifundia*: large-scale landholding) and the extension of agricultural industries. Out of a total population of 188 million nearly 5 million households are not able to

indigenous communities and looked for alliances with the global political movements. This attempt to defend themselves against the permanent encirclement by the Mexican army and 'against neo-liberalism' remained weak. The subsequent effort to rely less on an ominous civil society and left-wing parties, but to create a net-work with independent and more radical groups instead – the Other Campaign – was not able to prevent the intensification of repression. In December 2007 Subcomandante Marcos announced the preliminary withdrawal from the public, referring to the 'lacking social response of the International Civil Society' and the 'smell of war'. Particularly the examples of Brazil and Bolivia show that the 'move to the political left' happens at the expenses of the movement which had helped the new governments to seize power (see below) – the movements had focused on the political arena disregarding the possibility of taking more radical steps due to the current social turmoil and transformation [*Umwälzung*].

## **Proletarianisation and Semi-Proletarianisation**

Classical Marxism and Maoism categorised the rural population according to their land-property: big, medium and small farmers and rural labourers. This made sense for the so-called 'centre', for those countries which were industrialised between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In the US and in Europe the share of workers employed in industries touched 40 per cent as early as before World War I. In the period between 1870 and 1970 the numbers working in agriculture shrunk to five to ten per cent or even lower (in the US today the proportion is below two per cent). In England, the US, Germany and France the agricultural sector has been transformed into capitalistic relations – a process which was still happening up to the 1960s! – with the result that 'in the west' the peasant question has ceased to exist. In the so-called Third World

the rural population is sucked in by a process of dependent industrialisation: agricultural production for the world market. In some regions strong labour movements emerged in the course of this process (e.g. in South Korea in the 1980s). Unlike in the countries of the 'centre', in those of the 'periphery' the trichotomy of big, medium and small peasants/rural workers makes little sense. In these regions the social strata are polarised between big farmers and small peasants/rural workers; the process of semi-proletarianisation of the small peasants and rural labourers described above is the material background for the 'New Peasant Movements'.

## The new farmers' movements

In the following we narrow our focus to India, Brazil and parts of Central and South America, anything else would go beyond the scope of one article.

### India

India is the country of villages harbouring the contradictions between landed peasants, big farmers and a class of the landless. Many households became small peasants no earlier than during the time of land reforms 30 years ago — a process of 'peasantisation' taking place on little and bad land which results in a continuous flow back and forth between agricultural production and wage labour. The average size of land per household has halved since the 1960s (1961: 2.6 hectares — 1992: 1.3 hectares) and the number of families holding less than 0.2 hectares has increased from 62 per cent in 1971 to 71 per cent in 1992. About 42 per cent of the rural population does own land at all. The approximately five per cent of big and middle-size farmers hold 42 per cent of the land. 80 per cent of the Indian peasants are not able to survive by plowing their land, only 35 per cent of the average landed rural household's income stems from agricultural production. The poorest part of the

population stays on the countryside, because moving to the city requires a minimum of resources (a piece of land).

The 'New Farmers' Movement' (it is often called a 'farmer' instead of 'peasant' movement) which emerged at the end of the 1970s are a product of the so-called Green Revolution<sup>7</sup>. The new layers of medium and big farmers who produce for the market are its active core. They are held together by populist ideologies (e.g. rural population against the urban society) and their common interest in higher prices for agricultural products. Since the 1980s these strata of farmers, who managed to prosper during the Green Revolution, are confronted with decreasing prices and profits: the climax of the movement happened in the mid-late 1980s in the states of the Green Revolution (Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana). Back then hundreds of thousand people took part in the mobilisations, thousands got arrested during actions, dozens got killed. Shetkari Sangathana in Maharashtra, the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU, mainly Punjab and UP) and the KRRS in Karnataka are the biggest organisations. These rural movements are titled 'new', because they hardly ever address the question of land distribution, instead the prices take center stage (fertilizer, electricity etc., and market and state-guaranteed agricultural product prices). The forms of action are 'of the activist type': railroads are blocked, state officials are denied access to the villages; agro-products are withdrawn from the market, bills are boycotted... In parts of the movement women play a decisive role, 'women-specific' demands are raised, amongst others against the dowry-system, against al-

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<sup>7</sup> The 'old peasant movement' which emerged in the 1930s under the dominance of the Communist Party turned more and more into a mass mobilisation for the political parties — up to the coming into power of the CPs in West Bengal and Kerala. Once it got hold of state power the CP turned against the more radical wings of the rural movements. The Maoist movements which appeared in the late 1960s continue to exist to this day. This movement was formed mainly by agricultural labourers, students and urban proletariat, less by peasants. Today the Maoist movement — for example in Orissa and Bihar — has more or less turned into a militarised army or established itself as local administrations.