



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Landless workers win land rights in Nova Ronda Alta, Brazil, 1982-1984

12 March

1982

to: January

1984

**Country:** Brazil

**Location City/State/Province:** *Nova Ronda Alta, Rio Grande do Sul*

**Goals:**

Reclaim land taken away by the government in order to have work and food.

### Methods

**Methods in 1st segment:**

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › "Victory, You will reign! Oh cross, you will save us."
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

**Methods in 2nd segment:**

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

**Methods in 4th segment:**

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

**Methods in 5th segment:**

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 162. Sit-in

- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 020. Prayer and worship
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

**Additional methods (Timing Unknown):**

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols › "Natalion's Crossing - first step towards agrarian reform."

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Change

**Cluster:**

Democracy

Economic Justice

Human Rights

**Group characterization:**

- Brazilian Catholic Church and ecclesial base communities
- Brazilian peasants

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Peasants, Landless Workers, Father Arnildo

**Partners:**

Catholic Church Pastoral Land Commission, Bishops of Rio Grande do Sul, Bishops Dom Urbano and Dom Jaime Chemello

**External allies:**

Not known

**Involvement of social elites:**

Antenor Ferrari

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- Catholic Church Pastoral Land Commission
- Landless Workers
- Peasants

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

**Groups in 6th Segment:**

**Segment Length:** *Approximately 4 months*

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**

Rio Grande do Sul police and military, Governor Amaral de Souza.

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

Not known

**Campaigner violence:**

Not known

**Repressive Violence:**

Not known from March 1982 to January 1984. Before campaigners moved from Natalino's Crossing to Nova Ronda Alta in 1982, there was military aggression against the campaigners.

## Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**

6 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**

1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**

2 points out of 3 points

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Brazil is the largest country in South America with resources comparable to the continental United States as well as vast amounts of land for agricultural development. At the time of this campaign, two-thirds of the population went hungry and were without work. 48% of the arable land was controlled by 1% of the population for large-scale agricultural enterprises. In 1964, there was a military coup that resulted in a twenty-one year military dictatorship and small farmers were pushed off their land, which was taken by the government. The farmers who were forced off their land therefore became “landless” and had no way to earn an income to feed themselves and their families.

Throughout the 1960's and 1970's there were various disjointed landless workers campaigns for economic rights, but in the beginning of December 1980, about 6,000 landless families from across southern Brazil formed an encampment on a portion of land in Rio Grande do Sul which came to be called Natalino. The powerful institution of the progressive Catholic Church supported the grassroots campaign of the landless peasants. In 1975, the church founded the Pastoral Commission on Land (CPT) that was the collaboration between lawyers, agricultural technicians and activists that supported the landless in their movement to regain land. The CPT was also involved with developing base communities throughout rural neighborhoods in Brazil. These base communities were faith-based and provided a forum for people to discuss the church's role in the pursuit of social justice. The base communities also served as networks for the landless to plan and build solidarity. While there were many similar actions throughout the region in the early 1980's, the land seizures at Natalino and Nova Ronda Alta were the largest of the many occupations and will be focused on here.

Throughout 1980, 1981 and early 1982, the landless families staying at Natalino were constantly threatened by the police and

military that they would be forced off the land. State officials tried desperately to disband the camp. With a strong ally in the Catholic Church, the workers gained the support of Bishops Dom Urbano and Dom Jaime Chemello. The bishops entered into negotiations with the Rio Grande do Sul government pleading for a peaceful solution. Ultimately, the CPT had been able to purchase a portion of land, Nova Ronda Alta, and a group of about 600 families began to relocate from Natalino to Nova Ronda Alta on March 12, 1982, singing: "Victory, You will reign! Oh cross, you will save us" and were welcomed to the land by a banner assuring them they were entering the "Promised Land."

Even though Nova Ronda Alta was a less public encampment than Natalino had been, the landless workers had gained widespread recognition for their efforts by the time the transition of space happened. The goals of the campaigners was to regain their right to land, resources, and political recognition so that they could have means to work and to feed their families. The campaigners were essentially demanding the occupied land from the government.

While the people were relocating to Nova Ronda Alta, the 15 November 1982 elections presented a victory for the campaigners. Antenor Ferrari, an incredibly active supporter of the landless, was elected to be the president of the Rio Grande do Sul State Assembly. On 21 April 1983 Ferrari visited Nova Ronda Alta and negotiations with Governor Soares were entered on 26 April 1983 with the possibility of purchasing and redistributing land for the landless. When it became clear that the government was holding back on the deal and not making any progress, campaigners decided to increase the pressure. They launched a campaign of sit-ins at the Secretary of Agriculture's office in Porto Alegre, which is where the land negotiations were taking place from opening to closing every weekday from 24 July – 26 September 1983. While it is unclear precisely who went to the office and what actions were carried out, there were always about 11 to 20 people present in the office's main lounge. The goal of these sit-ins was to disturb the Secretary of Agriculture's office and serve as a reminder that they were not going anywhere until their demands to land were met.

Finally, on 26 September 1983 the campaigners reached a victory due to this increased pressure. Governor Soares purchased four estates in Ronda Alta, as well as in a cattle ranch located 150 miles away from Ronda Alta. The campaigners had a short-lived victory celebration for there was a considerable amount of conflict in how to divide the land. Tensions were extremely high from September 1983 until the end of November 1983, when most groups were settled. One priest present at Ronda Alta recounted a time in October 1983 when he pleaded with people at a church service to disarm themselves for he feared violence would break out. Nonetheless, throughout the campaign there were no recorded instances of violence amongst the participants. Ultimately the groups that settled in the ranch were the poorest of the people at Ronda Alta. The people that remained at Ronda Alta were the more powerful in charge of the campaign. 85% of 170 groups were settled on land by November of 1983 and the remaining thirty or so groups were settled by August 1984.

#### FORMATION OF THE MOVEMENT OF LANDLESS RURAL WORKERS

While working out their new farming communities in 1982, representatives from the encampment at Nova Ronda Alta were involved in meetings to create what would become the Movement of Landless Rural Workers or MST. This movement became arguably the largest social movement in Latin America and it continues at the time of this writing. The first meeting of 1983 was in February in Chapecó, Santa Catarina.

In October, 1983, another assembly of the landless from Rio Grande do Sul's Três Passos region met to discuss the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST). The last meeting took place in December 1983, which was the first Rio Grande do Sul statewide MST convention in Frederico, Westphalen.

This series of conversations supported by the CPT led to the national formation of the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST) in January 1984 at Cascavel, Paraná.

The MST grew exponentially and spread across Brazil to include about 1.5 million landless members. The MST had three main objectives: fighting for the land, fighting for land reform, and striving for a more just and fraternal society. The sheer size and power of the movement allowed it to become a political force, and its members held several assemblies mirroring a Congress.

Large marches and demonstrations for agrarian reform were held throughout the 1990's and 2000's and were largely successful in getting their issues addressed by the government.

## Research Notes

### Influences:

This campaign led to the formation of the Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST) which would lead many later campaigns for land rights (2).

### Sources:

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