Homeless Worker Movement in Brazil and the struggle for digital sovereignty
About MTST

The Homeless Workers Movement (MTST) is a popular, urban and left-wing movement founded in Brazil in 1997. It emerged from the globally known Landless Workers Movement (MST) but with an urban proposal. Both social movements are aimed at organizing workers under labor relations that traditional unionism could not deal with. Our main form of struggle is land occupations that do not fulfill a social function on the outskirts of large urban centers.

Throughout its 26 years of history, MTST has considerably grown and changed. If, at the beginning, it reproduced almost literally the methods of struggle created in the countryside, today it acts beyond the immediate agenda of housing.

MTST is a legalistic movement. We claim that real estate must fulfill its social function as stated by the Brazilian Federal Constitution. However, the same law weighs differently on citizens depending on how much money and power they have. To illustrate: if you own a vehicle, fail to pay its annual tax and get stopped at a police checkpoint, the police might impound your vehicle even if payment is delayed by a single day. The same rigor does not apply to real estate. Rich real estate owners can spend many years without fulfilling their legal obligations and nothing happens. We exist to balance this game. Land is not infinite, and while the rich struggles to keep it empty and scarce, thus driving up its price, many live on the streets in poverty.

More than 10 sectors coexist in the daily life of MTST. Each sector has a specific insertion in the social base of the movement. To name a few experiences, there is the successful Cozinhas Solidárias (Solidary Kitchens) project, whose main objective is to combat hunger among the parts of the urban population that are in a vulnerable situation. The food offered by Cozinhas Solidárias is served daily and free of charge. Resources, including the food consumed, come from urban gardens and donations.

Moreover, the success of the Cozinhas Solidárias is about to become official public policy in the current presidential mandate of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2023-2026). MTST supported the candidacy of the former union leader for a third term. Lula visited the movement’s occupations and recognized the scope of MTST not only in securing decent housing but also in fighting hunger, in the fight for rights and in orienting technological development to the concrete problems of society, especially for the vulnerable population.

As a practical example of MTST’s day-to-day operations, its architecture sector holds cistern construction workshops on how to capture and treat rainwater, training workers to meet their own needs in preparation for eventual times of water scarcity. There are also other examples, such as community courses, photo and video workshops, soirées and medical and legal assistance efforts.

MTST is divided into political and sectoral collectives. Decisions are taken in political collectives and the sectors apply them according to their themes. There are currently 13 sectors:

1. Architecture;
2. Art and culture;
3. Communication;
4. Education;
5. Vegetable garden and food security;
6. Legal;
7. Finance and fundraising;
8. Political training;
9. Self-defense;
10. Organization;
11. Negotiation;
12. Technology;

We are also preparing a collective for the care of animals in occupations.
The political context of 2015 - 2022

The fight of the Brazilian working class, which was already historically unequal, gets much worse from 2015 onwards, with Brazil experiencing a sequence of fraudulent processes that led to the impeachment of president Dilma Rousseff. Rousseff is a longtime left-wing activist who was tortured during the right-wing military dictatorship that ruled the country from 1964 to 1985. Aside from being elected the first female president of Brazil in 2010, Rousseff has also been indicated as a potential future president for the Bank of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa group).

The string of institutional frauds that overthrew Rousseff ultimately paved the way for arresting Lula da Silva in 2018, just a few months before the presidential election that put Jair Bolsonaro in power, a proto-fascist neoliberal with deep ties to big businesses in Brazil. Lula was a favorite and likely to win the 2018 elections, with polls indicating a clear advantage for Lula, with Bolsonaro as the second place candidate. After Bolsonaro’s election, Sergio Moro, the federal judge who presided over Lula’s case in the task force called Operation Lava Jato, soon became Bolsonaro’s justice minister. This turn of events caused an uproar in public debate in Brazil, given the obvious size of the impartiality and political interest of the trial. Later on, the entire case against Lula was reviewed and declared as impartially judged by Moro, resulting in Lula being set free in 2019. In 2022, Lula ran again for president, and despite a campaign marked by Bolsonaro’s lies and flagrant attempts to defraud the election in his favor, Lula won the election, thus initiating his 3rd mandate as Brazil’s president. It is also worth noting that this fact marks Bolsonaro as the first president in the country to lose a reelection campaign.

About the Technology Sector

It may sound strange that a housing movement has a technology sector. People have asked if our role was to “occupy” computers, just as the movement would do to land. It’s an easy parallelism, but it definitely doesn’t make any sense. In fact, one of our goals is to combat this type of disinformation in the digital environment.

During the 2018 electoral process, mainstream discourse attributed all responsibility for the political turmoil to social networks. The networks have their role, but they do not act alone. At the time, there were those who believed that there were no true supporters of Bolsonarism, stating that its online presence was all bots under the control of United States imperialism.

For us, this idea never stuck. The MTST’s roots are very strong in the cities’ outskirts and ghettos, we lived with Bolsonaro voters – which, although not pleasant, made it possible to understand its logic – and these people were no bots. Many of us at MTST are technology professionals. We know how bots behave, we work programming them every day. The idea that bots alone were making such a mess, while possible, was not plausible, it was more complicated than that.

Then, suddenly, we found ourselves talking about our professional daily lives when debating the movement’s politics. From there, creating the first course for developers was a natural step.

In addition to our educational goal, there were already other demands from within MTST for the automation of some daily tasks of the movement. One such case was experienced by workers who had been providing, for some time, on-demand services (commonly known as “odd jobs”) for people who sympathized with the movement.

Starting from the premise that a digital platform usually facilitates the transaction between two parties, we concluded that it would be possible to unite a person – typically left-wing and having a great appreciation for the struggle of MTST – with workers of the movement. This intermediation could take place through a mobile phone, in which an intermediary activist would indicate trusted people to carry out a job.
The demand existed since many of these professionals were already sought, specially construction workers, cleaners, electricians, plumbers, nannies, etc. Over time, so great was the success of word-of-mouth advertising of the quality of services provided that demand increased considerably. From then on, the Technology Sector (or “Núcleo de Tecnologia”) took on the task of automating this process. And thus came Contrate Quem Luta (CQL), a WhatsApp-based chatbot that interacts with users seeking to hire services from participants of MTST.

CQL was developed keeping in mind the concrete reality of workers offering services on the platform. Given their socioeconomic condition, some problems come along. Most of them own smartphones with modest hardware and have limited internet access except for the free WhatsApp data traffic commonly offered by Brazilian telephone companies through the so-called zero rating policy. The solution via WhatsApp was chosen to unravel these problems simultaneously: the access to the Internet is not impaired; and without the need to install any extra apps, no extra space is taken in the device’s limited storage.

MTST’s Technology Sector is involved in the production of tools and the appropriation of knowledge for strengthening the movement and the worker’s participation using technology. This process happens through the organization of the struggle in the territory in order to improve the workers’ ability to build their future autonomously as a collective. We understand this dispute as a way to secure our sovereignty, an ability to decide for ourselves which paths are effectively emancipatory for our people. It is through the way we use technology to our advantage that we promote the construction of people power.

In the current stage of capitalism we live in, the strategic sectors of society are increasingly dependent on technologies belonging to large conglomerates of private multinational corporations. We understand that the dominant neoliberal ideology, directed by an international financial bourgeoisie interested in accumulating wealth, goes directly against the interests of people’s movements in Brazil and throughout the world. The key element for advancing its policy is technological development. Contrary to what liberalism wants us to believe, technology is not neutral. In reality, it serves the interests of those who build it.
On digital sovereignty from the perspective of social movements

Digital sovereignty is a concept that has gained traction in political and academic debates. The debate is usually addressed by two different approaches, namely: the state and the individual. The issue of state sovereignty involves guidelines on national security and scientific and technological development. The issue of individual citizens concerns the agency and autonomy over the data generated, leading to the following questions: who owns my data? And how do I guarantee my own privacy?

Little is said, however, about digital sovereignty focused not only on the collective interest, but generated for and appropriated by the collective organization itself. Taking this into account, and given the current situation of the emergence of debates on digital sovereignty around the world, the MTST’s Technology Sector claims a digital sovereignty that is truly based on strengthening the struggle for popular power in the era of the information society. Not only do we want significant access to technologies, the Internet, digital and media education, but we want to direct the technological path towards those who really carry out social transformation in the territories.

The debate about the neoliberal advance of technology in our lives, in civil society as a whole, is also about sovereignty. If we increasingly rely on technology for our activities, and if these technologies go against many of our interests as citizens in a peripheral country, then it is up to us to create ways of acting in counterpoint to this technological dependence. We need to be able to build and maintain tools that meet the needs of our people without being at the mercy of the rules and terms of use of foreign agents. The question of digital sovereignty thus becomes a central point in the construction of citizenship for the Brazilian people.

At MTST, we take on the task of building digital sovereignty from the use and development of technologies by those who carry out social struggles for those who carry out social struggles. When we train our activists to become proficient in technology, when we recruit volunteers from outside the movement to help us build tools that improve and expand our fighting capacity, and when we take part in the public debate to demystify the hegemonic liberal narrative about neutrality of technology, we are creating a popular path towards those who really carry out social transformation in the territories.

It is worth noting that we teach programming not only for young people and adults in the movement, but also for children in the occupations. At the same time, while children learn by playing, we take the opportunity to promote conversation circles on emerging and critical topics with parents. The picture on the previous page, for example, was about the risk of manipulating the behavior and exposing children and adolescents to harmful content on digital platforms, which is the core of these companies’ business model. This in a context where, for example, one of the mothers (mostly solo) had four children and a cell phone with limited access to the Internet in her ‘shack’.
mobilization agenda to articulate ways to promote digital sovereignty for those who need it.

Despite being recent, our accumulation of debates and advances on the topic of digital sovereignty has leveraged us to gain presence and voice in several spaces of debate in the mainstream Brazilian digital and technological circuit. A notable example was the invitation to participate in an event for communication courses at Unisinos University, in 2022, at the invitation of Prof. Rafael Grohmann. We were also part of the 2021 and 2022 editions of the Campus Party in São Paulo. Since then, we have been invited to speak at technology events across the country, we have given workshops, contributed to debate circles and established partnerships with other social movements. In all its collaborations, the MTST Technology Center demonstrates its ideas, its teaching practices, its method of political training, its way of executing its projects and its vision of struggle centered on the base of the movement. In short, we always seek to demonstrate our grassroots effort through technology. As an example of this action, we actively participated in the preparation of two important manifestos published during the 2022 election campaign: the Action Plan for Platform Cooperatives in Brazil and the Emergency Program for Digital Sovereignty, both articulated by academics and activists and delivered to President Lula.

About the structure and organization

We like to see ourselves as a hands-on organization. We do things with a lot of routine and we gather around them. Speaking like that, it seems like an obvious one, but believe us, it’s not!

There are many groups that are content to talk about the world, about how much better it could be, and there is absolutely no big issue in doing that. And there are also many others who take specific actions to improve the world, they are not limited to just talking and debating, but they like to act on what is proposed. Each of these forms of organization reveals things about who is part of them and their reading of the world.

Groups focus on dialoguing about a theme, the exchange of experiences or evaluations and are generally made up of people who feel uncomfortable with the world and come to the conclusion that something doesn’t seem to be right and it is necessary to deal with it. When the debate begins, the
individual discomfort can be alleviated through the collective experience of discomfort, the feeling of detachment goes away momentarily and there is a functionality to it. It becomes, even if the group does not realize it, its own purpose.

Groups that have a specific role in reality, as a rule, are composed of people who, as in the previous example, feel uncomfortable with the world and seek a way to change it. However, this action is punctual, localized, as they do not see a structural problem in the world. Individuals tend to not see that there is a logic in capitalism that produces death exponentially, and when they realize it, they give in to the logic of “each one must do their part, I do what I can”. They believe that there is a maladjustment, exaggerations that need to be fought, hunger, misery, fragile education, little comprehensive health. All these points are subject to occasional corrections. NGOs are the most genuine expression of this way of thinking, a good place for “each one to do their part”.

We at MTST believe that the problem is qualitatively more complex than it seems to be. Capitalism is neither the work of human nature nor the product of divine decision. The destruction of peoples and the environment needs to be stopped at all costs, and this all sums up to a monumental task, which will not be overcome only by talking circles or specific actions. Although individual or closely focused action can help, those are not capable of great transformations. Capitalism will only be defeated through collective, coordinated, long-planned actions conducted by many disciplined militants, where “just doing your part” is not enough.

However, the struggle of the people is not only composed of disciplined militants. The process of transformation of consciousness (which goes first from restlessness to individual action and finally to collective action) is different for each person, it occurs at different times and at different paces for each different individual. Some people are in the process of becoming militants, while many others prefer, as we discussed above, just to discuss issues theoretically or to take specific actions with a reduced scope. If the problem is really monumental - and we think it is - then we must have room for all forms of action. No help is expendable.

With that in mind, the Núcleo de Tecnologia (Technology Sector) has a layered composition, similar to an onion. In the most superficial part, close to the shell, are the sympathizers, thousands of people who see the things we do with great eyes, don’t necessarily understand our motives, may even disagree with them, but think the MTST does an important job.

The next layer are the supporters. They are more than sympathizers, they feel the need to help in some way, be it with a donation, an advertisement, or a recommendation for a job vacancy, for example. Anyway, there are many ways to support the social movement’s work. Our role is to tell them that and be creative, invent ways that allow the most diverse support, all are important.

Soon after, comes the layer of people who are not satisfied with supporting, who want to be part of it, be close
to activities and help. People who are frequent in activities we call activists. It’s a bad name, but practical. They help in times like joint efforts, demonstrations and general struggles of the movement.

Finally, there are the militants, those who are not content to attend activities. They understood that capitalism is an abomination and activities are just moments of the struggle, but not the struggle itself. The struggle takes place in the organization of all the events that make up the political strategy. The militant feels compelled to contribute to their formulation, to experience them. Being a militant is not about using your free time, and not either about the amount of things you do. It’s about the place that the struggle of the people occupies in your life and how much you don’t see yourself alive outside of it.

The organization of the Technology Center is essentially the way we harmonize these profiles and deal with their complexities. In one month some are activists, the next month they become supporters, some weeks later they may have an almost militant dedication, and in other moments these individuals simply disappear!

This type of floating engagement is an inherent contradiction in the task of organizing different types of people in the same spaces, each with a different type of proximity to the struggle. The big key to organizing the Núcleo de Tecnologia is dealing with this reality without losing regularity. Developers may not have a linear production routine, it is not always possible to have one, each one has a way of accumulating on a problem. It is possible to spend weeks running circles around a puzzle, and suddenly the solution pops up during breakfast. This type of dynamic is not our privilege, it’s the category we organize. Developers may not have a linear production routine, and it’s not always possible or easy to have one. Each person has a different way of accumulating ideas around a problem, and suddenly the solution pops up during breakfast. The organization must follow this dynamic.

At this moment, in early 2023, we are experimenting with a form of organization that tries to mix, in addition to contribution levels, professional and political characteristics. We are constantly debating ways to put together all these different backgrounds so that, for example, we can feel free to discuss the international conjecture of imperialism without making a comrade who “just wants to code” feel excluded from the debate. Not everyone speaks the same way or expresses themselves with the same language. There are those who have ease with writing and do well in the task of writing a text like this. Some people speak well in public. There are also those who only feel comfortable working together to discuss software architecture. All those who want to fight must fit, and it’s our job to build safe and plural spaces for those who want to fight and fit in. We do this more than as a form of organization, but also as a rehearsal of the world we want to live in. In the terms of the Zapatistas: “A world where many worlds fit”.
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