
“... And we are against this progress of death”

-Werá Kwarai

At the celebration of the recognition of indigenous lands, Djagwareté, coordinator of the Commission of Tupinikim y Guaraní Chiefs, emotionally declared, “Two years ago we gathered right here, in the village of Pau Brasil, to celebrate the completion of the self-demarcation of our lands. On that day the people played drums, sang, danced and ate... Today we are here again, in the village of Pau Brasil, eating, dancing, singing and playing drums, this time to celebrate the Brazilian government’s confirmation that the land we have fought for so hard, for more than 30 years, belongs to us in fact and by law.”

He added, “The signing of the demarcation resolution by Justice Minister Tarso Genro, confirming that these 11,000 hectares are indigenous land, marks the end of a cycle of 40 years of struggle... Now another battle is beginning, for the recovery of our land taken over by the eucalyptus trees of Aracruz Celulose.”

The indigenous people have fought tirelessly to win back the “Land Without Evils”, a place of “many animals, much hunting, much water and many forests.” They are fully aware, however, that “the fight is not over yet.” They will undoubtedly face continued confrontations with the pulp giant Aracruz Celulose, which holds tenaciously to its claim that its monoculture of eucalyptus has benefited indigenous communities by bringing progress to the state where they live.

Guaraní chief Werá Kwarai criticizes this conception of “progress”, explaining, “They often call us lazy and inept. They accuse us of obstructing development. We are in favour of the progress of life and against this progress of death... If the company wants to make ‘good paper’, as it says in its advertising, it cannot continue buying off the judicial, executive and legislative branches of power. You cannot do anything ‘good’ on the basis of chlorine – which gives the pulp the whiteness demanded by the market. The only way to do good is on the basis of justice and the law.”

When the struggle to take back the land began, questions arose over what they would do with the 11,009 hectares being reclaimed. What could be done with land covered with eucalyptus? Over the last two years, in the midst of the land conflict, the indigenous communities have discussed reconversion strategies and exchanged experiences with quilombolas (communities of descendants of African slaves), small farmers and other indigenous groups about how to fight the “green desert”. Now they have an answer to the question: “We have many plans for our land, including reforestation and the recovery of springs, but the most fundamental is the rebuilding of a number of villages that used to exist before the arrival of the company... We are going to take our grandparents to see the place that belongs to them, because we are now the third generation of this struggle... Our grandparents fought, they were the first to resist and to remain on their land,” declared Vilma, a member of the Tupinikim community and granddaughter of one of those pioneers in the struggle.

The Tupinikim and Guaraní peoples are already rebuilding the villages and have begun to reforest their land with native species, and plan to repopulate the forests with the animals that used to live

there. They want to live in harmony with nature, something that has been denied to them up until now by the destruction of their forests and rivers, and by “the pollution of the air and of minds,” as some derisively comment.

Tupinikim chief Sezenando stresses that they still need to discuss the “Termo de Ajuste de Conduta” (TAC), an instrument that will make the land demarcation legally binding. This discussion, he says, “will determine the initiation and the conditions of the removal of the wood, since the federal government has declared that it does not have the money to compensate Aracruz Celulose.” The indigenous communities do not want to end up once again as those hardest hit by this dispute, because “the natural resources of our territory were destroyed by the company.”

Both the Tupinikim and Guaraní recognize that starting over “will not be an easy process, since we, the indigenous peoples, will not be compensated, and we are already suffering from a lack of resources and a lack of specific public policies for indigenous areas.”

“We want our land so that we don’t have to be dependent on the ‘family basket’ programme, handouts, or some little job in the city,” they stress, while speaking enthusiastically about the prospects for projects in the area. By uniting together, “the communities can revive their traditions on the recovered lands,” they believe.

At the same time, they are convinced that this victory “is a symbol of the power of social movements against transnational companies like Aracruz Celulose, which cause countless negative impacts on local populations,” as Tupinikim leader Vilmar declared. And we of the Alert Against the Green Desert Network would add: This victory was a victory of justice, the fruit of the organization and the forceful and persistent struggle of movements, both indigenous and non-indigenous. The indigenous peoples set an example for all of Brazilian society and delivered a message to the big multinationals, showing them that they are not invincible capital. As one of the supporters of their struggle maintained, “We could say that they, the indigenous peoples, are the new civilizers.”

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(Testimonials gathered at the victory party held by the indigenous communities on 7 September 2007 in the village of Pau Brasil)