
Argentina: "Sowing Struggle, We Harvest Land!" Land Recovery in Misiones

Over the last ten years, through organization and struggle, families in northeast Argentina have managed to recover land monopolized by multinational corporation Arauco. Now, they are growing food there.

It is possible to recover land that large-scale tree plantation companies have grabbed, and to grow food again. Grassroots organizations in Misiones, Argentina are showing how. As a result of years of struggle, families from Puerto Piray and Puerto Libertad have withstood the threat of being expelled from their territory. In some cases, they managed this through expropriation; in others, through occupations. Now, with great effort, they are returning life to the compacted and nutrient-deprived soil that pine and eucalyptus plantations left behind.

The Province of Misiones is located in northeast Argentina on the border with Brazil. Mighty rivers course through Misiones, which is part of the Paraná rainforest and is territory of indigenous Guaraní communities who have been severely harmed and threatened by the onslaught of tree plantations.

In 1950, the Celulosa Argentina S.A. pulp mill was set up in Puerto Piray on the banks of the Paraná River. In the following decades, and with the support of the State, two more pulp mills were set up, industrial pine plantations expanded, and the country's largest sawmills were built. Between 1950 and 1977 alone, the expansion of industrial tree plantations and the agricultural frontier advanced onto 53% of the native forest (1). In the last 25 years, pine and eucalyptus plantations have continued to push back forests in the Province: **while in 1992, there were 7,347 hectares of plantations, this area reached 405,824 hectares in 2018.** (2)

This expansion was possible through the implementation of national law 25.080, which has granted enormous subsidies to industrial tree plantations since 1998. In May 2017, the Argentinian government announced that it will extend those subsidies until 2030; and in May 2018, it launched the "Forest 2030" plan, which aims to **increase the country's plantations by 800,000 hectares** (today, tree plantations cover 1.2 million hectares nationally; 60% are in Misiones and Corrientes provinces). The plan is presented as a supposed solution to climate change and a creator of jobs. Behind this initiative, in addition to sector companies and the government, is The Nature Conservancy Argentina (3). This international conservation organization promotes carbon offset and mitigation projects in collusion with large companies and industrialized countries which continue to deforest and burn fossil fuels.

Arauco in Misiones

The Chilean transnational company Arauco, "landed" in Misiones in 1996 when it purchased the Alto Paraná S.A. pulp mill (located in Puerto Esperanza); it later set up a sawmill and a medium-density fiberboard (MDF) plant in Puerto Piray. **By 2014, Arauco owned 39% of the monoculture tree plantations in Misiones** (4).

Not only was the land concentrated in Arauco's hands, the raw material was too: Small sawmills lagging behind in technology lost access to wood and shut down, increasing unemployment. Meanwhile, the workers were not necessarily absorbed by the new company, because with increasing mechanization, the tasks on tree plantations which originally created jobs—such as planting and harvesting—were replaced by machines and agrottoxins (5).

Luisa Segovia, member of the Independent Producers of Piray (PIP, by its Spanish acronym), remembers having worked collecting resin and planting pine trees. Her husband, Nicanor, would weed, use a machete and apply agrottoxins from a backpack. These jobs were precarious and they caused him serious health problems. "It's a very conflictive company, because they don't care about human beings," he says. "When the certification companies came, the company's engineers threatened us so that we would say that everything was fine," recalls Nicanor.

Starting in the 2000s, when Arauco began to replace employees with machines, workers not only lost their jobs but saw how the plantations began to encroach upon their homes. Many small villages disappeared due to the company's violent actions and the complicity of the State, which stopped providing basic services to the population: **With no work, electricity, health or transportation, they were forced to leave their land.**

Piray's Struggle

In early 2000, unemployed families in Piray began to organize in grassroots groups. They were worried about the lack of jobs and the encroachment of pine trees onto their land immediately around their homes, which generated pollen and agrotxin pollution. Their complaints to local authorities went unheard, because the municipality only answered to the company.)

"That was when we started to wake up, and we saw that our fundamental project had to be **to find a way out: to live better**," says Miriam Samudio, a member of Independent Producers of Piray (PIP). So they began to say: **We need the pine trees to go, so that we can work and produce food on this land.** This became their rallying cry.

In 2003 they held a meeting with Arauco. At the meeting, company engineers said that the company would not give up a centimeter of land. Instead, they offered to build them a shoe, clothing or diaper factory. But the families refused, because they wanted the land. They wanted to produce food.

And so the struggle began. "The first step was **to raise awareness among our own people, the community and the society, so that they would understand our demand. Because we were going up against a multinational corporation**," Miriam explains. They had meetings and marches, and they created a negotiating table with the authorities. In those meetings, **the local government's complicity with Arauco was clear.** "We realized that their only goal was to wear us out, so we left the table."

By that time, about 200 families were organized under the name Independent Producers of Piray (PIP). When the negotiating table failed, they decided to start **connecting with peasant organizations in other towns**, such as the Bernardo de Irigoyen Peasants Union and Unidos Ruta 20. "They told us: 'You should not be afraid. They are always going to say no. But we have rights; it is our land, and multinational companies come to steal what is ours.'" One of the fears Piray families had was of being thrown in jail, because the police sometimes tried to blame them for alleged crimes. "To mess with Arauco was to mess with power and its friends," they say.

Communication within the organization was an important factor in the struggle. "We would meet every weekend. That enabled communication among families to always be clear, and for decisions to be made as a group," they explain. Another custom they maintained was to **take their grievances to local media**. "We condemned the fact that the pine trees were asphyxiating the community of Piray, and we presented all of our demands."

Expropriation

In 2012, after ten years of fighting, PIP decided to demand that the government expropriate Arauco. That year, then Argentinian president, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, announced the expropriation of the YPF oil company. "From that moment on, we came out and openly said 'expropriation,'" Miriam says. "Before, it was a forbidden word because it went against private property. But once the president said it, we used it as a tool."

From that moment on, and for almost a year, PIP traveled throughout the province and the country, getting people to support the expropriation project. They continued with their struggle in the territory, organized mobilizations, and remained firm in their demand: **"It was the land or nothing. Because otherwise we were going to disappear,"** they say. In June 2013, the Misiones Legislature approved the expropriation of 600 hectares from Arauco. **It was a first major victory.**

Growing food where there used to be pine and eucalyptus trees

The first return of land took place just in 2017, and the peasants' work has been hard. The company cut the trees and handed over the land in a disastrous, completely degraded state. All the stumps were strewn throughout the field, which was full of branches and other debris left after the wood was removed. The peasants discovered that the soil was very compacted from the tons of weight from the company's machinery, and from the continuous cycles of planting over eight or nine years—which did not allow the soil to recover. Furthermore, **after years of the application of agrottoxins, when crops were planted without chemicals, they became full of insects and pests that had disappeared with the constant use of poisons.**

In the first return of land, the communities received only 166 of the 600 hectares expropriated (Arauco is handing over the land as it harvests the pine and eucalyptus trees). Of those 166 hectares, only about 86 hectares were suitable for cultivation. As part of the expropriated land, the company included 80 hectares where families have been living for over 20 years. PIP decided to accept that as part of the first return of land, **so as not to fall into the company's strategy of pitting families against each other.** But they explained that further down the line, they will fight to make sure that Arauco gives them another 80 hectares that are uninhabited and suitable for cultivation.

The cooperative divided the land into one part for families and another part for collective cultivation. They planted squash, pumpkin, corn, cassava and watermelon, among other crops. **"The land was like concrete where there had been eucalyptus,"** the peasants say. The work is all by hand because they do not have the resources to buy machines, and the State is not providing any support. They tried using an ox, but the animal died of fatigue from the strain of working land that had been so compacted over so many years.

Insect infestations were another serious problem. As soon as the crops began to grow, they were full of "bugs." On the advice of technicians from the local Family Agriculture secretariat (which accompanied PIP throughout the recovery process), the farmers used **natural methods to combat**

them. They know that it will take a while before the land returns to its natural equilibrium and the insects cease to attack the crops. But **they are determined not to use agrottoxins.**

With the land damaged from the plantations, and with no machinery, **the first harvest yielded very little.** The farmers estimate that it was less than half of what they would have harvested from healthy land, and that this harvest was possible only thanks to the quality of the land. Indeed, the company develops its plantations on the most fertile land with the best topographic conditions, a fact which peasants condemn—not only in Piray, but in other areas of Misiones, too.

Reappearance of Water

In an area that was once a wetland, the water reappeared once the pine trees were cut. Farmers say that the wetland was always there, just that when the company planted eucalyptus and pine trees in the fields that surrounded it, the water almost disappeared and the wetland was at its minimum expression. In fact, the company later planted pine trees over the wetland, since the water had disappeared. "It is a natural water reservoir. If the wetland dries up, the spring that reaches the neighbors' houses, dries up," the producers explain. Now, months after the pine trees have been cut, the stumps can still be seen throughout the wetland that is coming back. The water is returning.

For now, the farmers grow enough for their own consumption, and this allows them to remain on their territory. They still are not producing enough volume to sell in local markets. But that is their project for the future, as they receive the land they are still due. **"Sow Struggle and Harvest Land"** is PIP's motto.

Occupations in Puerto Libertad

70 kilometers north of Piray, in Puerto Libertad, Arauco owns almost 80% of the territory. Of the 80,000 hectares that comprise the municipality, 65,000 are controlled by the company (6). The town has about 7,000 inhabitants and is literally surrounded by pine trees.

There too, Arauco's mechanization caused hundreds of layoffs in the 2000s. Most were chainsaw operators who worked for companies contracted by the multinational corporation. Furthermore, in the urban center of Puerto Libertad there was no longer space for new houses. All this led many families to seek space outside the city to live and simultaneously be able to grow food for subsistence and as a source of family income. **Here, the recovery of land for cultivation happened primarily through occupations.**

About 100 families today make up the "Parajes Unidos" cooperative of Puerto Libertad. Through this cooperative, they organize the production of food, which they sell in different markets. Each family farm is two to three hectares, and they grow cassava, corn and green onion, and raise animals.

The land occupations took place in several stages. One occupation was in 2006, on "capuera" land (rainforest area that was opened up years ago for cultivation). Then, in 2015, land where there had been Arauco plantations were occupied after the company harvested the pine trees. In other cases, former chainsaw operators paid for "improvements" on farms (structures built on a piece of land, but not the land itself), which Arauco later claimed to be their land.

Since they are on occupied land, many peasants face conflicts with the multinational company or with landowners who grow pine trees for the company (due to a national law which limits foreign land ownership, Arauco cannot buy any more land in Misiones). Because of these conflicts, peasants are

often harassed by local police.

Returning Life to the Soil

Nora Duarte is one of the women who participated in several land recoveries; and she has the experience of cultivating land where there were plantations before. She explains that where there were pine plantations for more than 20 years, the land is dry and hard. "There, you can't grow vegetables. Onions, maybe, but not cassava." She says that one of the ways to restore the soil is by planting legumes. After three years of working the land, they are able to harvest about half of what they plant. In other fields, where there were pine plantations for only ten years, they can harvest a greater variety of crops.

Small-scale farmers emphasize **the great investment of money and time they have made to restore the fertility of the land**. While the soil is being restored to the point where it can produce enough for them to live, families have to do "changas" (informal jobs). Neighbors also help each other: they loan each other plots of cultivable land and they exchange food. In some cases, it takes them up to ten years to live solely from their own production.

They do not have support from the State either: "We don't have formal education, but we know what is right and what is wrong," says one of the peasants. **"Why does the government make it so easy for companies to buy machines, and we don't even have enough money to buy a machete?"**, they wonder.

The farmers maintain that if they could take more land and transform it into gardens and farms, many families from nearby towns would join this life project.

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