

Eucalyptus plantations occupied by local community in Minas Gerais

by Alert Against the Green Desert Movement
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In the early morning of 24 November, around 250 peasants, men and women, inhabitants of the community of Vereda Funda, municipality of Rio Pardo de Minas, North of the state of Minas Gerais, reoccupied an area of about 8,000 hectares planted with eucalyptus plantations, called Olhos d'Água and owned by the company Florestaminas. These lands always were so-called devolutas lands. This means that these lands never were registered by the local people, called geraizeiros, who have been occupying these lands for centuries. In 1971, the Minas Gerais state government registered this land and 'rent' it for 20 years to Florestaminas to plant eucalyptus for charcoal production, expelling the local people, and leaving them without their cerrado (sort of 'savannah') vegetation that was able to attend all their basic needs: firewood, food, area for their small cattle, medicinal plants, fruits, water, etc.

In 2001, instead of giving the lands back to the local people, the state of Minas Gerais once again gave the right to Florestaminas to continue planting eucalyptus. A continuous struggle of the local communities towards the state institutions to give these lands back to the people because they belong to them and because they need them for their physical and cultural survival was totally neglected by the state institutions.

The proposal of the community of Vereda Funda is much more than reoccupying their lands. The people developed a proposal to reconvert the 8,000 hectares of lands to the traditional cerrado vegetation, proposing the implementation of a diversified system of food, wood and firewood production, creating 400 direct jobs, income raising and recovery of the water resources situation in the region, heavily affected by several cycles of eucalyptus growing. The plan also includes permanent protection areas. But the state showed little interest in their plans, presented to them over the past few years. And instead of supporting the plan of the community, that could strengthen heavily the local economy, the authorities showed a total interest to continue investing in a monoculture that creates very few jobs, produces charcoal for an iron industry that benefits once again few people, and certainly not the local people that suffer each day more from the plantations that surround and isolate them. And also the fact that the community pilot projects of recovering the traditional vegetation did not have success because the water resources has dried up, the people saw no other alternative than reoccupying their lands on their own.

The Alert against the Green Desert Movement and organizations linked with the Via Campesina give their full support to this struggle of the 133 families of Vereda Funda. But the struggle is not only restricted to this community. Nowadays, about 230,000 hectares of community and devolutas lands in the Minas Gerais state are in the hands of eucalyptus plantation companies that 'rent' these lands from the state government, mostly for less than US\$ 0,30 for each hectare/year.

What can be a result of the lack of willingness to carry out a real land reform, became once again clear in what happened in the municipality of Felizburgo, Minas Gerais, 6 days ago. Five landless workers of the Movement of Landless Workers (MST) were killed by a group of armed pistoleiros in a tents camp on a farm in the municipality of Felizburgo. Since two years, the MST was occupying this farm and it is important to declare that the lands of this farm are also devolutas what means that they should never belong to big farmers. In the state of Minas Gerais, there are around 11 million hectares of devolutas lands, including many eucalyptus plantations.

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