

Fight for the Forest:
Chico Mendes in his own words
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1989.

colonial government encouraged the creation of extensive rubber plantations in Malaya. When these became fully productive after 1910, Amazon rubber exports collapsed, as they could not compete with the far lower prices of Malayan plantation rubber. The rubber estates continued in existence, however, producing for an internal market. When the Allies lost control of Malaya during the Second World War the US government financed the revitalisation of the Amazon estates and another army of poor north-easterners was drafted into the western Amazon region to tap rubber. These *soldados da borracha* (rubber soldiers) were encouraged to migrate to the region for the duration of the war. The agreement between the US and Brazilian authorities promised them repatriation and military pensions, something that never happened. Chico Mendes' father was a *soldado da borracha*.

In the 1960s and 1970s many *seringalistas* abandoned their estates or sold them to ranchers from other parts of Brazil. This was the case with the region around Xapuri. The 1970s and 1980s have seen a growing conflict between ranchers clearing the forest for pasture, and rubber tappers, in many cases free of the oppressive relations with the *seringalista*, but facing eviction and loss of livelihood at the hands of the rancher.

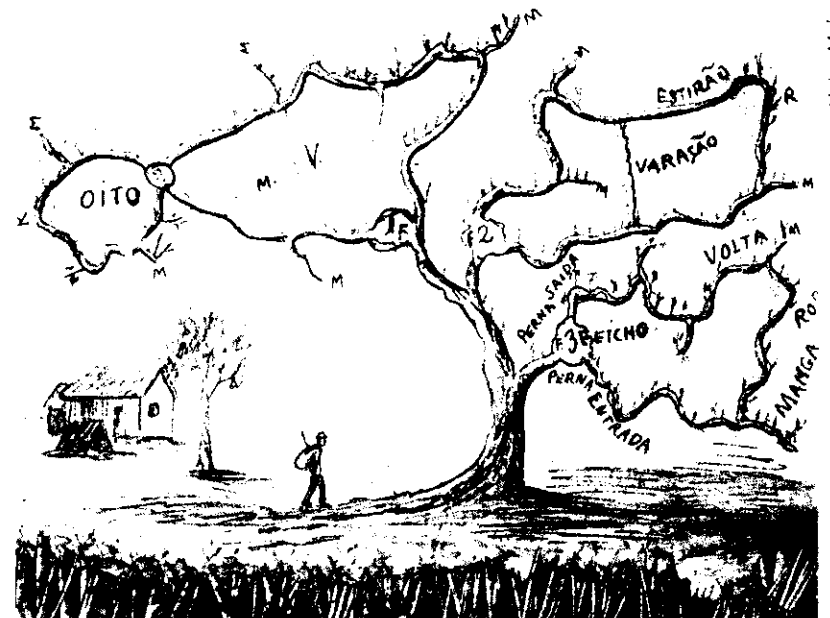


MENDES, CHICO

THE LIFE OF A RUBBER TAPPER

The traditional rubber estate operates on a system of debt bondage. During the rubber boom at the turn of the century the rubber tappers (generally men from the semi-arid north-east escaping the droughts) were obliged to remain single and forbidden to plant food for themselves. They were doubly exploited, obliged to sell their rubber at artificially low prices to the estate and to buy tools and foodstuffs from the estate store. Illiterate and innumerate, they were permanently at the mercy of the *seringalista* and the book-keeper. Leaving the *seringal* was forbidden until the debt was paid off, which rarely happened.

In time, especially after the collapse of the boom, these restrictions were relaxed. Rubber tappers took partners, particularly Indian women, and a new culture evolved, based on this fusion of north-eastern and indigenous characteristics. Although the rubber tapper household began producing some subsistence crops and obtained protein through hunting,



A rubber tapper's plan of his trail through the forest, drawn as a tree.

Helio Melo

A rubber tapper's equipment --- for collecting the latex. (above right)

1. scraper
2. knife
3. handle
4. bucket
5. cup
6. bag
7. rubber thong
8. shoulder bucket
9. lamp
10. shotgun
11. strap
12. dagger

13. cartridge case
14. kit bag

and for smoking the rubber (below right)

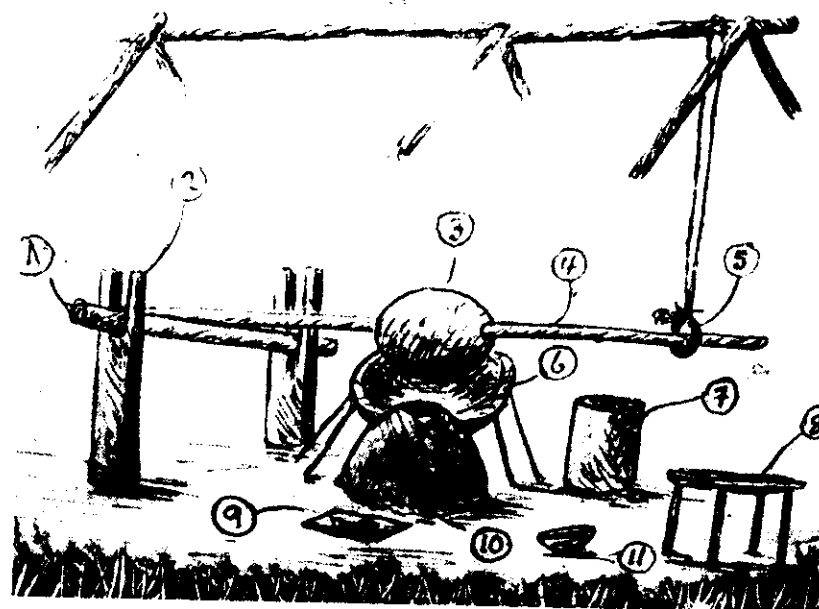
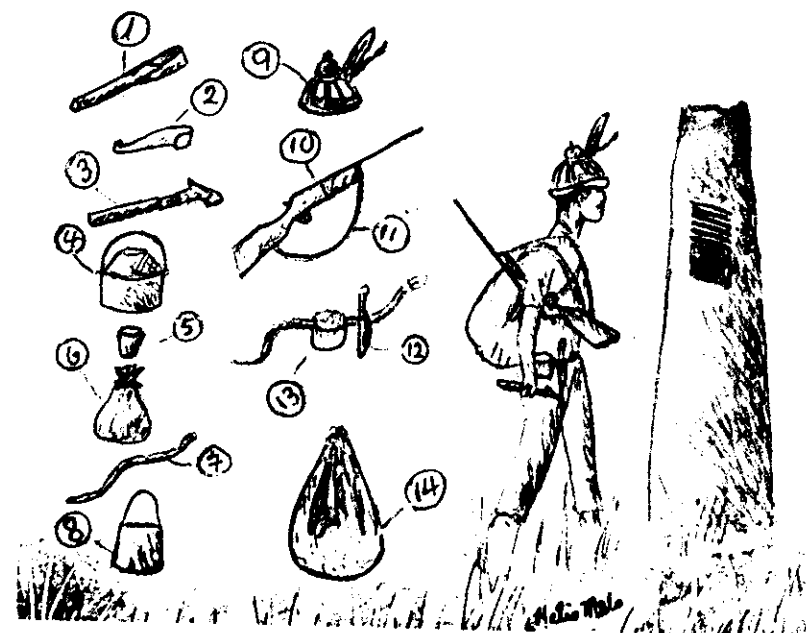
1. 2. 4 & 5 adjustable spit for smoking the rubber (3)
6. large gourd used as basting basin
7. can for latex
8. stool
9. ash pit
10. furnace to burn coconut shells
11. small gourd for scoop

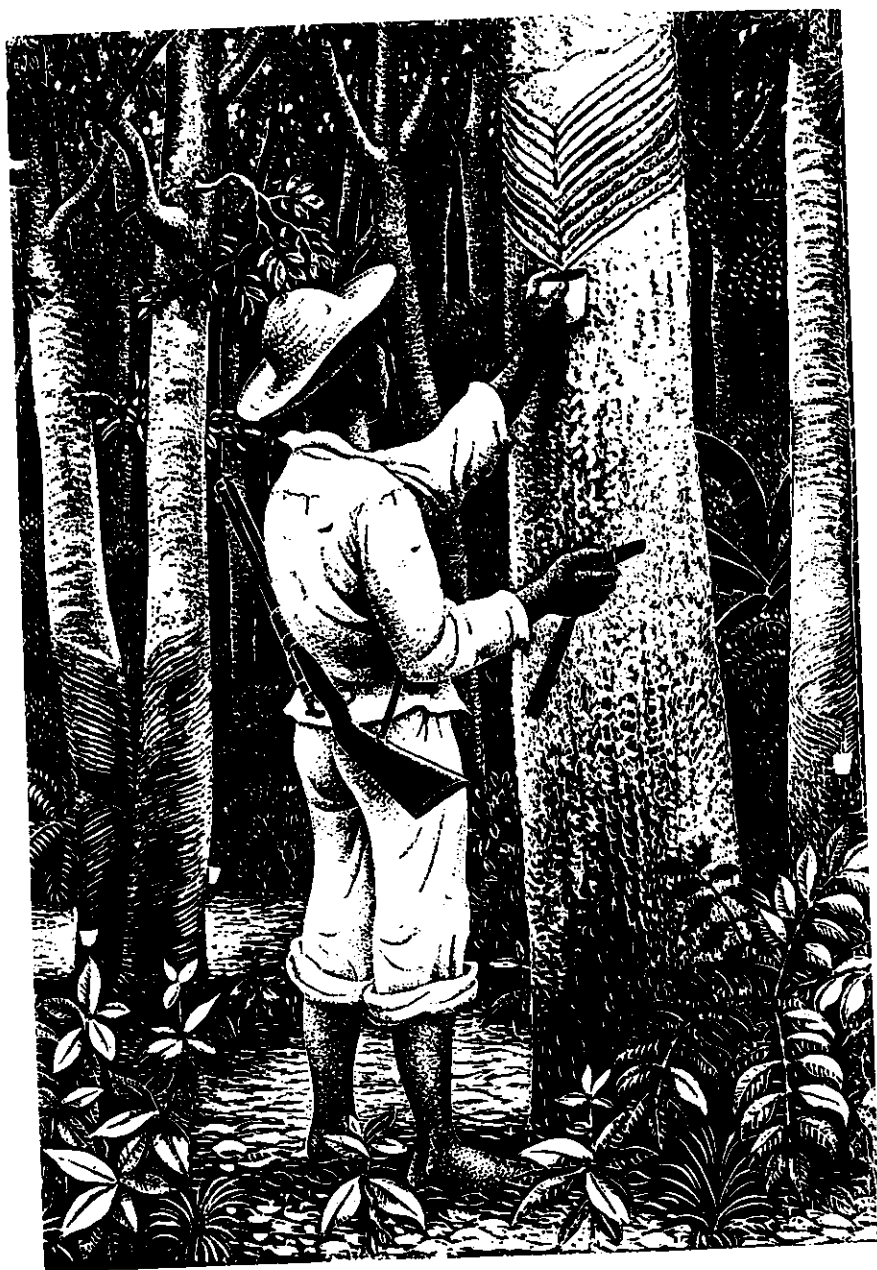
pressure to consume from the estate store meant unbalanced nutritional habits with a disproportionate consumption of tinned foods.

In many parts of the western Amazon this system remains unchanged, although in the area around Xapuri the *seringalista* has given way to the rancher. This means the rubber tapper, instead of being exploited by the estate owner, is simultaneously exploited by local merchants and facing expulsion at the hands of the rancher.

The rubber tapper household (called a *colocação*) is located in the forest. Each is between 15 minutes to an hour's walk from the next and will have two or more trails (*estradas de seringa*) which pass up to 200 rubber trees as they occur naturally in the forest, before looping back to the rubber tapper's house. The day starts before dawn, when the rubber tapper will set out on a circuit of one of these trails, making a new incision in each tree and leaving a small cup to catch the latex. A second circuit is made to collect the latex. The day ends with the rubber tapper coagulating the liquid latex, either pouring it onto a spit over wood-smoke or adding acetic acid and pressing it into blocks. The trails are tapped on alternate days.

Children learn to tap rubber from an early age. When family labour is lacking, the rubber tapper may employ a youth from outside the family on the basis of a share in the production. Although it is generally the men who do most of the rubber tapping, most women will learn the skills and it is not uncommon for unpartnered women to support their families by tapping rubber.





Chapter 1

First Lessons

My life began just like that of all rubber tappers, as a virtual slave bound to do the bidding of his master. I started work at nine years old, and like my father before me, instead of learning my ABC I learned how to extract latex from a rubber tree. From the last century until 1970, schools were forbidden on any rubber estate in the Amazon. The rubber estate owners wouldn't allow it. First, because if a rubber tapper's children went to school, they would learn to read, write and add up and would discover to what extent they were being exploited. This wasn't in the bosses' interests. Also it was better for production to have the children available for work rather than going to school.

So for many years, the great majority of us could neither read nor write. The rubber tapper worked all year hoping he would finally make a profit but always remained in debt. As he couldn't count, he couldn't tell whether he was being cheated or not.

But something out of the ordinary happened to me. One afternoon in 1962, someone new passed by our house on the rubber estate where we lived. He was a worker, a rubber tapper, but looked and spoke completely differently from the rest. He called by on a day when we had just got back from tapping and were busy curing the latex. He began to chat and the way he spoke intrigued me. He brought newspapers with him. At that time I didn't even know what a newspaper was, but I showed an interest in them and I think he realised I was keen. Anyway, my father and I arranged to go and see him.

One day, we set off to visit his home. To get there, we had to walk for three hours along a narrow trail in the forest. He lived alone in his hut. He said he would like to teach me how to read, and he and

my father agreed I could take time off work at the weekends to go and spend some time with him.

Forest Politics

Every Saturday I left in the afternoon and walked through the forest for three hours to get to his hut. As we had no text book, he used to use a political column in the newspaper. He received these newspapers a long time after they came out, a month, two months. This went on for several months and in no time I could read and write. My father also understood a little bit and he helped me too, but he didn't have much time to teach me. This other person was much more able, he was very intelligent. I was so interested in what he had to say that at times I spent the whole night awake, listening to him.

After a year had gone by like this, he began to tell me something about himself. One night, he told me had been in the army, that he had been a lieutenant in 1935. He and some of his colleagues had joined the movement led by Luís Carlos Prestes¹ at that time. He told me the country had been in a bad way and that he had decided to fight for the revolution led by Prestes. But Prestes was defeated and many people were arrested. He and other colleagues were imprisoned on the island of Fernando de Noronha.

He had relations on the government side and they managed to arrange his escape by boat from the island to Belém in the state of Pará. There he joined another rebellion and once again he was arrested. He escaped again and went to Bolivia, where in the 1950s he played an active part in the struggles of the Bolivian workers, the miners and the opposition movements. Then there was a great wave of repression and he was one of the people they were looking for, but before they could arrest him he fled into the jungle and made his way through the rubber estates across the border to Brazil.

The Bolivian border was just two hours' walk away from his hut, and he had decided to stay where he was, for safety's sake. So he lived on his own and learned how to tap rubber. He never even learned how to cook. He really did lead a complicated life! After I had known him a year, he told me his name. It was Euclides Fernandes Távora.

The 1964 Coup

The most important thing I learned from him was about 1964, when there was a military coup in Brazil. I'd already learned a lot from



Rubber tapper using a brazil nut pod to collect latex. Xapuri.

my conversations with him. He'd managed to get hold of a radio and I learned how to get the Portuguese-language programmes transmitted from abroad. The first programme I used to listen to was transmitted at five o'clock every afternoon by Radio Moscow. Straight after that, there was a programme on the Voice of America and around the same time, a broadcast in Portuguese by the BBC in London. These three programmes had a lot of power in the Amazon.

THE MILITARY COUP OF 1964

The government of João Goulart (1961-64), leader of the Labour Party and *bête noire* of the armed forces, tried to undertake structural economic and social reforms, provoking intense opposition from conservative forces. The opposition had the support of the US, concerned to prevent radical change in Latin America in the aftermath of the Cuban revolution.

The Goulart years saw increased inflation and the growing organisation of the working class and the dispossessed. Industrial trade unions pressed for reform of restrictive labour legislation, while rural workers' unions were formed for the first time, and the sugar plantations of the north-east witnessed the first attempts to challenge the almost absolute power over life and death held by landowners. Innovative community action and literacy projects began to flourish, under the initiative of the Church or progressive figures like Paulo Freire. Conservative forces, their interests challenged, and the military hierarchy, threatened by growing militancy amongst the ranks, carried out a coup in April 1964 to 'prevent subversion' and 'restore order'.

The military promoted a new economic and social model, attracting foreign capital for a programme of rapid industrialisation by offering political stability and cheap, docile labour. They achieved this through wage control and the concentration of wealth, leading to the coexistence of high growth rates and increasing poverty. Opposition was suppressed by force.

The growing economic crisis, beginning with the oil price rises of the mid-1970s and deepening with the debt crisis after 1982, forced the military to plan its withdrawal from direct political administration, whilst nominating and controlling future civilian

presidents. Successive changes in electoral legislation were made to achieve this.

The military's plans went astray when the opposition candidate Tancredo Neves, able to unite a wide spectrum of political forces, won the indirect presidential election in 1985. However he died before taking office and the vice-presidential candidate José Sarney, previously leader of the military's political party and an opponent of democratic reforms, was installed as president. The Sarney government has presided over economic mismanagement, growing rural violence and the failure to undertake much-needed measures such as agrarian reform.

The presidential elections scheduled for November 1989 will be the first direct election of a president since 1960.

Every night we discussed the radio programmes. After the coup, for example, we listened to the Voice of America talking about a great victory for democracy in Brazil. Another night, we would listen to Radio Moscow condemning the repression in Brazil and saying the coup was financed by the American CIA and supported by the conservative sectors of the Church. The programme gave a very good analysis. We also learned from these broadcasts that the real patriots of our country were being massacred and many of them had been arrested, tortured, and exiled, while many more had been disappeared or assassinated. They were all activists.

Meanwhile the Voice of America kept on repeating that there had been a great victory for democracy against anarchy, corruption, terrorism and communism and so on. So you see, I learned all the different versions. After every programme, we used to discuss and compare the US and the Soviet versions.

This made me very much more aware in 1965, the last year that I saw much of Euclides. He gave me a lot of advice about how to organise in the trade union movement. He said we had at least 10, 15, 20 years of dictatorship ahead of us but that new unions, new organisations would emerge. Despite the defeats, humiliations and massacres, the roots of the movement were always there, he said. The plants would always germinate again sooner or later, however much they were attacked. He told me nobody had ever been able to eliminate this movement for liberation in the world. It was a very good lesson, a prophecy about our country's future.

Getting Involved

Then he said: 'Look, you ought to get involved in trade union organisation in this area. They will emerge, sooner or later, I don't know when, but that is where you ought to be. Don't avoid joining a union just because it is linked to the system, to the Ministry of Labour and the dictatorship.'

'You must get involved', he continued. 'You know, Lenin always said you shouldn't stay out of a union just because it is yellow. You must join it and use it to organise the grassroots, spread your ideas and strengthen the movement. Who knows, you might overthrow that system. The unions may be completely tied to the government but don't worry about their philosophy or about the politics of whoever is in charge. Mind you, they will be servants of the government and you'll need to know about them when you're in there.'

I think that was one of the most important bits of advice he gave me and one of the reasons why I am in this struggle today. Unfortunately, other friends did not have the privilege of knowing Euclides.

In 1968, I tried to organise the rubber tappers and I came up against a lot of problems. I tried to do it on my own - I didn't have any backing. It was during the hardest years of the dictatorship and it was very difficult to get people interested. We had to wait until 1975, at a time when the whole region was under the sway of the landowners, before the first trade unions were formed, on the initiative of CONTAG and according to guidelines drawn up by the Ministry of Labour.

CONTAG AND THE BRAZILIAN UNIONS

Brazil's trade union structure dates from the Estado Novo, the period of Getúlio Vargas' dictatorship from 1937-45. Vargas' model was Mussolini's labour code, which states that trade unions are subordinate to the Ministry of Labour. Union membership is obligatory. The Ministry controls the finances, collecting members' dues and apportioning funds within the trade union structure. It can intervene in union affairs, removing officers and appointing its own nominees in certain cases.

Unions are divided up according to category or profession and to their municipality. For example, bank workers in

metropolitan São Paulo (composed of various municipalities) will be members of different bank workers' unions depending on where they work. Construction workers in these same municipalities will have their own building workers' unions, as will every other labour category. Each type of union will come together at a state level in a federation, and these federations support a national level confederation.

Under the legislation, contact is prohibited between unions of different labour categories. For example, there is no legal structure whereby bank workers' unions and building workers' unions can meet. (This however has not prevented the de facto emergence in the 1980s of trade union congresses.)

CONTAG (*Confederação dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura*) is the Confederation of Rural Workers' Unions. At the time Chico Mendes is describing, the state of Acre had no rural workers' unions in existence. CONTAG therefore decided in 1975 to send a representative from Brasília to Rio Branco, the state capital of Acre, charged with creating, from the top downwards, rural workers' unions in the municipalities of Acre. The unions in Brasília and Xapuri were the first to be formed. By the early 1980s rural workers' unions had been formed in all the municipalities of Acre, together with the state federation of rural workers' unions - FETACRE (*Federação dos Sindicatos dos Trabalhadores Rurais do Acre*).

When I heard that the first union was to be founded in Brasília, I remembered Euclides' advice and went straight there, without waiting for an invitation. They accepted me and I did a course on trade unionism as part of the union's initial work. I did well. Because of what I had learned ten years previously, I felt at ease taking part in the discussions there, but I soon saw the kind of cautious, conservative thinking that lay behind the union. On the face of it, the union was there to defend the rubber tappers but it was actually all about preserving the status quo. I saw this straight away but it only made me want to penetrate that movement even more.

So I joined the Brasília union in 1975. Elias Roseno was elected President, Raimundo Maranhão, Treasurer, and myself as Secretary. Since there was no money to pay any of us, we three took turns staffing the office. I used to stay one, two or three weeks in the union office while the others worked and then we would swap over. Some friends in Xapuri who worked on the rubber estates near to Brasília

found out I was Secretary and also joined the union, but Xapuri was a separate municipality and I decided to come back and set up a union here.

It was difficult at first, because Xapuri was quite different from Brasília. At that time, in Brasília, the Church was led by Bishop Dom Giocondo of the prelacy of Acre-Purus. He had come out in favour of the rubber tappers, and the inauguration of the union, as well as its courses and training days were all carried out on church premises. Things were different here in Xapuri. In fact, I soon got a police summons for the first time in my life, because a local priest had told the police about my activities. This priest was close to the landowners and against any kind of organisation by the workers. He also happened to be a secret agent of the government's intelligence system, the SNI. His name was Father José Carneiro de Lima.

It was a bit difficult to organise the union here but everyone worked hard to get it going. From 1978 onwards, when I was already in Xapuri, Wilson Pinheiro² was elected as leader of the Brasília union. He was a very able and courageous person and he strengthened the movement a lot.

Elected by Accident

When I was still on the union executive in Brasília, but already thinking about moving to Xapuri to help organise a union there, general elections were called. At that time, the military dictatorship allowed only two political parties to function - ARENA, the National Renovating Alliance and the MDB, the Brazilian Democratic Movement. The MDB was generally seen as an opposition party though it was really a party created by the dictatorship. Even so, it was the only party that workers had the least bit of confidence in because it opposed the dictatorship at a very difficult time. There were a lot of people who didn't even feel brave enough to stand as a candidate for an opposition party.

I was invited to stand as candidate for the Xapuri municipal council, because the party needed a minimum number of candidates to be able to take part at all. I accepted just to make up the numbers. When I consulted my colleagues in Brasília, they were a bit worried because they didn't think it was the right moment. I felt I should stand because it would help me when it came to organising a union in Xapuri, and in the end people agreed with me.

So I came here to Xapuri and stood as MDB candidate for the municipal council. I was still thinking I was just a name on a list that

would allow the MDB to take part nationally. I didn't have any money and I didn't have any experience of party politics. I voted for the opposition and I was opposed to the government, but I didn't fully understand the party political process. In the end, however, I was elected. My lack of experience made things difficult for me. My background was in the trade union movement, but now I had to get on with both the political party and trade union aspects of the struggle.

The party for which I was elected, the MDB, won a total of three seats on the council and the regime's party got four. I knew things wouldn't be easy since the landowners' side had the majority, but I had hoped that at least my two MDB colleagues would show support for the workers. I was to be disappointed. They didn't share my idea of using the mandate as an instrument of struggle for the rubber tappers. The first initiatives I took on the council were aimed at stopping the expulsion of rubber tappers from their land. This didn't go down very well either with my colleagues or with the majority party. It didn't go down very well either with senior politicians in the MDB and in 1977 I nearly got kicked out of office. I got more and more disillusioned.

I took an active part in founding the union. I wasn't eligible for election to the union executive because I was holding political office but I worked to get colleagues elected. It was from about this time that I began to receive support from the local Church which was going through a process of change after that reactionary priest I mentioned had left.

The years 1978 and 1979 were very difficult for me, what with being a town councillor and involved in the trade union movement at the same time. I was told I couldn't be a member of the union unless I was working in agriculture, so I went out tapping rubber and harvesting brazil nuts while the local council assembly was in recess. After the union allowed me to affiliate, I took part in a lot of its decision-making processes.

An Injured Lion

The situation improved but the political fights with the landowners and the other six town councillors were very rough. It was one of my bitterest experiences but it taught me a lot. It was how I found out about how the party political machine works, how workers are conned. It's a tragic, ridiculous system. Without realising it, workers are like the person who meets an injured lion, cures the lion and then

gets eaten by it! The workers strengthen the politicians who then defend the workers' enemies. And many workers have still not discovered this.

At that time I began to get to know a different set of people: the intellectuals, people with an education, students and university professors in other left-wing movements. These people began to try and recruit me and I got involved with another side of things, the clandestine political parties. I even went so far as to participate in the PC do B, an illegal Communist Party at the time. I was attracted by the proposals of the left and began to realise I was in the wrong party, but for tactical reasons I wanted to carry on in the MDB. I felt I ought to continue using the mandate as an instrument of struggle because things would be worse otherwise.

It was towards the end of 1979 that the Workers' Party (PT) was created. Trade unionists in São Paulo and here in Acre asked me to join. It was a difficult decision because the PC do B considered anyone who joined the PT as a traitor. I disagreed with the way the PC do B behaved. We organised together against the landowners but when there was any repression, they disappeared while I had to face the consequences. I kept finding myself on my own. I began to get angry about it and to be suspicious of them, so I left the PC do B and joined the PT.

THE RISE OF THE WORKERS' PARTY

In 1979 the imposed bi-party system of Arena and the MDB was breaking down and was replaced with new legislation. Although this permitted the creation of new parties, the registration procedures were complex and designed to perpetuate old-style parties under another guise. The PT (*Partido dos Trabalhadores* - Workers' Party) grew out of the metal workers' strikes of São Paulo (1978, 1979 and 1980) together with emerging rural and urban grassroots movements and progressive Church organisations. It represented a new network of community and union organisations which had emerged during the military period and which saw the official opposition party, the MDB, as unrepresentative. They wanted to create a new sort of party, one that was democratic, participative, and built from the bottom upwards.

The founders of the PT managed to stand the new 1979 legislation on its head. The legislation required parties to have local committees in at least 20 per cent of the municipalities in



Forest calendar: each groove marks a day's work

Wendy Fendley Christian, Acre

at least 12 states. This was clearly designed to facilitate the registration of previously existing parties, and presumed that no new party would be able to achieve this in the short term. The PT was able to satisfy these draconian requirements within a year by coming into being as the voice of a plethora of already existing groups: union (industrial, rural, professional), neighbourhood, Church and intellectual. By the end of 1981 the PT had over 500,000 members, coming from nowhere to become Brazil's fourth largest party. Unlike other political parties, the PT is based on the principles of participation and democratic decision-making, through local groups, regional co-ordination bodies, and state-level committees to the national party conventions.

In electoral terms the PT grew slowly. In the 1982 elections it had a handful of federal deputies and senators elected to the National Congress, but PT President Luís Inácio da Silva (Lula) failed in his bid to be elected governor of São Paulo state. The 1985 municipal elections and 1986 congressional and state elections saw advances for the party, but the major turning point came in the municipal elections of November 1988. With an electorate disillusioned after three years of economic crisis and perceived corruption within the PMDB/PFL alliance supporting President Sarney, many voters turned to the PT. The party increased its overall share of the vote, increased its representation on a number of important municipal administrations and, above all, won the mayoral elections in Porto Alegre and São Paulo, plus the ring of industrial suburbs surrounding São Paulo.

This altered the balance of party forces considerably, and the opinion polls saw a substantial rise in Lula's support for the November 1989 presidential elections. However the new PT municipal administrations now have to try and govern in a situation of political and financial chaos, and electoral support for the PT may well decline in the run-up to the presidential elections.

I became active in the PT. I joined because it was a party that was very attuned to the aspirations of the trade union movement. But I had further bitter experiences, not to do with the national policies of the party but because of various groups that decided to enter it - I was a victim of internal disagreements. In 1982, I stood as a PT candidate for the state legislative assembly but lost.

I had to face a lot of internal opposition because the right-wing of the party believed my candidacy would damage the party by leading it to adopt a radical line. The worst people were those linked to the Church, people who were supposed to be progressive. But that's all right, I accepted it as all part of the process of struggle and got on with the job.

I got more and more involved in the trade union movement, feeling it was the best place for me to participate. It all made me remember the advice given to me by Euclides, back in 1965. I continued to be active in the PT but from 1982 onwards I devoted myself to the Xapuri Rural Workers Union.

Today, I am a member of the National Council of Rubber Tappers (CNS)³. I've kept off the executive to leave space for other members, but I have a leadership role nevertheless. People are saying I should stand for the CNS executive at the next national meeting which is due to take place in March 1989 (see epilogue). I believe the CNS can make a very big contribution to the movement, nationally and internationally.

My role, not as a leader, but as a comrade, has been to contribute to the strengthening of our movement, and today I think the CNS has become very important to the struggle. Even though I'm speaking as President of the Xapuri Rural Workers' Union, I think it's the CNS that's the key to strengthening the trade union movement in the Amazon region. As one of its members, I aim to do all I can.



Chapter 2

Learning to Fight

‘With Wilson Pinheiro showing us the way as President of the Brasília trade union, our resistance movement spread across the region. The years of 1978 and 1979 were especially important in this process, and the work done at that time made the Brasília union into one of the strongest around. Even CONTAG recognised that.’

In 1979, Wilson Pinheiro led a group of 300 rubber tappers to Boca do Acre, in the state of Amazonas, and drove out a group of gunmen who were threatening land squatters there. The rubber tappers only carried knives and sickles, but they still managed to disarm the gunmen, confiscating more than 20 automatic rifles. When they got back to Rio Branco they handed the rifles over to the local army unit, but the local army commander got angry with them and accused them of wanting to turn the area into another Cuba. Wilson replied: ‘No, we are trying to avoid this place becoming another Cuba.’

A Spiral of Violence

This made a big impression on people and got the landowners worried. As a result, in June 1980, the region’s landowners held a secret meeting about the resistance the rubber tappers were organising. They decided the solution was to kill Wilson Pinheiro along with a leader from Xapuri - that could easily have been me. In this way, they hoped to stop the resistance and carry on clearing the forest unheeded.

They hired two gunmen for 400,000 Cruzeiros (£3,300) each. On the night of the 21 July 1980 one of the gunmen went to our office in Brasília and at 7.30 in the evening, right there in the union office, he shot Wilson Pinheiro dead. The other hired killer went to Xapuri but didn't manage to find any of the people on his list. Luckily, we were all at a union meeting in the Juruá Valley.

The workers were really angry about Wilson's death. We tried to get the police to investigate, setting a time limit of seven days for something to be done. Unfortunately, the law turned a blind eye. We were still in the time of the dictatorship and the only police official who showed any interest in getting to the bottom of the crime was removed from his post by the state's Security Minister.

On the seventh day, the rubber tappers realised the police weren't going to do anything and angrily went off to an estate about 80 kilometres from Brasília, where they seized one of the landowners known to have organised Wilson's assassination. It was clear that this particular landowner was part of the whole conspiracy to kill Wilson. The workers gave him a summary trial and condemned him to be shot. He got about 30 or 40 bullets.

The workers were prepared to leave it at that because they thought they had, at least in part, avenged the death of their leader. But this time the police acted fast. In the next 24 hours dozens, hundreds of rubber tappers were arrested, tortured, some of them had their nails torn out with pliers. All because ordinary workers had reacted to a crime committed by wealthy and powerful people.

In a way the movement suffered a defeat in Brasília. The repression forced us onto the defensive. But resistance had to go on, though this time with Xapuri as the organisational base. The Xapuri union was founded with a great deal of self-sacrifice in April 1977. The local Church, the middle class and the local authorities put a lot of pressure on us, but despite this, the rubber tappers were very anxious to see things change and to be free from all the pressure and the threats. It all began quite slowly, but the task of organising against the major cases of deforestation got under way again.

In Xapuri we had one particular thing on our minds. We wanted to involve people much more widely in the discussion and preparation of our resistance so that what happened in Brasília couldn't happen again. Wilson had centralised things in Brasília and when he was killed there was quite a downturn in the resistance. Here in Xapuri we wanted to improve grassroots organisation so the movement would be stronger.

Education for a Change

From then on, the Xapuri rubber tappers showed the way in the struggle against deforestation. The Xapuri union came up with a proposal to use popular education to help develop our level of organisation, to help make contact with more people and draw them into the movement. People's lack of understanding of their situation had been causing us a lot of problems. The rubber tappers have been here for more than a hundred years with no schools, nothing, while at the same time being brainwashed by the rubber estate owners. People tend to keep that slave mentality and therefore do not involve themselves much in the struggle.

We first began to do some education work in 1979, and from 1982 onwards a popular education programme, based on the concerns and lives of the workers, got properly under way. Things went slowly but even so, the programme began to make a big contribution by getting rubber tappers to think more about what was going on around them. It's something that needs to be a permanent part of our work. There was a literacy programme organised by people linked to Paulo Freire and the Ecumenical Documentation and Information Centre



A literacy class at Floresta rubber estate, a day's walk into the forest from Xapuri. The literacy teacher lives with the rubber tappers for some months and trains further teachers to carry on the work.

Levy Gross Dwyer

(CEDI). The strengthening of our movement has coincided with the development of the education programme.

Projeto Seringueiro is organised by the National Council of Rubber Tappers (CNS) and aims to encourage the rubber tappers to identify more closely with the forest, to understand it, to learn more about it and defend it. It is a slow process, but we are making progress.

PROJETO SERINGUEIRO

Projeto Seringueiro (the Rubber Tapper Project) was begun in 1980. In addition to the promotion of co-operatives, the project recognised that the prime need was to increase rubber tappers' self-confidence and understanding, to enable them to administer the co-operatives without the need for outside project workers. For this to happen, those involved needed literacy and numeracy training in order to handle the co-operatives' financial affairs.

From the beginning, the literacy programme, devised by CEDI, was a key part of the project. Potential literacy teachers were chosen by the communities to receive training to improve their literacy skills. They then returned to teach other members of their communities. The initial support came from Oxfam and later from the Ecumenical Services Network (CESE). The federal government, through the National Heritage Foundation of the Ministry of Culture, subsequently supported the project and the state government's education department now provides some of the salaries and running costs. Relations between the rubber tappers and the project on the one hand and the authorities on the other are often tense.

From the start, the project has worked closely with the Rural Workers' Union in Xapuri.

“At first, the programme was directed only at adults. But the adults began to complain that after a day's work they were too tired to study. They said they were too old and it was more important that the children had the chance to study. They managed to convince the education team, and now the team is putting together material for our children. They learn about our *empates* at school and often insist on taking part themselves!

All this has already been important to our struggle in Xapuri. For example the victory at Cachoeira, the first extractive reserve in Xapuri, resulted from the advances in the level of our organisation, and of course the education work contributed to that.

CACHOEIRA – SUCCESS AT A PRICE

Cachoeira ('rapids') was the name of the rubber estate in the forest outside Xapuri where Chico Mendes was brought up and started life as a rubber tapper. He worked on the Cachoeira estate from the age of ten until his early thirties, when he began devoting most of his time to the rural workers' union.

In 1987 Cachoeira was bought by Darli Alves da Silva. Using a mixture of inducements and threats, he tried to drive out the 60 families of rubber tappers who had lived and worked on the estate for generations. Chico Mendes invested a great deal of effort and all his powers of persuasion and leadership to convince the rubber tappers of Cachoeira to stay where they were, and Darli issued death threats against him. In the second half of 1988, following the shooting of two youths during the *empate* at the Ecuador rubber estate in May and the assassination of Ivair Higino in June, the federal government sought to defuse the situation by signing expropriation orders for three extractive reserves. One of these was Cachoeira, where 6,000 hectares were allocated to the rubber tappers.

This victory for the rubber tappers was also the death sentence for Chico, as the family of Darli Alves sought to avenge their defeat. The attempts on his life became systematic and on 22 December 1988 he was murdered.

“When we began to try and set up our own schools, we asked international agencies for financial support. We got some help from Oxfam. At that time the landowners were telling the security forces that we were getting money from Moscow to help organise a guerrilla army! This led to an increased presence of the security forces and created a very difficult situation, at least until 1983. But then they realised there was no truth in the landowners' accusations and let us get on with our work. We didn't let them intimidate us. In fact, when we saw the security forces getting involved, we realised we must be on the right track!

ENCONTRO NACIONAL DE SERINGUEIROS DA AMAZÔNIA



11 a 17 de outubro de 1985
Auditório da Faculdade de Tecnologia - UnB
Brasília - DF

Iniciativa: Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais de Xapuri-Acre. Promoção: Federação dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura do Estado do Acre — Seringueiros do Amazonas — Associação de Seringueiros e Soldados da Borracha de Rondônia.
Apoio: Instituto de Estudos Sócio-Econômicos (INESC) — Ministério da Cultura — Fundação Nacional pro Memória — Universidade de Brasília.

Poster announcing the first national meeting of rubber tappers. The drawing is by Hélio Melo, a rubber tapper.

After that the work went ahead well. We've now got 18 schools in the Xapuri region and we want to use the experience we've gained to help rubber tappers set up schools like ours all across the Amazon region. The education programme is certainly going to make a big contribution to our struggle.

We have now managed to get a grant from CESE to pay the programme's co-ordinating team. In addition, many of the teachers are now getting a salary from the state government, because of the pressure we were able to put on the Education Secretary.

Last year, we signed an agreement with the Ministry of Education in Brasília for government funds to build our own schools. It wasn't very much money: 1.164.000 Cruzeiros (£16,000) for 12 schools. The work only got done because everybody in the community contributed. The Ministry of Education officials were amazed - when they came to inspect the schools, they said they'd never seen anything like it before. They told us of local authorities that had received a lot more money but hadn't managed to build a third of what we'd done.

There are limits to what the government is prepared to do. It isn't interested in politicising workers, because it knows very well that if workers become politically conscious they learn to stand on their own two feet. But even so, our education work has been positive. We believe that all our advances, the fight against the destruction of the forest, the organising of the co-operative and the strengthening of our union, were all possible thanks to the education programme.

Looking for Alternatives

A moment arrived when we began to get worried, because we had got a fight on our hands, the struggle to resist deforestation, but at the same time we didn't really have an alternative project of our own to put forward for the development of the forest. We didn't have strong enough arguments to justify why we wanted to defend the forest.

The CNS grew out of our need to work out alternative development proposals for the Amazon forest. People in the union at Xapuri came up with the idea of organising a national meeting of rubber tappers and forming a commission of rubber tappers to go to Brasília. We decided such a commission should be representative of the whole of the Amazon region.

Mary Allegratti¹, who worked for INESC in Brasília, thought it was a good idea, and in May 1985 I went to Brasília and had a meeting with officials of the National Heritage department of the Ministry of

Culture. I asked for financial support to call a national meeting of rubber tappers, and in the end INESC, National Heritage and other organisations including Oxfam agreed to cover the costs.

This ended up as the First National Rubber Tappers' Congress, held in Brasília. Why Brasília? Because it was the decision-making centre of the country. Also because most of the authorities thought the Amazon region was just one big empty jungle. We wanted to show them the Amazon was in fact inhabited - there were people living and working in the forest.

The important thing about this meeting was that it would provide an opportunity to set up an organisation, or at least to try and set one up, that would be able to develop alternatives which would justify and strengthen our resistance movement in the fight against deforestation.

The National Rubber Tappers' Congress was to take place in October 1985. After I got back from Brasília, we set up an organising committee composed of representatives of the trade union, the *Projeto Seringueiro* and other organisations. Mary spent her time organising things at the Brasília end. A few comrades were delegated to go and seek out rubber tappers in strategic parts of the Amazon and discuss the meeting.

Finally, in October 1985, we managed to bring together 130 rubber tappers from the whole Amazon region. Observers from the rest of Brazil and from abroad were also present. The discussions at this meeting produced the proposal for extractive reserves in the Amazon. This proposal allowed us to put forward an economic development alternative to back up our fight against deforestation, and the idea really took off. It was from then on that the rubber tappers' struggle began to get known all over the world.

THE BRASÍLIA MEETING

Over a hundred rubber tappers, representing seventeen rural workers' unions and rubber tappers' organisations from Acre, Amazonas and Rondônia, travelled to Brasília for the meeting. For most of them this was their first trip outside the region, in some cases the first beyond their immediate home. One woman described how she had travelled to the meeting: two days down the Jutai river by canoe, two days by river boat down the main Amazon river to Manaus, a day by bus to Porto Velho, meeting up with the rest of the participants for the two day bus ride to

Brasília. Prior to this she had never been beyond the mouth of the Jutai river.

Officials from the Ministries of Industry and Commerce, Education, Health, Agriculture, Agrarian Reform and Culture, together with members of the National Congress also attended. The final document from the meeting listed 63 demands relating to Amazon development policy, agrarian reform, rubber policy, food policy, health, education and culture, pensions and social security. The first two were:

'We demand a development policy for Amazonia that meets the interests of rubber tappers and respects our rights. We do not accept an Amazon development policy that favours large enterprises which exploit and massacre rural workers and destroy nature.'

'We are not opposed to technology, provided that it is at our service and does not ignore our wisdom, our experience, our interests and our rights'.

“ We had meetings with officials of several government departments and agencies where there were some sympathetic officials, and soon the first working group was established to discuss the proposal for extractive reserves in the Amazon. The idea had really caught on.

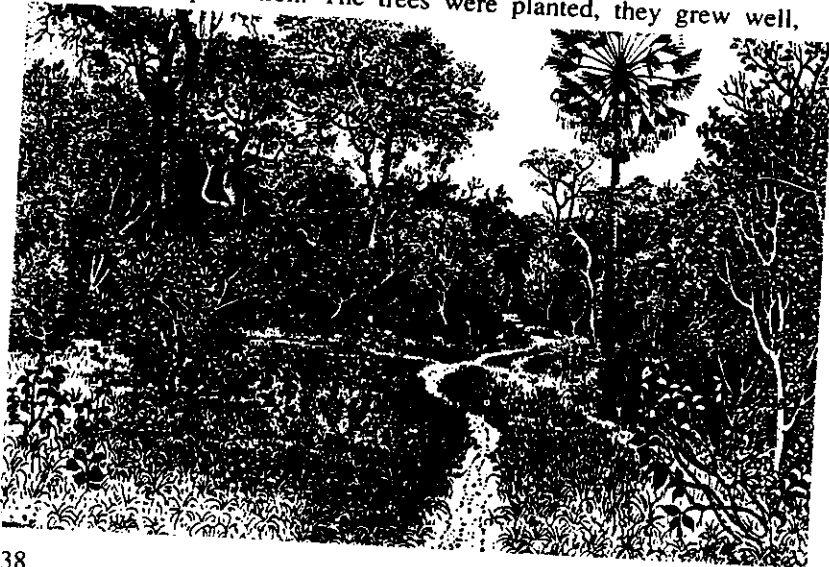
At the moment, we are preparing for a second national meeting of the CNS which we plan to hold in the second half of March 1989 (see epilogue). That meeting will elect an executive which will take over from the provisional executive elected in 1985. So the CNS is now a reality. ”

THE FOREST WORLD

One reason for the diversity of life in rainforests is their great age. Evolution has rolled on in many rainforests for the past sixty million years, making them the oldest communities on earth.

Another reason for their extraordinary richness and diversity is the hot and moist climate. Because temperatures never drop to freezing point, organisms can grow and reproduce continuously throughout the year. Survival depends not upon enduring periods of extreme cold or drought, but upon finding an ecological niche in which one can hold one's own. The climate provides an abundance of such niches. The transition from aquatic to terrestrial life probably occurred in just such warm, moist conditions. Rainforests are the only places on earth where typically aquatic animals can live out of the water.

One disadvantage of highly specialised species is that, because they depend on a particular set of conditions, they are more likely to become extinct if their environment is disturbed. The US imports more than US\$16 million of brazil nuts every year, gathered by Indians and peasant collectors from trees scattered throughout the forest. Some years ago an entrepreneur decided it would be more efficient to grow the nuts on a plantation. The trees were planted, they grew well,



and in due course they flowered. But they produced no nuts. No one knows exactly how brazil nuts are pollinated, but it seems to depend on a combination of certain species of bees and orchids which did not exist in the plantation.

Subtract the forest from the ground on which it stands, and with few exceptions you are left with poor soil. Why is it so poor? Partly because it is so old. Soil is a mixture of air, water, decomposed vegetation and broken-down rock. Its fertility depends largely on the quality and age of the rock from which it has formed. The Amazon basin developed between two ancient rock masses, the Brazilian and Guayanan shields, several billion years old. They are amongst the oldest rock formations on earth, and the soil formed from them is ancient, weathered and infertile. Only six per cent of the Amazon basin's soils have no major limitations to agriculture.

The tropical rainforest is a closed system, within which the same nutrients are continually recycled. As soon as a leaf or a branch dies and falls to the ground, it begins to decay. Micro-organisms attack the debris and speed up the process of decay, and specialised roots help the plants absorb the nutrients as soon as they are released.

Because a high proportion of the nutrients comes from above, rainforest trees have many small 'feeding roots' that spread out on the forest floor. Often a thick, spongy mass of roots, fungi, humus, bacteria and other micro-organisms covers the soil. Here in the root mat, which may be as much as 16 inches thick and can be peeled back like newly laid lawn turf, the forest decomposes and nourishes itself, acting as a slow release fertiliser.

Rainforest canopies cushion the soil from the impact of the rain, protecting it from erosion and landslides. Their roots act as sponges, absorbing the rain and releasing it slowly. This way, the forests to some extent even out seasonal extremes, conducting a steady and moderate flow of rainwater to the world's major rivers. When the forest is removed, so is this moderating influence. During the rainy season the full force of tropical storms is felt at once, and there are no reserves left to ease the hardship of the dry months. With cruel irony, deforestation brings flooding and drought.

Adapted from Catherine Caulfield, *In the Rainforest*, Heinemann, London 1985



Chapter 3

Building Bridges

“ We realised that in order to guarantee the future of the Amazon we had to find a way to preserve the forest while at the same time developing the region’s economy.

So what were our thoughts originally? We accepted that the Amazon could not be turned into some kind of sanctuary that nobody could touch. On the other hand, we knew it was important to stop the deforestation that is threatening the Amazon and all human life on the planet. We felt our alternative should involve preserving the forest, but it should also include a plan to develop the economy. So we came up with the idea of extractive reserves.

What do we mean by an extractive reserve? We mean the land is under public ownership but the rubber tappers and other workers that live on that land should have the right to live and work there. I say ‘other workers’ because there are not only rubber tappers in the forest. In our area, rubber tappers also harvest brazil nuts, but in other parts of the Amazon there are people who earn a living solely from harvesting nuts, while there are others who harvest babaçu and jute.”

FRUITS OF THE FOREST

● Brazil nuts (*Bertholletia excelsa*) are produced by the *castanheira* tree, one of the tallest in the Amazon forest. Its branchless trunk rises to a height of 20 metres or more, before forming a wide canopy. The brazil nuts are the seeds (12 to 24) contained in a hard pod (the *ouriço*) somewhat larger than a cricket ball. The pods fall to the ground between December and February and are collected and opened by rubber tappers. The



Harvesting jute.

felling of the *castanheira* is prohibited by Brazilian law, but since its pollination is dependent upon a complex interaction with the surrounding eco-system, the clearing of the surrounding forest effectively kills it. It is a common sight in deforested areas to see the trunks of the *castanheiras* still standing amid the pasture, sterile monuments to the previous forest cover.

Other Amazon trees and their by-products include:

- **Babaçu:** either of two large palms (*Orbygnia martiana* and *O. oleifera*) which are highly prized for their usefulness. Oil is extracted from the nuts and used in cooking, as fuel, as a lubricant and in the manufacture of soap. The hard, ivory-like quality of the nuts also means that they can be made into buttons. The husks are used as fuel, the leaves provide a fibre for hat and basket weaving, and the stalks are used in the making of a fermented drink.

- **Jute** (*Corchorus capsularis*) is a 5 metre high tree brought to the Amazon region from India during the Portuguese colonial administration. The trunk, when felled and soaked in water, releases fibres used to make sacking and other materials.

- **Tucumã** (*Astrocaryum tucuma*) is a palm which grows to a height of 15 metres. The leaves, following immersion in water, produce a fibre used for fishing nets, rope and hammocks. The juice of the fruit is a regional drink.



Breaking pods to extract and crush babaçu nuts.

- **Patauá** (*Oenocarpus bataua*) is another palm growing to a height of 15 metres whose fruit, when boiled, produces an oil used for cooking. The fibres are used for brushes.

- **Açaí** (*Euterpe oleracea*) is a palm whose dark purple fruit produces a nutritionally rich drink which is one of the region's great delicacies.

- **Copaíba** (*Copeifera langsdorfii*) is also known as the balsam copal tree. Its wood is used for carpentry, while its seed provides a medicinal oil.

- **Bacaba** is the name given to various palms of the genus *Oenocarpus*, common throughout the Amazon region. The pulp

of the fruit provides a drink, the kernels a cooking oil and the palm hearts are eaten.

So what are we really after? Despite the threats, we're fighting for better marketing and price guarantees for rubber. We want better marketing policies and better working conditions for those harvesting nuts. But there are an infinite number of natural resources in the forest, so we also want the government to encourage the industrialisation and marketing of other forest products that it has always ignored in the past.

There are other questions to be considered. A sustainable fishing industry could be developed, exploiting the resource in a rational way. The enormous variety of plants with medicinal properties in this forest could prove very important to the country, if only some research was done. The universities, not only in Acre, but throughout Brazil, should spend time researching the Amazon region. I believe if this happened, and if the government took it all seriously, then in ten years the Amazon region could be very rich and have an important role in the national economy.

COMMERCIAL POTENTIAL OF THE RAINFOREST

Tropical rainforests occupy only seven per cent of the earth's land surface, yet they contain an estimated 40-80 per cent of the world's plant and animal species. Sixty per cent of the remaining tropical forests are in Latin America and of this total over half are in Brazil.

The richness of the tropical forests far exceeds that of other regions of the world:

- The United Kingdom has 1,443 different plant species; Costa Rica, only one fifth the size, has at least 8,000.

- Amazonia contains one in five of all known bird species and at least 2,000 species of fish (ten times as many as in the whole of Europe).

- At least a quarter of all pharmaceutical products are derived from tropical forest products, despite the fact that only one per cent of all Amazon plants have been intensively examined for their medicinal properties. Tropical forest plants have so far provided treatments for leukaemia; Hodgkin's



Tony Gross/Oxfam

Indian children playing on the river, Rondônia.

disease; breast, cervical and testicular cancer, as well as a host of analgesics, antibiotics, heart drugs, enzymes, hormones, diuretics, anti-parasite compounds, ulcer treatments, dentifrices, laxatives, dysentery treatments and anti-coagulants.

- Of the 90,000 plant species in Latin America only 10,000 have been tested for anti-cancer properties. Scientists expect that at least ten per cent of the untested plants will reveal some form of anti-cancer activity. A species of alexa tree, found in the northern Amazon basin and Madagascar, contains the plant alkaloid castanospermine which is being investigated at St Mary's Hospital in London as a possible treatment for some forms of AIDS.

Where did we get the idea of setting up the CNS? We discovered there is something called the National Rubber Council which represents the interests of landowners and businessmen but not the interests of the rubber tappers, so we thought, why not create an organisation as a counterweight to all that bureaucracy and try to stop the government messing the rubber tappers about? The First

National Congress set up the CNS and elected a provisional executive committee.

The CNS is not meant to be a kind of parallel trade union, replacing the Xapuri Rural Workers' Union, for example. It is just an organisation for rubber tappers. The growth of the trade unions was very important for us, but other agricultural workers including day labourers and so on are also members of the same union. Other kinds of agricultural workers have been seen as having particular needs and interests, but not rubber tappers; it's as though we were something that existed only in the past. So one of the reasons for creating the CNS was to recognise the rubber tappers as a particular group of workers fighting for a very important objective - the defence of the Amazon forest. The idea went down very well.

The Indians

We also wanted to seek out the leaders of the Indian peoples in Acre and discuss how to unite our resistance movements, especially since Indians and rubber tappers have been at odds with each other for centuries. In Acre the leaders of the rubber tappers and Indian peoples met and concluded that neither of us was to blame for this. The real culprits were the rubber estate owners, the bankers and all the other powerful interest groups that had exploited us both.

People understood this very quickly, and from the beginning of 1986 the alliance of the peoples of the forest got stronger and stronger. Our links with the Indians have grown even further this year. For example, a meeting of the Tarauacá rubber tappers was attended by 200 Indians and six of them were elected to the Tarauacá Rubber Tappers' Commission. Indians are now beginning to participate in the CNS organising commissions. In Cruzeiro do Sul about 200 Indians are active in the movement and this year they have even joined in our *empates*.

Our proposals are now not just ours alone, they are put forward together by Indians and rubber tappers. Our fight is the fight of all the peoples of the forest.

When the Minister of Agriculture met a joint commission of Indians and rubber tappers in his office, he was really taken aback. 'What's going on?', he said, 'Indians and rubber tappers have been fighting each other since the last century! Why is it that today you come here together?'

We told him things had changed and this meant the fight to defend the Amazon was stronger. People really took notice of that.



Tony Gross/Oxfam

As with the rubber tappers, Indian families clear only a small area around their houses.

ACRE'S INDIANS

Reliable 1987 estimates give an indigenous population of 6,600 in Acre and south-western Amazonas in at least 42 separate locations. None of these areas has undergone the whole process of registration by the Brazilian government, a right theoretically accorded the communities by the Brazilian constitution. Recently the government has announced its intention to drastically reduce the size of the areas the communities are entitled to. The population is composed of 15 different indigenous groups: Apurinã, Arara, Iauanauá, Jaminawa, Kampa, Katukina, Kamanawa, Kaxarari, Kaxinaua, Kulina, Machineri, Masko, Nuquini, Papavo, and Poyanawa. The total indigenous population of Brazil is estimated at around 200,000.

With the exception of one or two still uncontacted groups, all of these communities have been in contact with non-indigenous society. The advance of rubber tapping activities into the upper rivers of Acre and south-western Amazonas from the 1870s led either to Indian communities being incorporated into the rubber economy or to their retreating ever further upstream. Many rubber estates organised hunting expeditions

(*correries*) to locate indigenous groups and either massacre them or bring them in to the *seringal*. These expeditions took place until after the Second World War and rubber tappers were forced to take part by their employers. The current alliance between rubber tappers and Indians in Acre is all the more striking given the previous history of antagonism between them.

The region's indigenous communities practise a mixture of subsistence agriculture, hunting and fishing, and collecting forest products - above all rubber and brazil nuts. Although previously some groups lived in substantial communal longhouses (*malocas*), a normal village now consists of a collection of houses built in the regional style (wood or split palm, with a wooden or thatched roof and raised on stilts), surrounded by a cleared area for domestic animals and with nearby gardens. If the village is not on the river bank, there will be other water sources for drinking and washing nearby. All the communities come under the administration of the federal government's National Indian Foundation (FUNAI), and some will have a FUNAI post installed in the village. Many communities are also the object of missionary activity: Catholic and Protestant, Brazilian and foreign.

In recent years the indigenous communities of the region have made considerable progress in overcoming the prevailing racism and establishing their right to participate in local affairs. This progress has been achieved despite opposition from FUNAI and local politicians. The communities have been helped in this process of revitalisation by the local branch of UNI (the Union of Indigenous Nations) and the Pro-Indian Commission of Acre, a group of anthropologists, teachers and others working with the communities on education, health, economic and consciousness-raising projects.

Spreading the Resistance

Our resistance began in Xapuri, where rubber tappers were in the forefront of the movement. But now our aim is to spread the resistance movement right across the whole Amazon region. Rubber tappers from Brasília, from all over the states of Acre, Rondônia, Amazonas, Amapá and representatives from the only remaining rubber tappers in Pará all came to the First National Congress.



Chico Mendes on the BR 364 road between Rio Branco, Acre, and Porto Velho, Rondônia.

Adrian Cowell/Central TV

We were particularly keen to get the rubber tappers of Brasília and Assis Brasil organised because of the plans to pave the BR 364 road and build a road link to the Pacific. Also because of the BR 317. We knew the paving of these roads would lead to more and more land speculation, and the greed of the landowners would make them grab the land near the roads. We then turned our attention to organising in the Juruá valley, where rubber tappers worked in conditions of near slavery.

We are anxious to organise in Rondônia because of the extent to which the forest is being destroyed there. There is also a lot of grassroots work being done on the banks of those far-away rivers of the State of Amazonas. But, at the beginning, it was in the Acre valley that the movement grew most quickly.

ROADS TO RUIN

Environmental destruction in Amazonia follows the roads. As soon as all-weather routes are completed, an influx of poor landless farmers and wealthy cattle ranchers begins to hack down the forest to set up farms on soil which often proves barren

once the forest cover is removed. Seen from the air, the main highways and smaller feeder roads are bordered by a roughly 12 mile area of destruction on either side. Beyond 12 miles, the forest cover is usually intact.

Long distance road construction in the Amazon dates from the 1960s, starting with the BR 364 highway from Cuiabá to Porto Velho, going on to Rio Branco and eventually crossing Acre to Cruzeiro do Sul, and the BR 317 from Rio Branco northwards to Boca do Acre and south to Xapuri, Brasília and Assis Brasil. However they were not paved and therefore impassable for most of the year, so their impact was only local.

In the late 1970s Brazil sought World Bank funding to pave the BR 364 from Cuiabá to Porto Velho and to colonise the central part of Rondônia on either side of the road. This was the North-West Brazil Integrated Development Programme or *Projeto Polonoroeste*. The social and environmental consequences of this in a region which had hitherto been virgin rainforest populated by Indians and rubber tappers are discussed below.

By 1985 the Brazilian Government, wishing to pave the Porto Velho to Rio Branco stretch, was negotiating another loan, this

time with the Inter-American Development Bank. Aware of the criticisms of the *Polonoroeste* project, the Bank tried to write in measures to protect the environment and the local Indian communities. Although by the time of Chico Mendes' death disbursement of the loan had been halted, the paving of the road is being undertaken with domestic capital.

There are plans to extend the paved road network further westwards into Peru. In the early 1980s the state government of Acre discussed with Peru the upgrading of the BR 317 to the Peruvian border, where it would link with a road to Puerto Maldonado and the Pacific. Recent planning appears to favour the paving of the BR 364 to Cruzeiro do Sul, which would continue to the Peruvian city of Pucallpa.

One of the main interested parties in a Pacific outlet, apart from Brazilian exporters to Pacific markets, is Japan. The world's biggest importer of raw materials, Japan has identified Brazil as a major long-term supplier of minerals, timber and grains. These are produced either in the Amazon basin or in the Brazilian mid-west. For Japan the Pacific route makes commercial sense, although it could lead to vast new areas of Amazonia being devastated. The Japanese are reported as having offered to finance the Pacific link from Acre westwards, although they denied this in early 1989.

Looking for Allies

Our biggest assets are the international environment lobby and the international press. I'm afraid we have had more support from abroad than from people in Brazil, and the opposite should be the case. It was only after international recognition and pressure that we started to get support from the rest of Brazil.

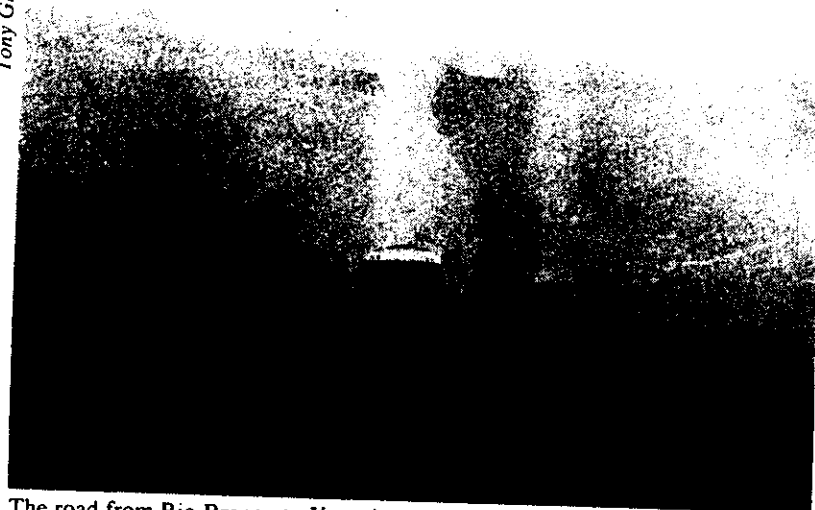
Links between our movement and other workers' organisations are quite weak in general. We do have good links with organisations that have only emerged recently, like our own, for example the Landless Workers' Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra*). We've got strong links with the CUT trade union federation and their third national congress (in 1988) unanimously adopted a motion put forward by the Xapuri trade union, calling for the defence of the Amazon region by the peoples of the forest.

We haven't had a very good relationship with the National Agricultural Workers' Confederation (CONTAG). They haven't

Tony Gross/Oxfam



Preparations for paving the Porto Velho-Rio Branco stretch.



The road from Rio Branco to Xapuri.

given us much support, but they respect us a lot, despite us being affiliated to the CUT rather than the CGT¹.

We want to get on well with all the country's labour organisations. We would be quite happy to get support from anybody in the CGT, because we just want to make our movement stronger. We welcome any support, any alliance, as long as the people concerned are committed to our struggle.

Political Parties

If the CNS is to become stronger, it must avoid identifying itself too closely with any one political party. That is my position and I have defended it at seminars and meetings in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and the US.

So far, the PT is the only party to select rubber tappers as candidates for political office. Despite all its problems, the PT has been the only party that has given us significant support. I've often felt we could build stronger links with parties other than the PT; left-wing parties with a history of struggle. Unfortunately, we have to live with the sectarianism that is a feature of our country's politics.

In Rio de Janeiro, for example, when I was asked to help launch a group in support of the peoples of the forest, I was advised by some left-wing colleagues to avoid getting caught in the cross-fire between the other parties. When I arrived, the PT and the PV (Green Party) were fighting over who I 'belonged' to. I kept well clear of all this and ended up contributing to a seminar at the ABI where there were the PV, PT, PSB and PCB and other independents, everybody together in support of the proposed support group.

The Church

We have had a lot to do with the Church but there have been clashes at times, because although the Church has an important role in our struggle, it is only prepared to go so far. For example it has been very difficult about our interest in linking up with political parties. The political space the Church has given us has been very important and recently things have improved, for example the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) has been more actively involved in our movement after a period in which it vacillated in its attitude towards us. We have good links with the Prelacy of Acre-Purus, but things are much worse in the Juruá Valley where the Church is very conservative. We have a good relationship with the Church at Carauari, another region in the state of Amazonas. I think the links we've had with the Church have been positive and we've been able to build up a working relationship which benefits both the Church and the rubber tappers. The Church cannot give up on us now, after having worked so hard with us in the 1970s.

THE CHURCH

Brazil has the largest Catholic congregation in the world and no other country has as many priests, nuns and bishops. The progressive wing of the Brazilian Catholic Church was active in social movements before the 1964 coup, and during the military regime the Church was the only force able to work openly on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. Relations between Church and state have often been strained, leading Helder Câmara, one of the most prominent Church opponents of the military regime and formerly archbishop of Olinda and Recife, to remark, 'Why is it that when I give help to the poor they call me a saint, but when I ask why they are poor in the

first place, they call me a communist?' Many members of the churches, lay and ordained, have suffered for their support of grassroots movements.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the Catholic Church, as part of its 'option for the poor', set up thousands of grassroots 'christian base communities' promoting religious teaching and social action. Congregations were taught that not only were present social and political structures not the will of God, but that a radical change in society could correspond much more closely to Christian values and aspirations.

In addition to creating local Christian base communities, the Church set up various national-level pastoral organisations. Two that were represented in Acre at this period were CIMI, the Indigenous Missionary Council, and the CPT, the Pastoral Land Commission. They served to offer support, spiritual and political, to Indian and peasant communities respectively.

Acre contains two dioceses: Acre-Purus in the east and Juruá in the west. The diocese of Acre-Purus is administered by an Italian order and the bishop is a prominent figure in the progressive wing of the Church, having been president of the

CPT. The diocese of Juruá, based in Cruzeiro do Sul, is administered by a German order.

With the arrival in the western Amazon of poor colonists from southern Brazil, in many cases descendants of 19th century German immigrants, the Brazilian Lutheran Church also has progressive pastors and lay workers helping grassroots causes, including rubber tappers and Indians, in Acre.

Cities and Students

People in the cities have always ignored us. However, since the CNS was set up we have begun to get some support, for example from Acre University, which is quite an important political institution. We know the great majority of professors in the university either support the UDR or are very conservative, but we hope to get some support from the new Rector there. Student support has been a bit unsteady but it's increasing now the Greens are getting organised in Acre.

We have found it very difficult to get proper legal assistance. The Acre Federation of Rural Workers' Unions (FETACRE), which ought to support us, has refused us assistance. Their lawyer is more interested in taking on cases for individual small landowners who are able to pay him a bit. We prefer not to have anything to do with him.

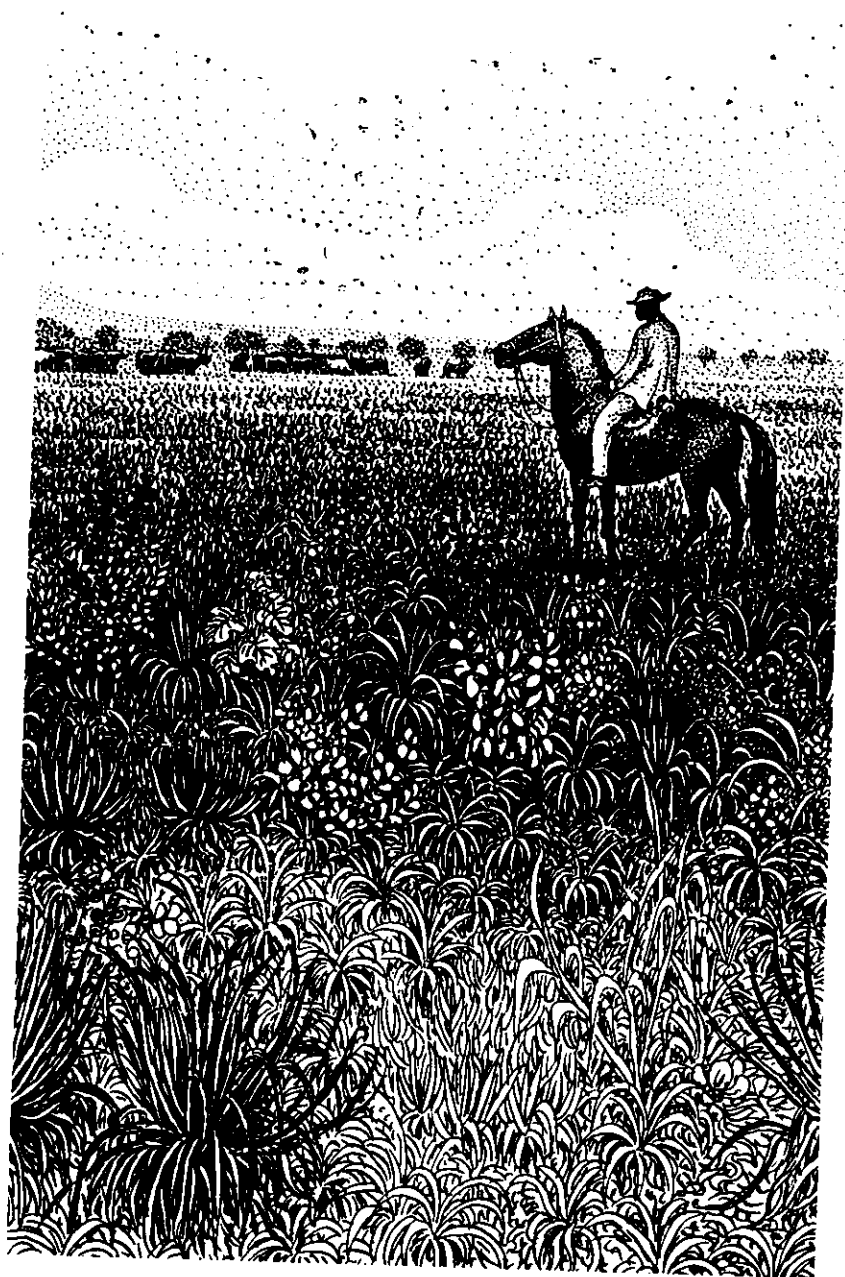
Our union doesn't have enough money to employ a lawyer, but in July 1988 the Institute of Amazon Studies helped us obtain the services of a lawyer from Paraná, Genésio Felipe. He gives legal advice to the rubber tappers through the CNS, the individual unions and the Acre Pastoral Land Commission. He covers the whole of Acre, so he's got a big job on!

I'm afraid we don't get much help from the lawyers round here. There are dozens of lawyers in Acre but they are all the children of landowners and other sectors of society that are against the workers' movement.



Tony Gross/Oxfam

Evangelical missionaries in Rondônia.



Chapter 4

The Landowners Strike Back

“ We know we face powerful opposition. As well as the landowners and businessmen who dominate the Amazon region, we are up against the power of those who voted against land reform in the Constituent Assembly. The voting power of these people in Congress has been a problem for us and has encouraged the growth of the right-wing landowners’ movement, the Rural Democratic Union (UDR). The defeat of the land reform proposal was a big victory for the landowners and land speculators. Now, since the establishment of the UDR in Acre, we’ve got a real fight on our hands. However, we also believe our movement has never been stronger.”

LAND, POWER AND THE UDR

For most of its history, land and power have been synonymous in Brazil. Political power, locally and nationally, lay in the hands of large landowners who traditionally exercised powers of life, and often death, over the mass of the rural population. The modernisation of Brazil after the Second World War saw the beginnings of a movement for agrarian reform, dismantling enormous landed estates (often unused for agricultural purposes) and redistributing land to small farmers in the interests of social justice and increased productivity. It was fear of the growing impetus for agrarian reform that lay behind the 1964 coup.

During the period of military rule, land concentration increased, as did the number of landless families forced to migrate in search of land and work.

The civilian government that took office in 1985 initially said it was committed to massive agrarian reform. It created an Agrarian Reform Ministry and in May 1985 published the draft agrarian reform plan. Started from the concept of social justice, the plan proposed the redistribution of 43 million hectares (168,000 square miles - an area three times the size of England) in five years. The proposals were welcomed by rural workers, but condemned by landowning interests. Over the next six months the government was intensively lobbied by landowners and when the revised plan became law in October 1985 its basic thrust had been altered to a preoccupation with productivity rather than justice. This time it was the landowners who welcomed it, while it was condemned by rural workers.

The rival groups lobbied the National Constituent Assembly when it met in 1987 and 1988 to draft a new constitution, and the landowning interests won. The sections of the constitution which refer to agrarian reform are now more conservative and restrictive in their application than the previous legislation of 1964. A large part of the conservatives' success was due to the UDR, the landowners' organisation that successfully oiled the wheels of the Constituent Assembly whilst at the same time intimidating rural workers and their allies.

The UDR (*União Democrática Ruralista* - Rural Democratic Union) came into being in 1985 following the publication of the first national agrarian reform programme. Its founder was a rancher and doctor from the mid-western state of Goiás, Ronaldo Caiado. The UDR grew quickly, initially through the ranching and agro-industrial regions of the mid-west and São Paulo, but soon forming local groups throughout Brazil, including Amazonia.

In addition to relying on the personal wealth of many of its members, the UDR raises funds through the auction of donated cattle at large public rallies. During the debates on agrarian reform in the constituent assembly in 1987 and 1988 the power of the UDR's organisation became apparent. In addition to intense lobbying in the assembly, and packing the public galleries to intimidate the advocates of agrarian reform, the UDR organised mass rallies in Brasília. On one such day Brasília's airport ran out of parking space for the hundreds of private planes belonging to UDR supporters.

The UDR claims that it controls a substantial block of members of the National Congress, and voting patterns in the Constituent Assembly confirm this. It also claims that many of

the mayors elected in the November 1988 elections, particularly in the richer rural areas of southern and mid-western Brazil, are UDR sympathisers.

Although the UDR has consistently denied having paramilitary forces, the levels of rural violence have grown steadily over recent years and many of the hired guns implicated in the assassination of rural workers and their supporters have been linked to UDR supporters.

After four years of the Sarney government, less than three per cent of the original programme has been carried out. The Agrarian Reform Ministry has had five different ministers over this period, has been accused of incompetence and corruption and was one of the ministries the government sought to wind up in the economic and administrative reform package of early 1989.

“ You can already see how strong the UDR is in Acre - it's just organised its first cattle auction to raise funds. We know, through people who have been to UDR meetings here, that their aim is to destroy the Xapuri union by striking at the grassroots organisations of the Xapuri rubber tappers. They think if they can defeat Xapuri they can impose their terms on the whole state and further afield in the Amazon region as well. The Governor of Acre himself told me this. Just to give you an idea, it was after the UDR's official launch here in Acre that the first drops of blood were spilt in Xapuri.

You might not believe it but among our allies at the moment are the rubber processing plant owners. They are not people we can trust very far - for a start, they are also timber merchants. But because they profit from exporting rubber, they are now making overtures to the CNS. They say we should fight together against the abolition of the Rubber Development Board (SUDHEVEA)¹. This is quite a complicated situation because on the one hand we have to defend the interests of the rubber tappers, but on the other we know the abolition of SUDHEVEA poses a threat to rubber marketing and export.

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the matter and though it has got a lot wrong with it, SUDHEVEA's attempts to improve the rubber marketing structure in the Amazon mean that it's something worth defending in today's circumstances. This is the basis on which the processing plant owners are proposing a tactical alliance with us.

However, generally speaking, the landowners and businessmen of Acre, and the whole region for that matter, are organising resistance to our demands. In this fight, our only defence is the pressure put on the authorities by Brazilian society and the international scientific community.

The Government Takes Sides

There was a time when the state government seemed to be paying a lot of attention to environmental problems and to the rubber tappers.² But we soon realised it was just putting on a show of defending the environment so the international banks and other international organisations would approve its development projects.

We can't see how the authorities can say they defend the ecological system while at the same time deploying police to protect those who are destroying the forest. That happened, for example, in the case of the Ecuador rubber estate where there were many nut and rubber trees. The Governor was warned several times about what was going on there. In fact, I personally warned him and suggested he go and look at what was happening for himself. I told him he was being very



Rubber tappers occupying the Xapuri IBDF office are evicted by local military police

hasty in sending police there. Fifty hectares of virgin forest were cut down, but thanks to the pressure, thanks to the hundreds of telegrams sent to the Governor by national and international organisations, we managed to get him to withdraw the police from the area and so saved about 300 hectares of forest.

VICTORY AT ECUADOR

In May 1988 the federal forestry board (IBDF) granted permission for the Delta construction company, which had recently acquired the Ecuador rubber estate in Xapuri, to clear 50 hectares of forest for pasture. The Rural Workers' Union of Xapuri and the CNS objected that the licence was illegally granted and that Delta was actually planning to clear 300 hectares.

With no response from IBDF, the rubber tappers staged an *empate* at the scene but were dislodged by police. They then occupied the IBDF offices in Xapuri, asking the state government in Rio Branco and the IBDF headquarters in Brasília to revoke the licence.



Chico Mendes speaks to 150 rubber tappers in the church on the day after the shooting

On the night of 24 May 1988, two gunmen on a motorbike fired shots at rubber tappers sleeping on the porch of the occupied IBDF offices. Two youths were hit and required emergency treatment. The bike was reliably identified as belonging to one of the sons of Darli Alves da Silva, responsible six months later for the murder of Chico Mendes.

Following protests by the rubber tappers, supported by demonstrations by the Green Party in Rio de Janeiro, extensive press coverage and telegrams from abroad, the government finally revoked Delta's permission to clear the area.

In the area they destroyed there, the last harvest produced 1,400 cans of brazil nuts³, a good crop. We challenged the owner of the land and the Governor himself to work out the annual income per hectare produced by forest products such as brazil nuts and rubber and then compare it with that produced by grazing cattle there. They refused because they knew we could prove the income from one hectare of forest is 20 times greater than when the forest is cleared and given over to cattle.

We quoted decree law 7,511 of 30 July 1986 and regulation 486 of 28 October 1986 which prohibit the cutting down and sale of brazil nut and rubber trees and the deforestation of hillsides. There were two hillsides in the area being cut down on the Ecuador rubber estate and the law was completely flouted. After the second *empate*, when the rubber tappers managed to stop work going ahead, the local IBDF representative appeared and without even inspecting what was going on, told the landowner he could go ahead and clear the forest. He gave the landowner a licence even though the landowner did not present, as he should have done, a written plan for managing the area.

Another law - I can't remember its number - says you can only clear up to 50 hectares of forest without presenting a forestry management plan. Further on it adds that it's forbidden to cut down any area of forest on hillsides or where there is a concentration of brazil nut and rubber trees. None of these laws were respected. The Governor himself didn't even consider them and the IBDF certainly didn't.

We do have a good relationship with the Acre Technology Foundation (FUNTAC) which is a state government agency⁴. They really understand how difficult the lives of rubber tappers are and recognise that deforestation is a problem. But despite the good relationship we've got with FUNTAC, we have no confidence left in the state government. How can we believe a Governor who says he

defends the forest, and visits Rio and Japan to talk about defending the forest, but who then orders the police to go and protect the people who are destroying it? He ought to be using the political power that his office gives him. If he used his power in favour of the workers he'd certainly get their support.

Holding Back Progress

People have used all kind of arguments against us. The landowners say we're holding back progress and harming the country's economy. They say rubber is not important to the economy and the future lies with cattle raising. Others say the Amazon is a vast expanse of uninhabited territory and that it should be developed. All kinds of reactionary arguments are used against us. Our enemies work hard at putting forward their arguments to try and undermine our own. However, the national press has now started to realise that the defence of the Amazon is really an issue.

But anyway, we can deal with the arguments that are used against us. To those who say Acre should be producing food, we say there is plenty of land for that. What are the big colonisation projects supposed to be producing? Anyway, all it needs is for the government



A brazil nut tree stands alone after the rest of the forest has been cleared.

Jony Gross Orlam

to develop an agricultural policy that takes into consideration the region's small farmers. There should be no problem about growing enough food.

THE ROAD TO RONDÔNIA

Large-scale organised colonisation schemes in the Amazon region began in the 1970s. When the government built the Transamazonica highway, it included an ambitious colonisation programme as an attempt to settle landless peasants from north-east Brazil and defuse demands for agrarian reform. Both the highway and the colonisation were failures, although sizeable numbers of poor colonists were settled in the Altamira region. Private colonisation schemes were set up in northern Mato Grosso, mostly involving migrants from southern Brazil who had lost their lands as a result of the boom in soya production.

With the beginning of the *Polonoroeste* project in Rondônia, vast numbers of people from both southern Brazil and the north-east flocked to the area, looking for places on official

Tony Gross/Oxfam



Road clearance and settlement can cause a 12 mile corridor of devastation. A township in Rondônia — similar settlements could start in Acre.

colonisation projects or seeking to settle spontaneously wherever land was available. At one time over 7,000 families a week were moving along the BR 364 highway. Without a proper land register or the administrative capacity to control this influx of people, the authorities could do little to avoid the chaos that followed.

Such credit and extension services as existed were directed towards ranching and the promotion of high-value export crops such as coffee and cocoa. Adverse circumstances, including the poor quality of most of the soils and total unfamiliarity with a tropical forest environment, plus extremely high malaria levels, led to tragic failure for many of the colonists.

Following severe criticism the World Bank has acknowledged that the *Polonoroeste* project was ill-conceived and poorly administered. The fear of the rubber tappers and Indians of Acre has been that the paving of the road into Rio Branco will trigger a similar wave of uncontrolled migration, with the same disastrous social and environmental consequences.

Although there are ways of settling more people and increasing food production in tropical forest areas without this level of destruction, it is important to recognise that the pressure on land in the Amazon region is the result of the failure to carry out agrarian reform in other regions of Brazil, where land concentration, and therefore the numbers of landless rural families, is currently increasing.

The rubber tappers aren't saying that nobody should lay a finger on the Amazon. No. We've got our own proposals for organising production. The rubber tappers and the Indians have always grown their subsistence crops but they've never threatened the existence of the forest. It's the deforestation carried out by the big landowners to open up pasture for their cattle that is threatening the forest. Often, these people are just speculating with the land. What happens in Xapuri and other parts of the Amazon is that these people cut down 10,000 hectares, turn half of it into pasture for their cattle and let the other half grow wild. They are really just involved in land speculation.

The landowners use all the economic power at their disposal. They bribe the authorities; it's common knowledge that they've bought off the IBDF staff in the Amazon region. They also use the law. They request police protection for the workers hired to cut down the trees, saying it is their land so they can do whatever they like with it. They



Cleared land can support cattle — for a while.

accuse the rubber tappers of trespassing when we try and stop the deforestation. They turn to the courts for support and protection, claiming the land is private property. But the rubber tappers have been here for centuries!

There has been less pressure from the police in the last two years because we are able to present reasoned arguments to them. When we organise an *empate*, the main argument we use is that the law is being flouted by the landowners and our *empate* is only trying to make sure the law is respected.

The other tactic the landowners use, and it's a very effective one, is to use hired guns to intimidate us. Our movement's leaders, not just myself but quite a few others as well, have been threatened a lot this year. We are all on the death list of the UDR's assassination squads. Here in Xapuri, these squads are led by Darli and Alvarino Alves da Silva, owners of the Paraná and other ranches round here. They lead a gang of about 30 gunmen - I say 30 because we've counted them as they patrol the town. Things have changed recently because we managed to get an arrest warrant issued in Umuarama, in the state of Paraná, for the two of them. I don't know whether it was the federal police, but somebody tipped them off. Now they're both in hiding and have said they'll only give themselves up when I'm dead (see epilogue).

We are sure this will be the landowners' main tactic from now on. They are going to fight our movement with violence and intimidation.

There's no doubt in our minds about that. The level of violence that has been common in the south of the state of Pará is already spreading to Xapuri, to Acre.

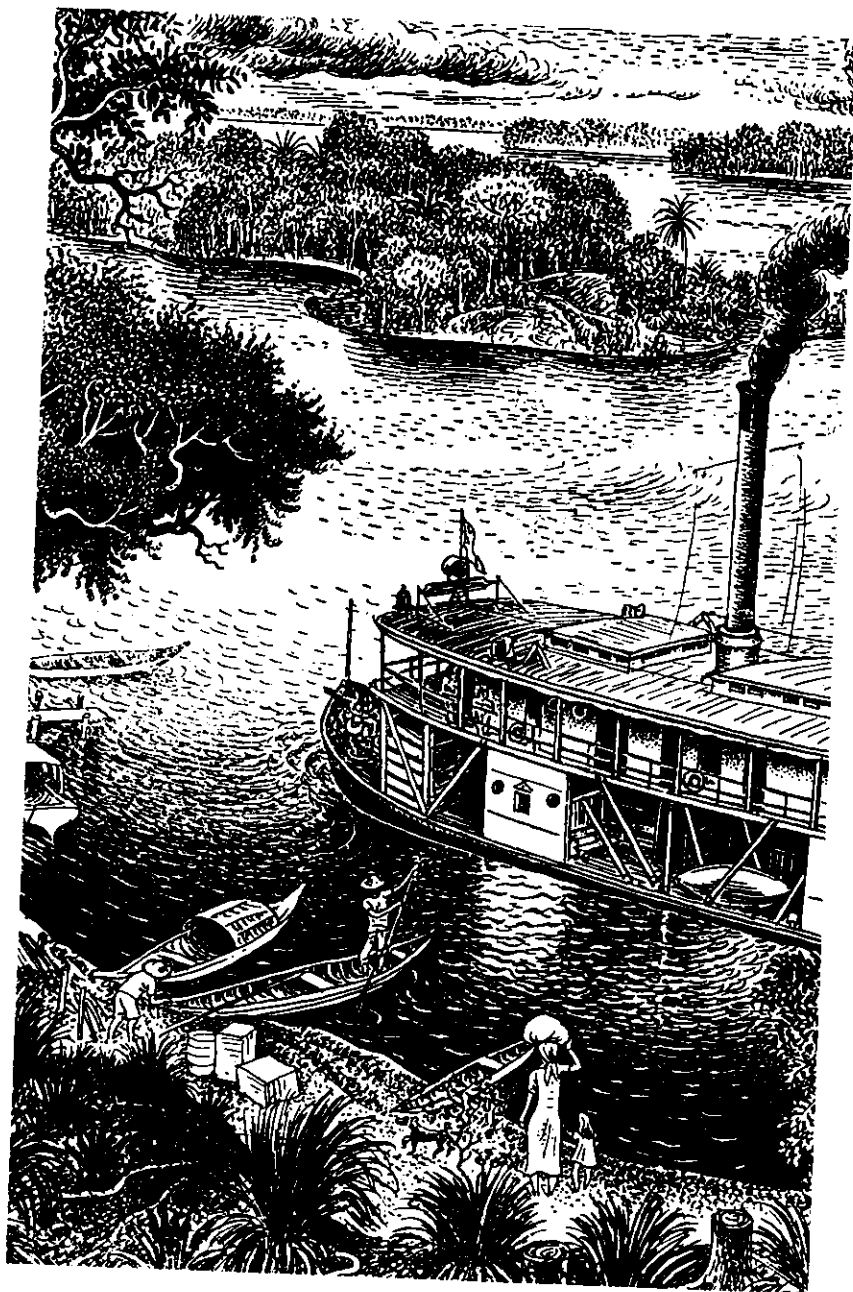
Rich Men's Law

The law has always been on the side of the rich. One of our problems is how to cope with this bias in the judicial system. We often turn to it for support but it always sides with the landowners. This year the police even refused to carry out an inquiry into who shot the rubber tappers who were camped out outside the IBDF offices on 27 May 1988. The gunmen were recognised and are well known round here and witnesses have made statements to the police, but they haven't done a thing.

In the case of Ivair's death⁵, it is obvious who hired the assassins. We don't know who the killers were but we know who paid them. Now, if you know who is behind a crime, you can easily get hold of the people responsible for carrying it out. The person who hired the killers was Cícero Tenório Cavalcanti, a candidate of the PMDB party. This is common knowledge and people have made statements to the police to this effect, but no progress has been made on the case and Cícero Cavalcanti hasn't even had to make a statement to the police.



The mother of one of the injured boys with Chico Mendes in the union office on 28 May 1988.



Chapter 5

Working Together

“We rubber tappers have to organise and mobilise ourselves, because there’s no point waiting for the government to help us. The only thing we can count on is our own level of organisation. One day we hope to organise a major *empate* right across the Amazon region. The future of the CNS and the extractive reserves will depend on how much resistance we can put up and how well organised we are.

The main force behind the CNS is still the Xapuri union, but we are forming new leaders and nuclei of support all over the Amazon region.

The CNS meets every six months. The strategic centre of the movement, in terms of communication and information, is the Institute of Amazon Studies, where Mary Allegretti, Paulo Chiesa, Bia and other friends work. They take care of the CNS’ national and international links. We also get technical advice from Mauro Almeida at Campinas University.

One of the ways to increase support for the CNS and broaden the level of participation is to get discussions going with groups of rubber tappers, mainly in the communities that are already organised. In Xapuri we have 30 union branches which form the CNS support base in the area.¹ The same level of organisation exists in Brasília and Assis Brasil. We aim to have discussions with these groups of workers, these grassroots leaders, to work out ways of dividing up responsibility for spreading the education work across the region, and get the resources necessary to do it. The CNS is still a bit precarious because activists lack time to get more fully involved. Another problem is the sheer physical distance between us all and the difficulties of communication.

The Dilemma of Violence

So far we have used non-violent forms of struggle, and that's how we aim to keep it. If some day we need to use violence, it will be because we have been forced to do so by the circumstances, by the system and the policies of the landowners.

The *empates* are organised in the following way. When a community is threatened by deforestation it gets in touch with other communities in the area. They all get together in a mass meeting in the middle of the forest and organise teams of people to take the lead in confronting the workers cutting down the trees with their chainsaws and so on - all this in a peaceful but organised way. These teams try and convince the workers employed by the landowners to leave the area. The rubber tappers also dismantle the camps used by those workers to force them out. We are often attacked by the police because the landowners always apply to the courts for police protection. The judicial system has always done what the landowners wanted and sent in the police and there have been a lot of arrests.

One important point is that the whole community - men, women and children - takes part in the *empate*. The women stay at the front to prevent the police from shooting us. The police know if they open fire, they will kill women and children.

I remember on at least four occasions, we were arrested and forced to lie on the ground with them beating us. They threw our bodies, covered in blood, into a lorry but we all sang hymns. We got to the police station, perhaps more than a hundred people, but they didn't have enough room to keep us there and we had to stand up in the corridors. In the end they had to let us go free.²

At the same time as 100 or 200 colleagues are involved in the *empate*, standing in the way of the chainsaws and scythes, we aim to have a team whose job it is to get information about what is happening back to Xapuri where another group will make sure it travels all over Brazil and the rest of the world. This is something we have only recently started to organise.

The trouble is that the landowners are quite happy about using violence. I'm very worried at the moment because they have, in fact, killed a few people. We know they intend to start by picking off some of the workers and then go on to attack our leaders. This year they killed Ivair, who was just beginning to emerge as a leader. He had got involved with our movement through the Church and was just learning the ropes.

I don't want to see this happening. I don't want anybody getting killed. There's no point in me or any of my colleagues dying. I don't



Tony Gross/Oxfam

Taking out quality hardwoods for export.

think that dead bodies solve anything and I know that if that's the way things go, this place will become an inferno. We are going to do our best to see it doesn't happen. But if it did become necessary, I'm sure there would be 100, 150, 200 workers who would be ready to fight and decide this thing once and for all. But that would mean a bloodbath here in Xapuri, repression, and a lot more besides.

We don't want that to happen. We want to resist in a non-violent way as we are doing at the moment. We managed to deal with the Alves family by getting warrants for their arrest issued. It's now up to the courts to do what they are supposed to do, and see the law is upheld. This has helped us by creating a certain amount of goodwill in the local community. These days, for example, a lot of people who didn't even get on with me at first come up and say they support me. Middle-class people tell us how brave we are in facing up to the gunmen. Those criminals haven't been arrested yet but they have suffered a political defeat, and everybody knows it.

For us, the important thing is to continue to make a political impact. We feel our resistance can produce results through pressure by the press and lobbying organisations, at both a national and an international level. Our evaluation is that we should not go for a confrontation.

In the case of Cachoeira though, there was a moment in a very agitated mass meeting, last May, when I found myself in a tight corner with this argument. It's a good job we can keep calm in that kind of situation, otherwise I don't know what would happen. In this particular case a lot of workers had had enough of picketing and were proposing more radical tactics. In fact, they wanted to organise armed struggle against the police and the gunmen. They wanted a confrontation, but I feared the worst and argued that the movement should continue to use non-violent tactics, at least for the time being. We tried to show what effect the use of violence would have on our political support. It was a very animated meeting, but a very democratic one and we had a good discussion. There were about 400 people there, and in the end about 85 voted in favour of armed struggle. The rest voted to continue using non-violent tactics.

A Rubber Tapper's Co-operative

The co-operative is a CNS initiative. The idea followed on from the proposal to create extractive reserves. We had to work out ways of improving the economic situation of the rubber tappers. They are



Xapuri Rural Workers' Union building.

exploited so much they often end up leaving the land and going to try their luck in the towns. The government and the landowners leave the rubber tappers in total poverty, right there in the middle of the jungle, hoping they will give up and leave the area.

THE AGRO-EXTRACTIVE CO-OPERATIVE

The idea of a rubber tappers' co-operative was first tried out in the *Projeto Seringueiro*. In the traditional estate the rubber tappers are locked into a system of debt bondage. When the old system breaks down, as it mostly has in the Xapuri region, dependence upon the estate is replaced by dependence upon merchants who travel into the forest by boat or mule train buying up the rubber tapper's production at knock-down prices and supplying the manufactured goods which the rubber tapper's family depends on at vastly inflated prices. A mark-up of 500 per cent on staples such as sugar is common. The rubber tapper's physical isolation means there are few options to this system.



Co-operatives can sell their rubber in bulk, ensuring better prices and easier transport. Bundles of rubber ready for the mule train.

However, if rubber tappers who are neighbours could work together to jointly stock and market their rubber and brazil nuts, getting their produce to the nearest town themselves, it would be possible to sell at the official minimum price and buy goods in bulk at wholesale prices.

This would mean finding the initial capital to start up such a co-operative and to acquire the mules or boats needed for transport. In 1980-83 the *Projeto Seringueiro* began testing the idea in three locations in the forests around Xapuri. Oxfam provided the funds. The idea was shown to be feasible and proved that by marketing and purchasing in this way, and without altering production techniques or levels at all, the members of the groups could maintain their previous consumption patterns during the rubber tapping year (April to December) and at the end of the year receive a sizeable cash income. This served both to recapitalise the co-operative and to give each rubber tapper a cash dividend.

If the group could then increase production by, for example, planting extra rubber trees on each trail or by planting additional fruit or palm trees in the forest and marketing the fruit, it would be possible to create forest production systems that reward existing forest dwellers, preserve the forest ecosystem, offer income levels that compare favourably with any other group of small producers in Brazil and represent an alternative regional development strategy to the ecological catastrophe of colonisation and forest clearance schemes. Although there are difficulties involved in such co-operatives, not least in the training of the rubber tappers to administer the projects themselves, this is the model the CNS is seeking to introduce in the extractive reserves.

The CNS is fighting for better living conditions for the rubber tappers so they feel their future lies here in the forest. The co-operative is already proving a success. So far it has relied on its own resources but we've just heard it's going to receive five million Cruzados (£5,400) to help it get organised. Christian Aid, an organisation of the British Council of Churches, decided to give us the grant. For them it's a small grant, but for us it's a lot of money. With it we'll be able to improve the transport system taking the latex from the rubber producing areas to the strategic collecting points. This project was the fruit of a visit I made to London, where I met the people at Christian Aid. A representative of theirs later visited

us when we were in the middle of an *empate*. He was able to appreciate our situation and decided to suggest the approval of a small grant.

The co-operative has to address itself to the problems of the rubber tappers but must also bring benefits to small farmers if they want to join. We hope the co-operative's activities end up going far beyond Xapuri and spread to the whole of the Acre valley, the rest of the state of Acre and ultimately all over the Amazon region. We know it will take a long time, but we'll manage it.

Health in the Balance

On the question of health, the union took an initiative in 1985. At that time we had a certain amount of confidence in the State Health Secretary. To a certain extent, he was committed to the workers' cause, especially the rubber tappers. He was called Zé Alberto³. He had a team of doctors who were all committed to the rubber tappers' struggle, particularly to our fight for better health conditions. During the course of a year and a half we managed to build six health centres and have health promoters⁴ sympathetic to our cause working among us.

Unfortunately we couldn't continue with the work because, as with anybody sympathetic to the labour movement in this state, Zé Alberto and the whole team of doctors got the push. However, the work went on because the health promoters were committed people. Some of them worked three years without a contract, without earning a penny. But they carried on anyway and showed they knew what they were doing and some of them now have a job and earn a proper wage from the State Health Department.

Our most serious problem is the lack of drugs and equipment for the health centres. We have to work hard to get all this from the hospital, because the Xapuri municipal council tries to make sure our health centres don't get a single pill. So now we're trying to find other sources of support through the CNS to keep things going.

A Death Foretold

Our movement grew out of the needs of the rubber tappers. We made a lot of mistakes but we learned from them. You know, people have to look after themselves, they have to fight and be creative.

That's how we built this movement. We realised we had to fight to protect our way of life.

On 21 July 1980 they killed Wilson Pinheiro. On 27 July our comrades in Brasília decided to take justice into their own hands. So they killed Nilo Sérgio, one of the people who organised Wilson's murder. But what happened then, when our comrades suffered the violence of the police, when they were tortured? The movement was weakened because the level of grassroots organisation was weak.

CONTAG has a lot to answer for because of its attitude towards trade union organisation. It played an important role in setting the union up, helping it get on its feet, but it didn't give any attention to grassroots organisation or to preparing new leaders and activists. The landowners spotted this weakness when they met in June 1980 and concluded 'if we kill Wilson Pinheiro and Chico Mendes, that will be the end of the trade union movement in Acre.'

At that time, here in Xapuri, we began to discuss all this. Raimundo Barros, the other main CNS leader in Xapuri, and I worked and lived together. After Wilson Pinheiro was killed, I slept somewhere else for three months, and then I got together with Raimundo and said: 'Look, as from today, we'd better keep apart, let's work in separate areas and both try to bring on new leaders. We must separate now because some day our enemies will catch up



'Chico Mendes — they have killed our leader, but not our struggle' — banner at the funeral.

with us and kill us both. But if we separate and they kill you, I will keep trying to build the movement and if they kill me, you keep doing the same.'

From then on, we were never together. Every six months to a year, I visited Raimundo's area and he visited mine. Today things have got better, because now there's a whole group of colleagues in each of our areas who are committed to the struggle. So now I don't have to worry so much about leaving my area.

These leaders don't show their faces so often, but they are around when the movement needs them. I can tell you the names of some of them. For example, in Cachoeira there's Manoel Custódio, a good leader. There's Raimundo Monteiro, Luís Tagino and other young activists, taking their first steps as leaders. There's another young lad, João Teixeira, who's incredible. You wouldn't believe it to look at him, but when you get talking you can tell he's got grassroots support and a great fighting spirit.

These people are the fruit of our movement's advances. After each stage in the struggle, we evaluate the situation, we learn from our experiences. The struggle teaches us many things. Every day we learn something, while at the same time knowing we could be on the receiving end of a bullet at any time.

We're involved because of our ideals and we'll never turn back. Our roots are too deep for us to think of giving up the struggle. It is a question of honour, a matter of principle. None of us would betray our movement. We all worked together to build up that spirit, that love. They would have to kill us all to destroy our movement and I can't see them managing to do that. I don't get that cold feeling any more. I am no longer afraid of dying and I know they can't destroy us. If any of us got killed, the resistance would still go on and it might even be that much stronger.



Chapter 6

The Future

‘ The prospects for our struggle have got much better. All that we’ve achieved over the last 15 years is just a drop in the ocean. Though extractive reserves have now been established in some areas and others are under consideration, they aren’t enough even for one per cent of the people who live in the Amazon forest. But we’ve taken the first steps and we’re optimistic about the future.

Since 1975, the rubber tappers of Brasília and Xapuri have carried out 45 *empates*. These have led to about 400 arrests, 40 cases of torture and some of our comrades have been assassinated, but our resistance has saved more than 1,200,000 hectares of forest (five per cent of the UK). We’ve won 15 and lost 30 of the *empates* but it was worth it.

Another very significant development has been the setting up of the co-operative, which will solve some of the fundamental economic problems of the rubber tappers. And it’s the rubber tappers themselves who run it!

Support from abroad has also been very important. Little by little, we’re building the same level of support here in Brazil, and we think we’ve succeeded in getting our case across to the public. This has all helped us win the establishment of extractive reserves.

On 30 June 1988, the regional representative of the Ministry for Land Reform and Development (MIRAD) stamped his feet on the ground and said the Cachoeira rubber estate would never be expropriated. Just 30 days later an order for the compulsory purchase of Cachoeira was issued. Since then, another reserve has already been declared, in São Luís do Remanso. The reserve there covers 40,000 hectares (150 square miles) on the border of the municipalities of Rio Branco, the state capital, and Xapuri. Another area of about 40,000 hectares has been set aside in the municipality of Brasília.

There are also proposals for reserves in Assis Brasil and at places in the states of Rondônia, Amazonas and Amapá thanks to the campaign mounted there by the rubber tappers and the CNS. There is another area of 60,000 hectares at Matanã in the municipality of Sena Madureira, Acre, a place I don't know.

These victories are the fruit of the resistance movement, organised by the CNS, which has succeeded in spreading the word about our fight for the Amazon right across the world.

More than ever, the rubber tappers are ready to fight. The single biggest boost to our morale was the victory of the rubber tappers of Cachoeira. That victory had an enormous impact throughout the region. People knew the rubber tappers there were up against powerful landowners with bloody assassins at their disposal. Between 18 March and the middle of April, we had pickets of almost 400 people out there in the middle of the forest, every one of them determined not to let a single landowner near the place.

An Arduous Road

Despite the creation of the CNS and the increasing level of organisation of the rubber tappers throughout the Amazon region, we have a long and arduous road before us. After the defeat of the land reform proposals in the Constituent Assembly, we know we have a big fight on our hands.

We are up against the political power of the landowners. Their movement, the UDR, has enormous influence throughout the country and in Congress. It was they who defeated the land reform proposals.

Here in Xapuri, the UDR is beginning to make its presence felt. Since April 1988, when it formally set itself up in Acre, the number of hired gunmen in Xapuri has increased, as have the number of assassinations and attempted assassinations of workers. These gunmen are in effect the armed wing of the UDR and we are the targets. It's a very difficult situation and we're going to have to work fast to bring new leaders on and build the movement up in the rest of the Amazon so as to prevent too much attention being paid to Xapuri.

The other big challenge is to mobilise public opinion, so that together we can force the government to expropriate more land.

Something else that's worrying us is that the government has pencilled in extractive reserves in areas where the rubber tappers are not organised and where the CNS is not involved. We are worried



'They are stealing the green from our national flag', poster.

about what exactly is going to happen in these areas. Only when the rubber tappers have got the reins in their hands do we feel happy.

We are demanding that the government put compulsory purchase orders on more areas. The areas we want expropriated are those with big concentrations of brazil nut and rubber trees, areas rich in good quality hardwoods, areas threatened with burning. These are areas where a lot of rubber tappers live and work. But we want to go much further than that. We believe it's no good creating a few isolated extractive reserves surrounded by grazing land. The government has to expropriate many more areas where rubber tappers live and where there are conflicts over land.

Our second main demand is to do with education, health and the economic problems that the rubber tappers face. We want proper education and health programmes in the reserves, and we want a better system for marketing our rubber. If this happens, it will stimulate production and at the same time encourage the rubber tappers to feel at one with the forest and fight to protect it that much more.

We want to find ways to defend our people from the violence of the landowners, but organising a system of self-defence for our people is still at an early stage, and we're not yet clear on how we can organise something along these lines.

What should we do? How far can we go? The whole question is under discussion. We think the Second National Congress of Rubber Tappers will go deeper into this question (see epilogue). Any self-defence scheme will have to take into consideration the situation we face, a situation that is going to get worse now the UDR is getting stronger. Our only aim in all this is to strengthen the rubber tappers' movement and defend the Amazon.

Epilogue

Chico Mendes' murder had an enormous impact. Within hours the news had made the headlines all over the world. Over the ensuing days and weeks the Brazilian government came in for unprecedented criticism over his death and the way it had been allowed to happen. Brazilian embassies around the world reported to Brasília on the adverse publicity, the demonstrations and the tributes to Chico.

It is clear that those who ordered the assassination had not anticipated this reaction. To them it was simply the removal of another inconvenient opponent, planned to occur on the eve of the Christmas holidays so that few people would notice.

Despite attempts to stifle the news locally by taking the Xapuri radio station off the air, rubber tappers in the forest came into town in their hundreds for the funeral. Political leaders and artistic figures flew to Rio Branco from other parts of Brazil. The bishop conducted the funeral mass in Rio Branco before the body was returned to Xapuri for burial. A reported 4,000 people accompanied the cortege. Orators at the funeral, including those rubber tappers who would continue in the leadership of the union and the CNS, promised their struggle would continue.

The federal government intervened, sending the federal police to conduct the hunt for the killers and removing local police chiefs. The suspected organiser of the murder, Darli Alves da Silva, was eventually caught, together with members of his family. However once the glare of publicity died down it appeared that the situation in Acre was deteriorating for the rubber tappers.



left, Darli Alves; right, Darci Alves, one of Darli's sons who confessed to the murder and later retracted, here shown identifying the gun.

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