

and fought to avoid, occurred just as he was becoming widely known and recognised as a leader of the rubber tappers and as an ecologist. Chico talked to us and for us. Because of this, all those of us who fight against misery, destruction and oppression were hit by the assassin's bullets. But it was Chico who died. His death will not be without meaning if we preserve his ideas and follow his example.

As a rubber tapper who learned to read and write when he was about twenty years old, he was not a man of letters but a man of words and deeds. In the face of armed violence, he led a movement which used peaceful forms of resistance. In response to deforestation he proposed extractive reserves. To end the semi-slavery of the rubber estates, he fought for the right to work autonomously and collectively. Chico the worker, Chico the ecologist, Chico the pacifist.

He left us a movement. His life and his death transformed his name into a symbol of struggle, faith and hope for a better world, for the peoples of the forest and for all of us.

Cândido Grzybowski, January 1989

The above passage is an extract from the introduction to *O Testamento do Homem da Floresta*, the original pamphlet containing the interview with Chico Mendes.

Introduction

On the morning of Friday, 23 December 1988 I was in Rio, sitting alone at the breakfast table. The front page of the day's *Jornal do Brasil* seemed to have no important domestic stories, so I turned to the inside pages for the first full reports of the PanAm disaster. The phone rang. It was Beto from São Paulo, sounding even tarser than usual. 'There's some bad news, have you heard? From Acre.' I felt my pulse quicken, tragic scenarios flashed across my brain. 'No, what's happened?'. 'They've shot Chico, Chico Mendes. Last night.'

So that was it. Of course, I should have guessed. With the shock, anger and resignation came in equal measure. My lack of surprise disturbed me. Had it really been inevitable? We discussed practical things: how to inform those outside Brazil who had known Chico; how people from Rio and São Paulo would be able to get across Brazil to Acre for the funeral on Christmas Eve. I was glad when we rang off.

Folding away the paper I looked again at the front page. This time I saw the headline: 'Trade union leader shot and killed'. I had read it but had failed to see. After all, it was not such an unusual headline. Chico's death was number 90 in 1988's catalogue of murders of Brazilian rural workers and their supporters — church outreach workers, lawyers, education workers.

Chico was President of the Xapuri Rural Workers' Union, based in a small town in the western Amazon state of Acre, near the Bolivian border. He was also the acknowledged leader of Acre's 30,000 rubber tappers. He was 44, married, with two young children: a daughter of four and a son of two. His parents had come from the dry north-east during the Second World War, sent to cut rubber for the allied war effort. Chico was born and brought up in the forest, learning the skills of a *seringueiro*, a rubber tapper. Traditionally

rubber tappers were victims of a system of debt bondage, but during the 1960s and 1970s the old system began to collapse in Xapuri. Ranchers from southern Brazil began to buy up rubber estates and clear the forest for pasture. Rubber tappers were evicted, often brutally. Others retreated further into the forest and continued producing on their own account, victims of exploitation by local merchants.

In the early 1970s the Xapuri Rural Workers' Union was founded, and Chico was soon elected its president. A modest and unpretentious man, he was nevertheless a natural leader. As the conflicts over land intensified, the union developed the technique of the *empate*, sometimes translated as 'stalemate' or 'stand-off'. During the dry season ranchers hire labourers to clear the forest for pasture. Just before the rains come in September the cleared areas are fired. Faced with eviction and loss of livelihood, the rubber tappers began to assemble *en masse* at sites about to be cleared, preventing the clearing and persuading the labourers to lay down their chainsaws and go home. Over the last ten years during the months of June, July and August the forests of the upper Acre valley have been the scene of numerous *empates*.

Over the same period others began to realise that not only did this movement represent a fight for social justice, but also a fight against environmental destruction. With the help of a small group of educators and anthropologists, and with modest funding from agencies like Oxfam and Christian Aid, the union began to invest in co-operatives, schools and health posts. Early results showed that once free of debt bondage and economic exploitation the rubber tappers' production was sufficient to permit a substantial increase in their standard of living. In addition, the communities proved they were able to administer their own schools and health posts.

Armed with these arguments the rubber tappers were able to propose a socially equitable and environmentally sustainable development policy for the region based on securing and improving their way of life, rather than official investments in ranching and colonisation projects that would spell disaster both for them and for the forest. Chico played a leading role in negotiating with state and federal governments, with the World Bank and the InterAmerican Development Bank, presenting the rubber tappers' views as a member of the CUT — the Brazilian Trade Union Congress (see chapter 3 footnote 1). He travelled to Europe and to North America. He received two international prizes. At the same time the situation back in Acre was worsening and leaders of the rubber tappers' movement, Chico included, were increasingly at risk.



Rex Features

The interview with Chico in this book was part of research commissioned by the Latin America Bureau on social movements in Brazil. The project, under the coordination of Brazilian sociologist Cândido Grzybowski, conducted in-depth interviews with leading figures in these movements. In late November and early December 1988 Chico recorded two and a half hours of interviews in Rio Branco, ranging over the background to his involvement in the rural workers' movement, the growth of the rubber tappers' organisation and the prospects for the future. A few days later Chico was dead.

An explosion of public concern and media attention followed the news of Chico's death. He himself, I am sure, would have expressed amusement and embarrassment at this. He would have been less than amused, I suspect, at the terms in which some of the subsequent debate has been framed in the countries of the North. One of the strands that emerges in this debate is an argument which suggests that since southern governments appear incapable of protecting their fragile environments and, worse, since it now appears the degradation of these environments may provoke global change that will affect us all, the management of such areas ought therefore to be subject to external scrutiny if not control. Behind

some environmentally friendly preoccupations lurk politically unfriendly propositions.

To understand the question of tropical deforestation we must look at both the situation in the countries concerned and in our own societies and economies.

It is true that continuation of current rates of tropical deforestation would represent an unprecedented failure on the part of humanity: a failure that would be scientific, aesthetic and, above all, moral. It is true that tropical deforestation makes a triple contribution to global warming: one, because the removal of the trees means they no longer absorb carbon dioxide; two, because burning the forest creates still more carbon dioxide; and three, because the introduction of cattle ranching, as has happened in the Amazon basin, increases the release of methane, another greenhouse gas, into the atmosphere from the unlikely source of bovine flatulence.

Yet only five per cent of the world's emissions of carbon dioxide (which comprises half of the global warming effect) currently occurs in developing countries (excluding China). Around 75 per cent is released from developed countries (North America, Eastern Europe, Western Europe and the Pacific). Western Europe alone is responsible for 15 per cent of the total, three times more than all the developing countries put together. The implications for the North are immense. How can these societies drastically reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases, with all that this implies for the supply and pricing of goods and services, particularly transport and energy? How will the costs be borne? Does the political will exist? Yet until we can demonstrate our commitment and signs of progress on issues such as this, northern preoccupations with southern environmental problems can all too easily be rejected by vested interests in the South as self-serving and hypocritical.

Blaming the victims

Take another aspect of the North-South relationship illustrated by the case of the rubber tappers of the western Amazon. Brazil is the world's most indebted country. It owes over US\$120 billion to northern banks and governments. Meeting the payments takes 28 per cent of its export earnings. The international financial system, through the International Monetary Fund, advocates 'adjustment' — reducing imports and maximising export earnings in order to generate the surplus to meet debt obligations. Consequently, countries like Brazil, deprived of new financial support and obliged

to cut imports, cannot make the investments needed for sustainable growth. Forced to export as much as possible, as quickly as possible, they turn to boosting the exports of primary products, with all the social and environmental costs that this entails. From the Amazon region minerals, meat, coffee, cocoa, hardwoods, vegetable oils, tropical fruits and a host of other products are sent out onto the world market to raise the foreign exchange to meet the debt payments. The UK is one of the major importers of these products.

Between 1983 and 1987 the Latin American and Caribbean countries paid their creditors US\$90 billion more than they received. The UN Secretary General has characterised this as a 'perverse net transfer of resources from developing countries'. Latin American countries owe EC and Swiss banks more than they owe US banks (US\$92 billion as against US\$80 billion). During this period European banks received a net transfer of almost US\$30 billion from Latin American and Caribbean debtors, of which UK banks received a third.

As consumers and bank customers in the North, we benefit from a set of relations that oblige indebted countries to plunder their natural resources. Once again we need to demonstrate a commitment to equitable trading and financial relations between North and South in order to speak from ethically defensible positions on environmental questions in countries like Brazil.

This is not to place the responsibility solely on the North, nor to invalidate the genuine concerns of environmentalists and others for whom the rubber tappers' movement represented hope and for whom Chico's death represented a loss keenly felt. Mutual support and solidarity between communities both North and South seeking to resist and control the forces that dominate them is the key to democracy and sustainable development. In the case of tropical forests, whilst changing production and consumption patterns in the North and advocating equitable North-South relations are clearly necessary, they may not be enough.

Chico was well aware of this. Whilst he sought to construct international alliances, on the basis of mutual understanding and equity, and whilst he wanted to make the European and US public aware of the connections between the struggle he was engaged in and the tinned meat on British supermarket shelves or the hardwood fittings in European bathrooms, he was aware that his struggle lay in Brazil.

A solution to the debt crisis or equitable trading relations would not automatically result in environmental or social improvements in highly indebted countries like Brazil. Substantial political change



At the Second Congress of the National Council of Rubber Tappers and First National Meeting of the Alliance of Forest Peoples.

is also needed. Successive Brazilian governments have had an agenda for the Amazon region in which social justice and environmental protection barely figured. Their aims have included sweetening local elites, generating foreign exchange, fortifying frontiers to forestall or intimidate neighbours and, above all, providing an escape channel for the landless from other parts of the country rather than contemplating agrarian reform.

Forging alliances

It is part of the new demand for democracy and social justice from Brazil's dispossessed and oppressed people that sees the rubber tappers of the western Amazon standing alongside Indians, rural workers, neighbourhood associations, industrial workers and others. They are demanding the right to be involved in taking the decisions that affect their lives, rejecting previous forms of authoritarian political culture, and advocating development policies and priorities that address the basic needs of the mass of the population.

Chico would be the first to admit that he was one amongst many, even in his own community. He was aware of the risks to his life, and had no desire to be a martyr. The purpose of his struggle was after all to enhance life. At the memorial service for him held in Washington in January 1989 one of the readings was from letters he had written shortly before his death:

'My dream is to see this entire forest conserved because we know it can guarantee the future of all the people who live in it. Not only that, I believe that in a few years the Amazon can become an economically viable region not only for us, but for the nation, for all of humanity, and for the whole planet...I don't want flowers at my funeral because I know they would be taken from the forest. I only want my assassination to serve to put an end to the immunity of the gunmen.....If a messenger from heaven came down and guaranteed that my death would help to strengthen the struggle, it could even be worth it. But experience teaches us the opposite. It is not with big funerals and demonstrations of support that we are going to save the Amazon. I want to live.'

I last saw Chico a few weeks before his death. I was in Rio. It was a Sunday afternoon and I was driving to the beach with some friends. As we passed the botanical gardens we saw a march assembling. I saw Chico at its head and thought of stopping to say hello. I hadn't seen him since the beginning of the year, but it was glorious beach weather and I knew that if we stopped we would get into one of those long conversations Chico delighted in and he would end up persuading us to join the demonstration. So we pressed on. I felt guilty, but consoled myself by remembering that I was on my way to Acre and would meet him there. Later we watched the environmentalists march through the centre of town on the television news.

I never did see him in Acre. I was in Rio Branco. He must have been in Xapuri or travelling. Time seemed precious for other reasons and I returned south without seeing him.

Two days after his death, on Christmas Day, I rang a friend in Rio Branco. She told me that one morning the previous week she had arrived late at work and saw Chico driving down the road. He waved at her and shouted something she didn't catch. In her office she was given a message from him explaining that he had waited half the morning to talk to her, but that she shouldn't worry. He

would call in next time he was in town. He wished her a happy Christmas.

I suppose all sudden deaths leave this sensation of unfinished business, of conversations hanging in mid-air.

When she saw him he must have been on his way home to Xapuri. Despite the threats he had received, and the advice of his friends, he wanted to spend Christmas with his family. At supper time, as he opened the back door of his modest wooden house to go down to the bottom of the garden for a shower, he was shot in the chest. He staggered into the house and died in the arms of a colleague, his family looking on. The bodyguards provided by the state government disappeared out of the front door, and the police in the town's police station on the next corner did nothing.

Chico did not want to die. The original interview should have served to present the background and demands of the rubber tappers to an outside audience, to reinforce the connections between the preservation of the forest and the need for democracy. It should not have been the chronicle of a death foretold. Nor would Chico have wanted to be cast as a hero: he just wanted people to agree on the need for change and to work together for that change.

Tony Gross
Oxford, June 1989

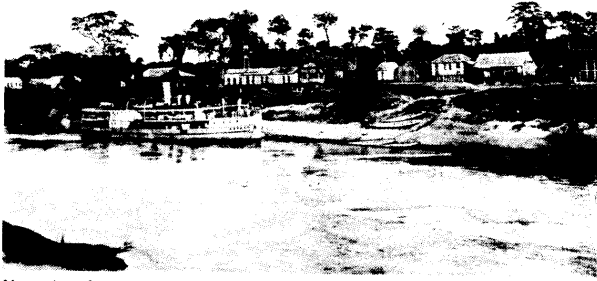
The history of rubber

The latex from the rubber tree (*hevea brasiliensis*) has been used for centuries by indigenous groups in the Amazon basin for waterproofing bags and footwear. In the 18th century travellers took rubber back to Europe and a flourishing trade grew up as it began to be used in the manufacture of surgical equipment and waterproof clothing. Entrepreneurs from towns on the main Amazon river would make annual expeditions up its tributaries to collect latex and other forest products from Indian communities that had been persuaded or coerced into supplying them.

As demand for rubber grew in Europe and North America in the late 19th century with the advent of the pneumatic tyre and other products, more permanent arrangements evolved. Traders began to bring in non-indigenous labour from outside the region, especially the rural poor fleeing the droughts in north-east Brazil in the 1870s and 1880s. The upper Amazon tributaries (the Madeira, Purus, Jutai, Juruá, Içá rivers) were occupied and the traditional rubber estate (the *seringal*) created. Conditions were harsh and the indigenous groups were either forcibly incorporated into the labour force of the rubber estate or hunted down.



Nova Floresta, a rubber estate in Acre producing between 15,000 and 20,000 kilos of rubber in 1906.



Xapuri at the turn of the century.

Those that were not exterminated retreated into the forest away from the main rivers.

Great wealth was created. By the turn of the century Manaus had grown from a remote military outpost into the most advanced city in South America with floating docks, electric trams and street lighting, piped water and sewage systems. Much of this investment was British. British banks and commercial firms controlled most of the export of rubber and import of luxury items, and the Booth Line had weekly direct sailings from Liverpool to Belém and Manaus. The great rubber barons of these two cities controlled a network of intermediaries who in turn financed the rubber estate owners (the *seringalistas*). At the bottom of the chain was the mass of rubber tappers (the *seringueiros*), virtual slaves in a system of debt bondage.

In 1876 a British traveller, Henry Wickham, took seedlings of the rubber tree from Brazil to Kew Gardens. By the early years of this century scientists had overcome the problems of artificial propagation and after experimenting in Ceylon, the 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*.

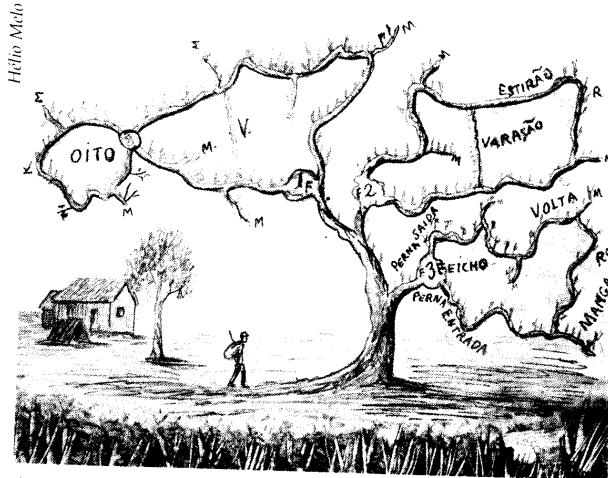
In the 1960s and 1970s many *seringalistas* abandoned their estates or sold them to ranchers from other parts of Brazil. This was the case with the region around Xapuri. The 1970s and 1980s have seen a growing conflict between ranchers clearing the forest for pasture, and rubber tappers, in many cases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



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



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



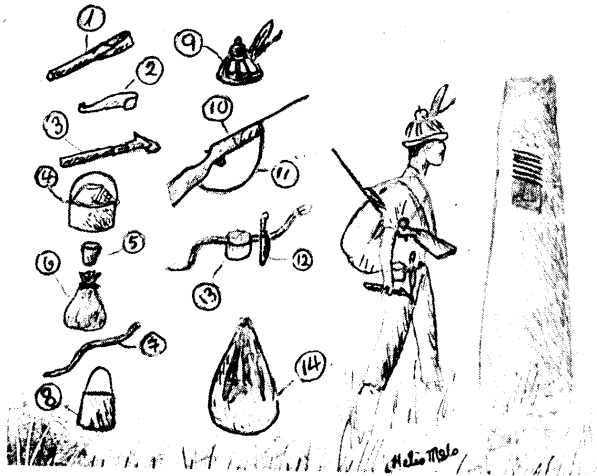
J.R. Ripper/Imagens da Terra

Children learn to tap rubber from early age.

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.

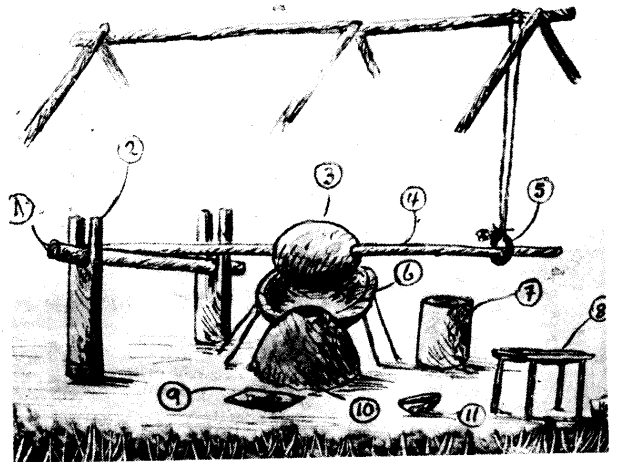
The rubber tapper household (called a *colocação*) is located in the forest. Each is between 15 minutes to an hour's walk from the next and will have two or more trails (*estradas de seringa*) which pass up to 200 rubber trees as they occur naturally in the forest, before looping back to the rubber tapper's 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.



Rubber tapper's equipment, for collecting the latex

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. kitbag



Rubber tapper's equipment, for smoking the rubber

- 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



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



Wendy Tynedale/Christian Aid

Rubber tapping using a brazil nut pod to collect latex, Xapuri.

The military coup of 1964

The government of João Goulart (1961-64), leader of the Labour Party and bete 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 presided over economic mismanagement, growing rural violence and the failure to undertake much-needed measures such as agrarian reform.

The presidential elections in November 1989 were the first direct elections since 1960. In the second round run-off the maverick conservative candidate Fernando Collor de Melo narrowly defeated the PT candidate Luis Inácio da Silva (Lula).

there was a military coup in Brazil. I'd already learned a lot from 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.

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.

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

CONTAG and Brazilian unions

Brazil's trade union structure dates from the Estado Nôvo, 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*).

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



Wendy Tymdale/Christian Aid

Forest calendar; each groove marks a day's work.

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.

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 chronology). 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.

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 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.

The narrow defeat in the 1989 presidential elections disheartened a party that by the end of the campaign had convinced itself that Lula would be elected. The first two years of the Collor government saw the PT on the defensive and incapable, along with the other opposition parties, of

providing effective opposition to Collor.

In the 1990 Congressional elections the PT increased its representation in the Chamber of Deputies and won its first seat in the Senate. In the governorship elections, however, the PT came close to victory in only one state. This was Acre, where the PT candidate Jorge Viana, a FUNTAC forestry engineer running with the support of the CNS and local grassroots organisations, lost to the conservative PDS candidate in the second round run-off.

The presidential election defeat, the party's poor showing in the 1990 governorship elections, the experience of municipal administration in Porto Alegre, São Paulo and Vitoria, plus the strategy re-evaluation induced by the collapse of socialism in Europe, led the November 1991 PT party convention to decide to concentrate on building a progressive left-of-centre bloc with other parties to provide opposition to the Collor government in Congress and to fight the November 1992 municipal elections with joint left candidates.



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.



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.

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

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 CEDJ, 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.

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.

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.

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

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 part of the Cachoeira estate was acquired 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 the 25,000 hectare estate was 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.

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!

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.

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 Roraima.
Apoio: Instituto de Estudos Socio-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.

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 Allegretti,¹ 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

The Brasilia meeting

Over a hundred rubber tappers, representing seventeen rural workers' unions and rubber tappers' organisations from Acre, Amazonas and R ndonia, travelled to Bras lia 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 Bras lia. 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'.

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 Bras lia, 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 Bras lia 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.

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. That meeting will elect an executive which will take over from the provisional executive elected in 1985. So the CNS is now a reality.