



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Brazilian Rubber Tappers campaign to protest the deforestation of the Brazilian rainforest region, 1977-1988

1977

to:

1988

Country: Brazil

Location City/State/Province: Acre

Goals:

Establishment of extractive reserves

Better marketing & price guarantees for rubber

Better living conditions for rubber tappers

Better marketing policies & working conditions for those who harvest nuts

Industrialization & marketing of other ignored forest products

Research on plants & resources of the Amazon

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 015. Group lobbying
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › empates
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 015. Group lobbying
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › empates
- 175. Overloading of facilities
- 179. Alternative social institutions

- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 015. Group lobbying
- 037. Singing
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › empates
- 175. Overloading of facilities
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 015. Group lobbying
- 037. Singing
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › empates
- 175. Overloading of facilities
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 015. Group lobbying
- 037. Singing
- 048. Protest meetings
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › empates
- 175. Overloading of facilities
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 015. Group lobbying
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 048. Protest meetings
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › empates
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 175. Overloading of facilities
- 179. Alternative social institutions
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Environment

Group characterization:

- Brazilian rubber tappers (seringueiros)

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Chico Mendes- Xapuri Rural Workers' Union leader

Marina Silva- co-founder of union movement and Workers' Party in Acre

Derci Teles de Carvalho- leader of union while Mendes was on the city council

Partners:

Indigenous people of Brazil

Wilson Pinheiro- leader of Brasileia union

Joao Maia- field delegate for CONTAG

External allies:

Landless Workers Movement

CUT trade union

Rubber processing plant owners

Involvement of social elites:

Lucelia Santos- one of Brazil's most popular soap opera stars of the 1980s

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Joao Maiafield delegate for CONTAG
- Wilson Pinheiro

Groups in 2nd Segment:**Groups in 3rd Segment:****Groups in 4th Segment:**

- CUT trade union
- Landless Workers Movement
- Rubber processing plant owners

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Indigenous people of Brazil

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Lucelia Santosone-one of Brazil's most popular soap opera stars of the 1980s

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Lifespan of campaign: 11 years, segment length: 1.8 years

Segment Length: *Approximately 1.8 years*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

UDR (Democratic Ruralist Union) - landowners' movement

Father Jose Caneiro de Lima- ally of landowners and secret agent of the government's intelligence system, SNI

Military Police

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

Rancher de Oliveira was shot forty times in response to union leader Pinheiro's assassination; however, this action was not sanctioned by the leadership of the campaign.

Repressive Violence:

The UDR had large numbers of hired gunman at their disposal, with which they threatened the rubber tappers & conducted assassinations. Military police arrested campaigners

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The campaign achieved its goal of establishing extractive reserves in the Xapuri region.:

In October of 1988, following a renewed wave of empates, Mendes convinced the Brazilian government to declare a 61,000 acre tract of traditional rubber tapper territory to be off limits to logging. This tract was declared the first ever extractive reserve. However, another primary goal of the campaign, improved conditions for rubber workers, was not achieved. Problems such as illegal logging and unstable rubber prices persist to this day, making it ever harder for rubber tappers to earn a sufficient income.

The movement continued even after leader Chico Mendes's assassination.

Between 1985&87 number of people involved in land conflicts grew from .5 million to over 1.3 million

For centuries, those who made a living by extracting and collecting rubber from rubber trees had been virtual slaves to the powerful rubber barons who controlled the Amazon region. Attempts were made in the 1960s to unionize these workers, called "rubber tappers;" however, these attempts failed. The 1970s marked a shift in the dynamics of the extraction of resources from

the Amazon. Ranchers from Southern Brazil began to buy up huge tracts of land in order to clear them for cattle grazing land. The rubber tappers who lived on this land were forcibly evicted, cutting them off from their source of income. This began new attempts to organize the rubber tappers and in 1975 a trade union campaign was successfully organized in Brasileia. The President of the union was Wilson Pinheiro and the Secretary was a young man from the Xapuri region, Chico Mendes, who later became the iconic figure of the movement. Having undergone training sessions in grassroots organizing, Mendes journeyed back to his hometown of Xapuri to establish a branch of the union there.

With the help of Marina Silva, Mendes successfully organized the Xapuri Rural Workers' Union in 1977. At the time a member of the city council, Chico was unable to serve as the head of the union and passed this responsibility to Derci Teles de Carvalho. The primary goal of the organization was to stop ranchers from clear cutting Xapuri's forests for grazing land. In his speeches, Mendes drew a link between survival of the forest and survival of the rubber tappers, whose means of support was the Brazilian nuts and rubber they gathered from the forest. 1977 also marked the creation of a weekly paper called the *Varadoura*, which was founded to broadcast information on the deforestation of Acre region. The editor of the newspaper relied heavily on Chico to give him weekly updates of the campaign, which Chico used as a recruitment opportunity.

The primary tactic of the campaign, employed from almost the start, was the use of *empates*, or "stand offs." This tactic involved groups of activists confronting laborers hired to clear the forests and attempting to convince them to lay down their saws. *Empates* were overwhelmingly successful as many of the men hired to clear the forests had been rubber tappers before the taking of their land. This tactic was not solely benign however, as it often involved the destruction of the laborers' camps and possessions, forcing them to return to their homesteads. Participants in the *empates* were often beaten and arrested by military police called on by the ranchers to keep order. The campaigners met this treatment with non-violence, such as singing hymns. When imprisoned, the campaigners often numbered too many for the jail's holding capacity and thus were soon released. As the campaign evolved so did the *empates*, moving to encompass the entire rubber tapper community, men, women, and children. Women and children would move to the front of the group, discouraging the Military police from shooting into the crowd.

In 1979 Chico introduced a strategy to establish schools and cooperatives on the rubber estates. The rationale behind this agenda was that these programs would improve the living conditions on the estates, which would in turn give rubber tappers more incentive to organize to keep their lands and remain in the forest. Originally engineered for adults, the education program quickly expanded to children. Classes included literacy training as well as global and environmental awareness. Although the Mendes' schools were a huge success, the attempt to establish cooperatives on the estates failed. Mendes tried to compensate for this by spending almost all of his time journeying from estate to estate spreading information and recruiting. 1980 marked the assassination of the president of the Brasileia union, Wilson Pinheiro. This resulted in a shift in the axis of the movement from Brasileia to Xapuri.

The next few years were marked by a series of *empates* and assassinations of union leaders. Then in 1985 the UDR, Democratic Ruralist Union, was formed. This group was formed by the ranchers in response to Chico's efforts to organize against deforestation. The UDR hired large numbers of armed forces to combat the union movement and initiated a number of targeted assassinations of union leaders. 1985 also marked the founding of the National Council of Rubber Tappers (CNS) by Mendes and other key union leaders. The group gained widespread international support since it was seen as both a social justice and environmental protection campaign. Later that year Chico organized the First National Rubber Tappers Congress. From this meeting emerged the proposal for extractive reserves, legally protected forest areas held in trust for people who lived and worked in a sustainable manner. This proposal offered an economically viable alternative to the clearing of forests for grazing land and would be the primary demand for the remainder of the campaign.

In 1986 the Xapuri Rural Workers' Union allied with the indigenous people of Brazil, who had also been historically discriminated against and overlooked. This was particularly significant because the Indians and rubber tappers had traditionally been at odds with one another over forest resources. Thus, the alliance between these two groups signaled for government officials the seriousness of the campaigns demands. In June of 1986 Mendes organized over 200 tappers for a march on the federal forestry office of Xapuri. Upon arrival the group staged a sit-in, but were quickly evicted by the police. For the remainder of 1986 and 1987 the focus of the movement was recruitment of rubber tappers for *empates* and rallying international support for

the cause. International recognition of Mendes with the Ted Turner's Better World Society Prize and United Nation's Global 500 Environmental Prize, both awarded to him in 1987, spread awareness of the campaign.

In October of 1988, following a renewed wave of empates, Mendes convinced the Brazilian government to declare a 61,000 acre tract of traditional rubber tapper territory to be off limits to logging. This tract was declared the first ever extractive reserve. This victory for the union sparked a wave of assassinations of the movement's leaders. The constant recipient of death threats, Mendes warned authorities for over a month of his impending assassination at the hands of the da Silva brothers, two local cattle ranchers. These calls for protection were ignored, and on Thursday 22 December 1988 Mendes was assassinated by Darli Alves da Silva. Following his death, the Second National Congress of Rubber Tappers met in early 1989, issuing twenty-seven demands on environmental and human rights protection. Within the next decade several of Mendes' co-campaigners were elected to important government offices, which helped to break the political stronghold of the UDR, creating a more receptive environment for legislation protecting the Amazon forests. As of 2001 twenty-one additional extractive reserves have been established in seven Brazilian states. However, this accounts for only 1.5 % of the area of the Amazon, and deforestation rates continued to grow in the Amazon, peaking in 1994. In addition, problems such as illegal logging and unstable rubber prices persist, making it ever harder for rubber tappers to earn a sufficient income.

Research Notes

Influences:

The Brasileia trade union campaign and their leader Wilson Pinheiro (1)

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Additional Notes:

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