



From the unions



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A look back at the political legacy of the late Francisco Alves Mendes Filho, known as Chico Mendes. The murdered Brazilian trade unionist is celebrated in particular for his defence of the rights of the *seringueiros*, workers who collect latex in the rubber tree plantations of the Amazon. *HesaMag* finds out what remains of his struggle today.

Angelo Ferracuti
Writer

Remembering Chico Mendes



↑ Raimondo Baros in the
Chico Mendes Extractive
Reserve in Xapuri.
Photo: © Angelo Ferracuti

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When I arrived at the deserted Rio Branco Airport in the middle of the night, Dom Luiz looked much the same as in the photos I had seen. A man of lean build, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, with short, white hair, a sparse beard and a talkative, determined air. This follower of Father Boff, the liberation theologian, who was dazzled as a very young man by the universal creed of the Second Vatican Council, later a driving force of the *Acquedotto felice* in Rome on the Appian Way, alongside the shanty-town dwellers who lived under the arches of the Porta Maggiore, was the very person described somewhat laconically by the American science journalist, Andrew Revkin, as 'Xapuri's priest [...] Ceppi, who was Italian and a member of Italy's Communist Party,' in his book *The Burning Season: The Murder of Chico Mendes and the Fight for the Amazon Rain Forest*.

Burning, because there have always been both blazing killer fires and gunfire here, Wild West-style shootings and gunmen firing at anyone who stands up against the law of the big landowners and agri-business multinationals, as well as acts of arson started by the estate owners to free up vast areas of forest and turn them over to cattle ranching and intensive crop farming. They call it the 'flame season', the 60 ill-fated days that, each year, come between the period of tropical heat and the long spell of torrential rains that swell the rivers: days which, in August 2019, fed 2 000 fires in this region. Rio Branco is a city of 400 000 souls in the region of Acre, in north-western Brazil, seized from Bolivia in 1900. In the forests on the border with Peru, 600 uncontacted people still live, Indians who have miraculously survived the rubber boom and the wave of migration from the north, primarily of Portuguese people. 'The first-born were the result of the rape of indigenous women,' comments Dom Luiz bluntly on the way to my hotel. He has been living here for 40 years, he knows every corner of this region and he was one of Chico's friends.

When, in the following days, we drive out of the city in his ATV and cross the new bridge to take Route 364, the road to Porto Velho, the tarmac strip cuts through vast, treeless grasslands. Here there has been a 57% increase in fires, but no one talks about it, they are seen as something normal. 'The West makes a fuss about the big scandal of the burning forest,' Roland Poalanca, former Member of Parliament for the Workers' Party, now a judge at the Court of Auditors, told me acerbically yesterday. 'But it's so that you can have soya and meat. Italy has imported 25 000 tonnes of Amazonian grass-fed beef in the past year.'

Further along the road, on an industrial estate at the end of a dusty road, is the Coperacre cooperative, which markets Brazilian chestnuts. It is a big green warehouse with a workforce of about

60 employees. Here, as we tour the different sections, Leandro, a tall, rugged young man with a chubby face and wide-awake eyes, proudly explains that they export to the UAE, the US, Russia and Germany. 'Here we sell what nature produces; we maintain without destroying anything,' he tells me as we visit the storerooms where the young sorters separate out the chestnuts with their skilled, nimble hands. 'Initially, they were all sent to Belém to the Mutran family, which had the monopoly, but now the work has been cooperativised, and it employs the people who live here. We process 2 500 tonnes a day.' These workers are the true political legacy of Chico Mendes, the rubber tapper and trade unionist murdered in 1988 because his activism hindered the activities of the agri-business lobby.

Symbol of an alternative model

Experiments in progress in agroecology, or natural extractivism, are also taking place in Crelândia, Chinari, Porto Velho and Nova Califórnia in Rondônia, where the Reça cooperative is based. On the way there, carrying on along the apparently never-ending road, which goes up- and downhill, stretching towards the horizon, we pass, on the one hand, tenant farmers' smallholdings, and, on the other, large ranches, vast prairies stretching for kilometres with grazing

↳ Nilson Mendes, Chico's cousin, in front of a sequoia tree, in the reforested Cachoiera Extractive Reserve. Photo: © Angelo Ferracuti



white cows and horses, bison, entire tracts of forest wiped out and the occasional silhouettes of towering trees.

For 35 years, 500 families of tenant farmers, joining forces in the Reca cooperative, have been replanting trees and processing local fruits, like heart-of-palm and cupuaçu, which are made into confectionery, liqueurs, jams and medicinal products, preserving the biome with its specific vegetation without bringing in new crops, a form of exploitation that is compatible with the life of the forest. When we arrive, in woodland nearby, 20 hectares are burning. I can see the thick, white smoke, rising high in the sky, blurring out the scrubland.

Trade unionist Chico Mendes was murdered in 1988 because his activism hindered the activities of the agri-business lobby.

Sergio Lopez, one of the cooperative's managers, explains that the media used to vilify Chico. 'They said he wanted poverty, not to touch the plants, to let the birds and butterflies live.' Then, through the Catholic Church and the Unified Workers' Central (CUT) trade union, they met him and they realised: 'Chico stood for a different model of development.'

Now, reforestation is going on here, with trees being replanted at high density and the environment being restored, respecting nature and the people working there. Like José, a small, gentle, quiet, elderly man, once a rubber tapper and now one of the forest guardians, who lives here with his family. When we go to meet him, he shows me round his 97-hectare farm with 600 chestnut trees, and we walk around them under the burning sun. He knows them all, he knows how old they are, he touches the trunks and brushes the leaves with the palm of his hand. 'You see, I used to cut lots of trees; now I replant them,' he says cheerfully. He reminds me of Elzéard Bouffier, the shepherd in Jean Giono's book, *The man who planted trees*.

The legend of Chico Mendes began in the region of Cachoiera, near Xapuri, during the first revolts. There, at the age of 10, he started tapping the trees to extract the latex with his father along the tracks of the rubber plantation. He met a Bolivian army

officer, Fernando Távora, who had escaped into the forest from his country after taking part in the struggles of the Communist Party. Távora taught him to read and write and sparked a passion for politics.

Cachoiera is almost 200 kilometres away on the BR317, a drive across vast plateaux: boundless, obliquely lit grasslands, under skies of deep blue. When I arrive in Xapuri, the heat is torrid and searing. The road to Cachoiera is red and unpaved, and the Toyota limps forwards on the slopes. At first, there are still ranches and pastureland, but after just a few kilometres the surrounding vegetation becomes thick and full of shadows, and at the sides of the road the

forest becomes an insurmountable green wall. This is where Chico Mendes gained his training and organised the first struggles of the tappers. Here too, the first natural extractivism project was conceived, and this is where the little, yellow-painted family house is, where his cousin Sebastião is resting peacefully in the shade of the veranda.

Mendes' remaining cousins Antonio, Francisco and Nilson, who manage the extractive reserve, are waiting for me. They remember the days of the 'stand-offs'. 'We used to go to where they were cutting trees, we seized the chainsaws and demolished the houses,' recalls Nilson, with a surly expression, wearing a wide-brimmed brown felt hat. 'It was a stand-off based on conscience, without any violence,' and they sang as they did it. 'Enough suffering, enough weeping, the land belongs to the workers; in our struggles and under the law, we won't give in,' he sings out loud. 'After those struggles, the landowners' Democratic Rural Union decided to go elsewhere,' says Antonio. 'Here, at that time, we had the Death Squad of Hildebrando Pascoal, an army colonel and Federal MP, a criminal. He used to tie people by their arms and legs to two trucks and mangle them to death.'

When we go into the reserve, Nilson heads boldly into the tangle of trees and branches, clutching a machete and the tapper's knife to carve the groove in the tree, followed by Dom Luiz and me. He shows me one tree that has been being tapped for 100 years, whereas itauba trees have to wait two centuries to become mature plants. He knows this forest like the back of his hand,

↳ Chico's fighting friends at the headquarters of the CUT union in Xapuri.
Photo: © Angelo Ferracuti



every pathway, he knows every escape route and even remembers the tree that his father cut 20 years ago in a ravine and the tree which has leaves that provide an antidote to cobra venom. Then there is also the sequoia they call ‘the queen’, a striking 700-year old samauma tree, 35 metres tall.

At least they dreamed

On the Chico Mendes Extractive Reserve, covering almost one million hectares between Assis Brasil, Brasília, Capixaba, Xapuri and Serra Madureira, is the farm belonging to Raimundo Barros, *Raimundão*, Chico’s fellow activist. When I arrive, he shows me the green cap with the Cuban flag on it. It was he who took Chico’s place in the movement, and he remembers Chico with tender-hearted respect. ‘He was an admirer of revolutionaries and revolutions. He said that someone who embraces a cause is unlikely to see the fruits, but at least he dreamed,’ he continues in a low voice. Around here, he and his children work 500 hectares of land. ‘Three thousand rubber plants, chestnuts, pineapple, which coexist with wild boar, deer, native bees.’ He is also against the exploitation of community timber, the share that each person can take for him- or herself. ‘I will never cut down a tree from here again,’ he says seriously, with a gesture that suggests this is a solemn promise.

Xapuri is a small town that has grown up alongside the River Acre, land of the rubber tappers. Looking at the facial features of the people you come across, they belong to Indians, light-skinned blonds from northern Europe, dark-skinned Africans. If you talk to Chico’s old comrades, who can be found at the trade union headquarters, a sense of despondency prevails. The Bolsonaro government, which obtained 70% of the vote here, is drawing up a decree that is set to halve the size of extractive reserves and indigenous lands and hand them over to entrepreneurs and multinationals. The intergenerational conflict is heart-rending. ‘They say that, if we don’t clear the forest, we will die of starvation,’ Julio Barbosa tells me. But his father is sardonic: ‘They’re trading the wealth of the forest for

↳ **Burnt forest around Xapuri.**
Photo: © Angelo Ferracuti



animals that bring in more money. They turn up at festivals dressed as ranchers, hats and all,’ which is quite the opposite of what they were. ‘What can we do to rediscover our zeal?’ says another. ‘It’s as though everything we’ve done has been of no use at all.’

Even the Chico Mendes Museum is closed, on the pretext that the building is unsafe. The house is at the end of the village. It is a small wooden structure, blue in colour, containing the few objects that commemorate him: the typewriter, the books and, in the background, the table where he played dominoes with the police guards the night before he was killed, on 22 December 1988, when Darcy Alves Ferreira blasted him with a shotgun. There are still traces of bullet holes on the door. The father of the killer, who instigated the attack, still lives on a farm outside the village; one of the two cowardly guards, who ran away rather than help him, is a big man who has a beer outlet in the centre of the village. ‘When he was hit, he fell by the door to our room,’ recounted his daughter Elenira, who was four years old at the time. ‘He tried to say my name, but he couldn’t.’ And when she was 19, an aunt showed her a photo of herself with

a dedication from her father: ‘She is the spearhead of hope. Elenira, one day you will carry on the fight that your father will not manage to win.’ At the funeral, his comrade Juan Correia, the bricklayer, was supposed to seal the tomb, but he could not bring himself to do it. ‘Then all Chico’s comrades started shouting and crying in the rain,’ relates Dom Luiz. ‘For seven days, we recited the Mass outside this house, and so many people gathered there in the morning.’

But to really understand what happened during those years, and what continues to happen today in the forest, you need to see it from above. When Cassiano Marquez starts the burner, the hot air balloon rises, following the direction of the wind, and then ascends further, to 800 metres above ground level. From the skies above Rio Branco, there is a dizzying view. Where there have been fires, dark craters have formed – I can see the charred trees, the parched land, and the huge forest has disappeared, giving way to big green spaces where herds of grazing cattle and horses run about. The forest – the great mother of the rubber tappers and the Indians, of the forest people – known to Chico as Pacha Mama. ●

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