

Report from Rio by Lorenzo Carrasco

Farmers march on Brasilia

President Cardoso has attacked near-bankrupt farmers who want to produce food, as "irresponsible deadbeats."

A march by thousands of Brazilian farmers on the capital city of Brasilia—described by one of the organizers of the "We can't plant" movement as "the strongest demonstration in the history of agriculture"—is challenging the political and economic establishment which sustains the current regime of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Until now, the government, ensconced in Brasilia under the powerful political protection provided by the mass media, which silences all opposition, has succeeded with relative ease in imposing its corrupt scheme of "reforming" the Constitution, the better to dismember the Brazilian national state.

But this steamroller technique of governing is coming rapidly to an end, as thousands of farmers, mounted on tractors and farm vehicles of every description, begin pouring into the capital city from every corner of the country. Their goal is a simple one: to drive home to the government the reality of the agricultural crisis that Cardoso's monetary policies, with interest rates 60% and higher, and with his open-door approach toward imports driving down the already minimal prices on the country's basic grain crops, leading Brazilian growers into unavoidable bankruptcy, have caused.

To get some idea of this, Brazil imported 9 million tons of grain at a cost of \$2 billion during the 1994-95 harvest period, despite having produced the largest grain crop in the country's history, some 81 million tons. The farmer organizations estimate, based on last year's harvest, that losses to the sector were on the

order of \$6 billion, despite the fact that the physical volume produced was 17% greater.

In this context, the protest being carried out in Brasilia must be seen as a last resort by farm producers, many of whose leaders in the National Congress have already been corrupted and bought off by the government. The march began in the extreme south of the country, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, which borders on Uruguay and Argentina, and has traveled more than 2,500 kilometers to Brasilia. Along the route, the marchers have held numerous demonstrations and staged important public acts. The *Jornal do Commercio* of Belo Horizonte, the capital of the state of Minas Gerais, reports that nearly 40,000 rural producers from 400 cities in 10 states are taking part in the protest, which was organized outside the framework of the traditional agricultural associations.

President Cardoso, who first tried to ignore the agricultural crisis and then attempted to describe the march as an "unnecessary demonstration" whose purpose was "incomprehensible," finally directed a statement to the nation. In it, he attacked the leaders of the march as "irresponsible deadbeats" who would shatter the nation's financial system with their proposal for general debt moratorium.

At the same time, he demagogically offered \$3.2 billion to finance next year's harvest, when the amount of credit the sector was receiving in the early 1980s was approximately \$27 billion a year!

Another trick of the government

to try to destroy the opposition to its program, is to encourage the so-called Landless Movement, linked to the Theology of Liberation and the radical Workers Party (PT), to intimidate the bankrupt farmers with land invasions. However, such a move bears a grave risk of exploding beyond anyone's control.

And the government's problems are just beginning. First, the farmers who have traveled thousands of kilometers have no intention of returning home without a solution, and are prepared to camp on the doorstep of the presidential palace if necessary. They arrive in Brasilia at a time when Congress is returning from its recess and the government hopes to accelerate its constitutional reform plan, as agreed to with the international banks. Second, the fact that the protesters intend to donate food to the "Community of Solidarity" charity which is run by First Lady Ruth Cardoso, is a "white-glove" slap in the face to government policy.

The march, which entered Brazil on July 18 to a noisy reception of fireworks and trumpet-blowing, proposes first and foremost, in the words of Antonio Eloy Paz, one of its leaders, to organize all of Brazilian society around the fight for survival of the agricultural sector. "The presentation of documents to the President of the Republic is symbolic, because everything we have had to say he already knows."

Another march leader emotionally declared, after hearing the presidential statement denouncing the growers, "We want to know what the President's position is. If it is to bankrupt the growers, then fine. We will go home and ask all the growers to plant perhaps half of what they planted last year. And if there is not enough food, 'Impeachment for Fernando Henrique Cardoso.'" "