

Brazilian workers of Portland Cement Company (PERUS) strike for economic justice and better working conditions, 1962-1974

- [\(mainly or initiated by\) people of color](#) [1]

Timing

Time period notes:

The strike began on 14 May 1962, but workers had previously created and sent a petition to the Abdalla Group.

May

1962

to:

11 November

1974

Location and Goals

Country:

Brazil

Location City/State/Province:

São Paulo

Location Description:

within the city and in the vicinity of the PERUS plant

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

Originally: securing on time payments, safer working conditions, reimbursement of percent of salary withheld for employee housing never allotted, and fulfillment of past agreements including establishment of a production incentive for workers

Later: complete confiscation of PERUS, reimbursement of lost wages for strikers, end to government intervention with the union, and withdrawal of SOCAL from PERUS and guarantee that all SOCAL workers would become part of the PERUS Union.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 016. Picketing
- 105. Establishment strike

- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 016. Picketing
- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 132. Refusal to dissolve existing institutions
- 187. Seizure of assets

Methods in 6th segment:

- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 187. Seizure of assets

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 016. Picketing

Notes on Methods:

Strikers were very active in public demonstrations, picketing and handing out leaflets in the city. As the campaign progressed and strikers were bogged down in legal processes, it is unknown how frequently they continued to demonstrate in the city. The military coup in 1964 also cracked down on regulation of strike activities.

The Union sued for the completed confiscation of PERUS. After receiving the union's petition, President Geisel allowed for the complete confiscation of PERUS by the Union. The government seized the company's assets.

Segment Length:

two years and one month

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Abdalla-owned factories
- PERUS workers
- families
- wives

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

João Breno Pinto, Mario Carvalho de Jesus

Partners:

three other Abdalla-owned factories

External allies:

The Catholic Church, governments of Rio Grande Do Sol and Parana

Involvement of social elites:

President Ernesto Geisel (Brazil), Leonel Brizola (Governor of Rio Grande Do Sol), Ney Braga (Governor of Parana)

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- PERUS workers
- families
- three neighboring Abdalla-owned factories (enter and exit)
- wives

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- three neighboring Abdalla-owned factories (reenter)

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Three neighboring Abdalla-owned factories initially joined PERUS but left the strike after 32 days. Many workers of these factories would sign the petition to President Giesel (1974) for the complete confiscation of PERUS from the Abdalla Group.

Segment Length:

two years and one month

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

José João Abdalla and the Abdalla Group

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

leaflet distribution, media/propaganda

Campaigner violence:

At one demonstration, a worker threw stones at the police, but the union believed that the worker had been set up to initiate violence by the Abdalla Group.

Repressive Violence:

Police beatings, violent arrests, use of water hoses, hunger siege

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

1 point out of 3 points

Total points:

7 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

Abdalla initially convinced about ten percent of PERUS strikers to return to work and many workers died over the course of the campaign. The union did receive donations but struggled financially with legal expenses.

PERUS lost the case for reimbursement of nontenured workers. Though given a share of awarded funds, they were not fully reimbursed for lost salaries.

The Portland Cement Company plant at PERUS opened in 1925. Located on the outskirts of São Paulo, Brazil's most populous city, the plant served as the main source of raw building materials for the city. In 1951, prominent Brazilian businessman, José João Abdalla, took over the plant, making it one of the thirty subsidiaries under his control. J.J. Abdalla showed serious disregard to the needs of the workers, neglecting to provide the proper maintenance and development of facilities, which hugely impacted production and quality and safety of working conditions.

In 1958, members of the Industrial, Cement, Lime, and Plaster Workers Union of São Paulo at PERUS engaged in a 46 day strike demanding wage increases. Workers won the pay raise and the Abdalla Group signed an agreement to improve working conditions and establish a production incentive for workers. The striking union members at PERUS came to be known as the "Queixadas" (wild boars) because wild boars are the only animals that when in danger, gather in groups to face the threat head-on.

The victory of the Queixadas was relatively short lived. By 1962, Abdalla had reneged on signed agreements from 1958, and the company had begun frequently delaying wage payments to its employees. The cement workers collectively referred to Abdalla and his team as the "mau patrão" (bad boss). Workers at PERUS and three other factories owned by the Abdalla Group signed a joint letter to the owner listing their complaints. They demanded on-time payments, reimbursement of the five percent of salaries withheld since 1960 for company subsidized employee housing never allotted, and fulfilment of past agreements, including establishment of production incentives. Abdalla offered no response and refused to communicate with workers. When workers threatened to strike, he coldly dared them to, if they had the courage.

On 14 May 1962, 3,500 workers from PERUS and the three other Abdalla-owned factories went on strike. Two hundred police officers occupied the PERUS plant on the planned strike day, but strikers refused to be lured into using violence.

The President of the Industrial, Cement, Lime, and Plaster Workers Union, João Breno Pinto, led the strike with a strong commitment to nonviolence. He strongly believed in the teachings of Gandhi and Martin Luther King on the power of nonviolent action and worked to convince workers that nonviolent action was the most effective path for achieving their goals.

When the company prepared to send out the first truckloads of cement following the strike, many workers threw themselves in front of the trucks. They called for the drivers to crush them because by complying with Abdalla, they were crushing the Brazilian worker. Police broke ranks to stop the trucks from running over the strikers. This incident spread word of the strike.

Thirty-two days into the strike, union leaders at the three other factories reached agreements with Abdalla. The following week, 2,000 workers at those three plants returned to work, leaving the Queixadas on their own.

Abdalla, a man of prominent wealth and political influence, publicly denounced the Queixadas. The Regional Labor Court refused to hear PERUS workers' complaints and ordered them back to work. The Queixadas then held a secret vote in which 1,257 of the 1,283 participants voted in favor of continuing the strike.

Workers distributed leaflets, picketed and spoke publicly in the city, raising support and donations for the strike. They held weekly meetings for seven years. The union's legal representative, Mário Calvarho de Jesus, stated that the PERUS Union made all decisions concerning the campaign's course of action in meetings open to all workers. In addition, because of their commitment to nonviolence, worker's wives and families became active participants in the bi-weekly demonstrations.

Abdalla eventually succeeded in persuading about ten percent of PERUS workers to go back to work. On 21 August, the one hundredth day of the strike, Conceição da Costa Neves of the State Assembly led 100 PERUS workers and many newly hired strike breakers into the plant. Early that morning, the Abdalla Group distributed leaflets throughout the surrounding neighborhoods, condemning the strikers as thieves and communists and imploring people to tell their husbands, sons, and neighbors to return to work. Police moved in and commenced beating and arresting many strikers. The mau patrão made highly publicized accusations against the Queixadas of embezzlement and impeding "free" workers from returning to work. The Labor Court eventually suspended the case.

As the strike dragged on, many workers grew frustrated and wished to resort to violence. A group even set a date to burn down the PERUS plant. After turning to the teachings of Jesus for inspiration on nonviolent alternatives, they decided to congregate in the center of the city and launch a four week hunger strike from 4 December 1962 to New Year's Day. The fasting workers were accompanied by workers who distributed leaflets around the site and educated the public about their struggle. One worker later volunteered to assassinate Abdalla and disappear. Mário Calvarho brought this up in one of the union's frequent meetings. Though many expressed interest in this solution, they ultimately decided that they wanted to not just end the strike, but win it, and in their firmeza permanente (relentless persistence/nonviolent struggle), they felt God was clearly on their side.

From the end of September 1962, the union, represented by Mário Calvarho de Jesus, began an inquest in the labor court for the unlawful firing of 501 tenured workers and the dismissal of non-tenured workers from PERUS. They initially lost both cases, but a retrial in 1967 ruled in favor of the 501 tenured workers. Workers won the right to return to work and be reimbursed for lost wages from August 1962 to when they would begin work again. Courts evaluated this case eleven times, but the tenured workers finally won once and for all in the Supreme Court in Brasilia in January 1969.

Following the military coup in 1964, the Labor Court revived suspended charges of embezzlement and

impeding free workers made against the Queixadas. The government interfered, placing the PERUS branch of the union under control of a chief administrator of the PERUS plant. Police arrested union leaders and Mário Carvalho.

Throughout the duration of the strike, Abdalla sought to impose a hunger siege on the strikers, convincing local businesses not to sell to the Queixadas. Strikers received an overwhelming amount of donations coming in from all over São Paulo and other states. Notable donors included the governors of Rio Grande do Sul and Parana, as well as the Catholic Church which supplied the workers with flour.

Following the court ruling in favor of the tenured workers, 309 workers returned to work in January 1969. Police subsequently arrested Mário Carvalho under false accusations by the Abdalla Group and held him for 29 days.

From 1970 to 1972, Abdalla began large scale compulsory transfers of workers to one of their different enterprises. He aimed to create a false union under the alias of SOCAL. After being rehired by SOCAL, the workers could no longer be part of the PERUS Union. The company fired any workers who refused this transfer.

The Queixadas brought Abdalla back to court with charges of compulsory transfers, blocking unionization, and fraudulent documentation authorizing SOCAL to work in PERUS. Abdalla still had not paid the over three million dollars owed to tenured workers. The PERUS Union realized that the only way to receive payment was through confiscation of Abdalla's property.

In July of 1973, the Queixadas won an apparent victory when Brazilian President Emilio Medici confiscated the PERUS plant and put it under the union's control. However, Abdalla retained ownership of the quarries that supplied the plant. This created a humiliating situation where the union had to buy raw materials from the Abdalla Group to run the plant.

On 1 May 1974, 3,500 workers, along with family and community members, signed a petition to newly installed President Geisel asking for complete confiscation of PERUS. They demanded the payment of overdue salaries for 400 workers and their heirs, an end of government intervention with the union, and guarantee that all SOCAL workers would become part of the PERUS Union.

In October 1974, President Giesel confiscated the quarries from the Abdalla Group.

On 11 November 1974, the union received the equivalent of 2,934,000 dollars for payment of wages. In addition to the tenured workers, the union gave shares of this sum to all non-tenured Queixadas. Although serious doubts of the power of nonviolent action arose throughout the campaign, they maintained their commitment to Firmeza Permanente.

Research Notes

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