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## TWO

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### Introduction

In the history of Latin America, nowhere is the use of nonviolent action better established than in the efforts of organized labor. Strikes, marches, and other forms of public protest have been integral to social gains for workers throughout the region. Organizing efforts have had to confront both the institutionalized violence of subhuman working conditions and wages, and the reactionary violence of often brutal repression of efforts for change.

There are many examples of heroic struggle against such violence. The most successful of these include extraordinary determination and creative use of nonviolent strategies. A good example is the protracted struggle of workers at the PERUS cement factory on the outskirts of São Paulo, Brazil. In the early 1960s the growing awareness and organization of the workers prompted the owner, J.J. Abdalla, to draw the battle lines and declare war. Previous struggles had prepared the workers. In 1962, when the owner reneged on signed agreements and challenged them to strike, they dug in and held on to a deeply felt sense of justice.

Abdalla's status as a wealthy Brazilian businessman gave him substantial political influence. He had the police, some corrupt judges, and prominent politicians at his bidding. He tried strike-breaking, police repression, setting up another union, and

"influencing" the judges. After a military coup in 1964, he took advantage of the national security state dictatorship to bring charges against his opponents. Yet through it all the large majority of workers stood firm.

There were many dramatic moments. One came when the owner succeeded in cajoling ten percent of the workers to return and hired a large number of new employees. The police had virtually militarized the area in a strong show of force. When the first trucks were ready to ship cement from the plant, some of the strikers threw themselves in front, saying, "Kill us, for what you are doing only helps exploit and ruin the Brazilian worker. What you are doing, do directly: Crush us." The drivers, themselves victims of the system, moved ahead. Suddenly several policemen, deeply impressed by the steadfast and uncompromising witness of the strikers, broke ranks, jumped onto the trucks, and stopped them. As word spread about this incident, people began more and more to notice an extraordinary struggle.

Most of the time, however, the long and difficult struggle was quite ordinary—leaflet distribution, public speaking, raising strike support funds. It took the strikers seven years to win back their jobs and five years more, until 1974, to receive full compensation. Brazilian courts heard the case eleven different times. In the meantime, the strikers suffered deprivation, imprisonment, takeover of their union, and other persecution. Through it all, it was the *firmeza permanente* or "relentless persistence" of the workers that eventually brought victory.

*Firmeza permanente* almost met its match in J.J. Abdalla, who fanatically refused to compromise. Abdalla never did pay. Instead, the government paid after confiscating his property. Years later he managed to get his plant back. But he also antagonized the cartel of cement producers who, by 1987, had ganged up to nearly run his business into the ground.

Today the PERUS workers, in many cases the sons of those who walked out in 1962, still have the same reputation for tough resistance. They are once again agitating for a government confiscation. This time, they want the plant turned over to them. In this campaign they have united with shantytown dwellers under the slogan, "Cheap cement to get out of the shack."

The author of this chapter, Mário Carvalho de Jesus, has served the workers' movement in Brazil for almost forty years. He is a tireless example of *firmeza permanente*, which he considers the only way to achieve workers' rights and still fully respect the human person.

For all his work with organized labor, the influence of Carvalho de Jesus on the Roman Catholic bishops of Brazil has perhaps been an even more important contribution. Through unflagging witness as a lay activist and insistent calls to conscience, he has done much to raise

the social awareness of quite a few Brazilian bishops in what is to be the most progressive Catholic church in the world.

## **Firmeza Permanente** ***Labor Holds the Line in Brazil***

Mário Carvalho de Jesus

In the 1950s the one thousand workers of the Portland Cement Company of Brazil (PERUS) were divided between two sites: a factory in the town of Perus, near São Paulo, and, twelve miles away, quarry in Cajamar that provided the raw material for cement production. At that time PERUS was the only cement factory in São Paulo, and was one of thirty subsidiaries owned by the Abdalla Group.

Around the end of 1954, the Union of Cement, Lime and Plaster Workers of São Paulo invited me to be its lawyer. I found the workers isolated and fearful. With time we filed a series of successful complaints. In each case, by participating in these actions and evaluating the results the workers gained confidence and the union became stronger.

In October of 1958 the union struck successfully against Abdalla for better wages. Owners and the police tried to provoke the workers but a spirit of peaceful protest blunted such attempts. Peaceful protest also enabled the workers' wives and families to participate in a round-the-clock picket and to help build public support through twice-weekly demonstrations in São Paulo. Meanwhile, strike committees visited other factories, schools, and universities.

The workers sought to tie their wage hike to a planned increase in the price of cement. By offering to take the smaller raise that the owners proposed if the owners in turn would reduce the disproportionate rise in cement prices, they strengthened public support. Seeing the workers hold firm in the face of great pressure, one of the lawyers helping them said that they reminded him of *queixadas*. He explained that *queixadas*, or wild boars, "are the only animals who, when in danger, will pull together in a group, snarl and grinding their teeth, and directly confront the hunter. He [the hunter] has to hide himself in a tree or else they will run him down. You are like the *queixadas*, *queixadas* who confront the predator."

Finally, after forty-six days, the workers won the wage hike they had demanded. Winning future struggles would prove much more difficult.

By 1962, Abdalla Group president J.J. Abdalla had reneged on several agreements. Despite a number of good-faith efforts on the part of the union to accommodate him, he appeared intent on doing away with the *queixadas* altogether. Union leaders at three other Abdalla Group factories invited the PERUS union to join them in pressuring the owners to honor their contracts. By that time, the PERUS workers had had enough. Even their salaries were late. They gladly signed a joint letter listing their complaints. Abdalla did not even reply.

The unions continued to insist that their complaints be heard, saying otherwise they would have no choice but to strike. Abdalla, who was rich, powerful and at that time a member of the National Assembly, responded with cold calculated indifference: "Go ahead and strike, if you have the courage. . . ."

The provocation was obvious. And when people are committed to seeking justice, certain words are like a hard shove. On May 14, 1962, the day we had agreed to act, two hundred police occupied PERUS. Nonetheless, 3,500 workers peacefully paralyzed work in all four factories. Later, an assembly of the strike leaders agreed that no group would settle separately and that the strike would end only when the Abdalla group addressed the complaints of all the groups.

As union lawyer I filed four lawsuits in the government's Regional Office of Labor. The Minister of Labor tried without success to mediate the strike.

Abdalla is "hiding milk," or pretending to be poor, said the workers, who refused to resign themselves to the silence and indifference of the *mau patrão* (bad boss). Meanwhile, the united stand of the workers garnered increasing public support.

But thirty-two days after the start of the strike we received disconcerting news. The president of the Federation of Food Industry Workers of São Paulo sought me out at home on a Saturday afternoon. Downcast, he told me that the workers of the three other factories had reached an agreement with Abdalla. On Monday more than two thousand would return to their jobs. I was disappointed. Why did the agreement not include the PERUS *companheiros*?<sup>1</sup> I asked. His reply: "Abdalla wants to put an end to the *queixadas*."

Later we learned that Abdalla had declared: "I am the lamp and the employees the butterflies; one by one they will come to me and I will destroy them."

After the agreement with the other groups Abdalla broke his silence. Using his great financial resources and political prestige, he publicly

denounced the continuation of the strike of the *queixadas*. Our participation in the common strike, he argued, had been merely for solidarity, not to press our own complaints; there was no further reason for workers to stay out.

The Regional Labor Court, by a four to three vote, refused to hear our complaints and instead ordered a return to work. Apparently the sand Abdalla had thrown into the eyes of the public had worked its damage. But even as he obstinately sought to liquidate us, we began efforts to expropriate PERUS.

At that time, the union took a secret vote on whether to continue the strike. The results were: 1,257 in favor of continuing, nineteen opposed, and seven abstaining.

The workers' demands were straightforward. Besides the call for paying salaries on time, demands centered around the fulfillment of previous agreements. For example, for several years the company had deducted five percent of salaries to finance workers' purchase of company-owned lots for home sites. But the company never released the lots, and the workers demanded reimbursement. The company had also agreed to production incentives that it had never honored. Further issues included other legally obligated payments plus union recognition for a group of affiliated wood workers.

João Breno Pinto, then president of the union, later recalled some of the lessons union members learned:

In a position of weakness, active nonviolence is more effective than violence. PERUS is a cement factory where the work is rough. So the typical worker there is an aggressive person. The small organized group was aware that to encourage violence was very easy but also that violence would achieve nothing, since the forces of repression would answer with better-organized violence. Our members were disgusted when we restrained them from letting the police and the traitors have it. However today, after it is all over, they acknowledge that while they did not deeply understand nonviolence, the path they were invited to walk was the best one.

We saw that the violent person tries to provoke the nonviolent opponent to get him to abandon his main weapon: the use of active nonviolence. Even our oppressors understood that we were not joining in the game as they had expected. For example, one day during an attempt to break the strike, a worker in our group threw a stone at the windshield of a police car that was accompanying a truckload of strikebreakers. Of course the police started beating people. But there was no reaction by the strikers. A day or so earlier, this man had been seen in the factory, working harmoniously with the police and the management chief. This proved that the oppressors had set up a trap to use this worker as a provocateur to spark an act of violence, to create an ugly scene in which they would be sure to win.

### Execution of the diabolic plan

With cool calculation, the Abdalla Group waited to wear down the workers. After May 14, 1962, in its efforts to crush the *queixadas*, the company suspended production of almost 600,000 bags of cement per month. In the beginning of August, their diabolical plan began to take shape.

The company lured two dozen tired workers, directing them to seek the help of Conceição da Costa Neves, a "labor leader" in the State Assembly. As a result she began to accuse us of being "communists" who impeded "honest workers" from returning to work. She went more than once to Perus and Cajamar to meet with the workers to induce them to break the strike.

About 100 workers among the 1,300 on strike presented a request for intervention in the union to the Labor Minister. Ten of the one hundred, who were portrayed as the "most enlightened," signed a power of attorney so that a lawyer in the pay of Abdalla would present two complaints against the leaders of the union and its lawyer. We were accused of embezzlement and of impeding "free workers" from returning to work. Paid ads in the principal newspapers of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro publicized the complaints, as did thousands of leaflets. Then Abdalla promised an early wage payment of thirty percent to any workers who would return to work.

On August 21, the hundredth day of the strike, the Assemblywoman Conceição da Costa Neves herself led the breaking of the strike by 100 PERUS workers with the assistance of the police. Newspapers, radio, and television looked on. At the same time the company brought in a large number of new workers.

Strike leader João Breno recalls:

The company mobilized the entire police force there and also brought in others from outside. They arrived with water cannons, which were a novelty then. They had the most modern equipment for dispersing crowds. At 5:00 A.M. our neighborhood awoke to a parade of all sorts of vehicles. Flyers explaining management's viewpoint were distributed. The flyers called the striking workers vagabonds, said that the union was made up of communists and thieves who wanted to ruin everything, including our neighborhood, and asked the housewives to force their sons, neighbors, and husbands to go back to work.<sup>2</sup>

With all this effort the company was able to put the factory back into operation. Repression and the hunting down of all strikers started at this time. They were subject to being seized, beaten, arrested—all types of persecution were used.

took over the workers' club and began using it as a dormitory. The new pastor in Cajamar, Father Bianchi, was entirely on the side of the workers. So Abdalla ordered that the street which led to the worker cooperative and the pastor's house be closed and that Father Bianchi vacate the company-owned house.

Closing in so as to crush the *queixadas*, Abdalla advised the merchant of Perus and Cajamar to quit providing foodstuffs to the worker (Many of the merchants were campaign organizers in Abdalla's electoral bids.)

At the end of September 1962, PERUS began an inquest in the Labor Court to sanction the firing of 501 tenured employees. The company alleged that they had practiced a serious misdeed: participation in an "illegal strike" and "abandonment of the job." All those except the 100 who had requested intervention in the union were blacklisted. However the firing of the 501 tenured workers required a special court order. Afterwards, we took three claims on behalf of the tenured workers to court.

### The resistance of the *queixadas*

To be truthful, I must confess that we were almost crushed. We suffered many hardships, shed many tears. Two workers committed suicide.

One day a *queixada*, a sixty-year-old northerner, called on me. "Give me twenty contos [approximately sixteen dollars] and I'll put an end to this strike," he said.

"How?" I asked.

"I'll kill Abdalla and disappear."

"Okay, Rodolfo, you know that we decide everything at meeting; I will not quote your name, but I'll present your proposal."

He agreed. My first intention was to try to dissuade him. Our work always respects the human being, distinguishing the person from the acts that the person practices. Everyone is capable of erring and everyone is capable of changing his or her position. But, knowing that other *companheiros* had also expressed the same intention as Rodolfo, I felt there would be a good opportunity to put the principles of *firmeza permanente* to the test.

Among the workers at the meeting that night I saw traces of satisfied smiles as they learned that someone was seriously disposed to liquidate the "bad boss."

I added, "The *companheiros* who wants to get Abdalla said that it will end the strike. But what's more important, to end the strike (to win the strike?)"

homicide, would give the police a motive to fall all over us. They would arrest the union leaders and me immediately. And the strike could really end. We could end up losing.

Everyone's anticipation increased when another *queixada* interrupted me: "Do you guarantee we'll win this strike?"

"No. No one can give this guarantee. The outcome of the lawsuit depends on many things: it depends on what we say in the presence of the judge; it depends on witnesses, on documents. Finally, it depends on the judge; not only one judge, but many judges. What I can guarantee is that we have a very strong case and that I will go to the end of the road with you, whatever happens."

Sergio interrupted: "This strike is a test of the existence of God. God can't possibly protect what Abdalla is doing to us."

I concluded more or less with the following words: "Abdalla with all his dirty tricks is a human being. We can't kill him. The laws are very weak in reaching the powerful, but if we believe in God, there will be a way for us to end this strike. Our visible aggressor is Abdalla, but behind him exists economic and political power. It's capitalism. We can't confront the aggressors with their weapons. That's what they want, because they can easily destroy us. Our weapon is our lives. Stay cool, *companheiros*."

In fact, the workers assimilated well the method of struggle inspired in the Sermon on the Mount and the witness of the apostles, a method that Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. took up again in the political sphere. In modern times it's called nonviolence. In Brazil, we call it *firmeza permanente* (relentless persistence) in search of justice.

There were many examples of resistance and solidarity in the strike, which began to seem like a war. The number of donations we received from all corners of the state of São Paulo easily thwarted the siege of hunger Abdalla wanted to impose. The governors of two other states lent their support. Leonel Brizola, Governor of Rio Grande Do Sul, sent us a hundred sacks of rice. From Parana, Ney Braga sent us a truckload of potatoes and beans. The owner of a bakery in Perus lent us an oven for use by two *queixadas* who were bakers. The Catholic Church furnished us flour.

At a hearing in which inspectors from the Labor Ministry and the Assemblywoman Conceição da Costa Neves participated, we successfully warded off a petition for government intervention in the union. The inspectors verified that the accusations against the union leaders, who had the solid support of the workers, were unfounded. Even so, the Labor Ministry postponed union elections. To hold elections we had to obtain a court injunction.

Once more we resorted to the courts, hoping to oust the police who had transformed the workers' club into a dormitory in order to better

protect the Abdalla Group. The court ordered the "bad boss" to demolish a wall he had raised in the street. Its purpose was to obstruct passage to Father Bianchi's house and to the striking workers' cooperative.

Knowing that the struggle in the Labor Court would be a long one, we argued that Brazil's president could intervene and expropriate PERUS. We developed a big campaign in this respect, with popular support and support from the students and teachers at the university. We circulated petitions, gave talks, and arranged meetings with political authorities.

However, with the factory returning to normal production levels without them, the workers were dejected, some desperate. The strikers called a meeting. Some workers wanted to invade the factory during the night and beat up the "pelegos," or sell-outs.<sup>3</sup> Others even wanted to set fire to the factory. The idea took shape. They even marked the date.

Then someone raised a question: "We know that physical violence can be practiced after all other possibilities have been exhausted. Have we already done everything we can?"

The question posed, the participants eyed each other. "Do you remember the passage of the gospel in which the apostles came to complain to Christ because they couldn't perform certain cures? Christ responded: 'Certain kinds of devils are expelled only with fasting and prayer.'"

In an instant, a worker suggested: "A hunger strike?" Others welcomed the idea. In early December we began. We spent Christmas and New Year's Eve of 1962 fasting in the Plaza of São Francisco. While one group was fasting, others would carry placards and distribute flyers to passersby. We stayed there for four weeks.

João Breno later reflected on the significance of that experience:

Our assembly decided that we should, like Gandhi, have a hunger strike in public, in the open area in some plaza in São Paulo. The objective would be to mobilize public opinion. Things were dragging out and everyone was forgetting about the PERUS strike.

The hunger strike seemed to us an act of humility rather than of protest. To attain our objective—mobilizing public opinion on our side—we had to halt all activity and just stay there in the square, standing or sitting, without eating. In spite of the noise of passersby, this forced us to meditate among ourselves. We talked about the conversations we had with the people who came by. After the hunger strike, I was totally convinced that this was the way, that nonviolence was not just a tactic but that it was the core of our work. From that time onwards we had to develop it.

With the inauguration of Governor Adhemar de Barros in the

beginning of 1963, Cardinal Motta, who always showed us complete solidarity, addressed a pastoral appeal to the Governor, asking him to mediate.

We—J.J. Abdalla and the leaders of the union—were summoned to the Government Palace. The employer never wanted to have a face-to-face meeting with the workers. At the time Abdalla made no proposal. Then a few days later, the company offered us twenty percent of lost wages. But it had underestimated the strength of the *queixadas*.

Personally I did not understand the obstinacy of the Abdalla Group very well. "Why do they want to destroy us?" I asked myself many times. Father Bianchi calmed us with a comparison: "Abdalla is the new Pharaoh. Apparently he is strong. But the small, led by God, dethrone the powerful. The struggle will take time. We too must purify ourselves."

Rafael, an ever-confident union leader, said, "We have to go through various sieves. At the end there will be a small group in the fine sieve. This group can't become discouraged. It will be responsible for the journey."

We had taken out various loans, already renewed. Finally, we had to begin paying on them. We began by selling the small bus of the National Labor Front, my car, and the union's small bus. The debts were many. Soon after that I sold a plot of land and a garage.

But no solution was in sight. In all honesty we had to tell the workers: "It's necessary to look for another job. The return to work of the tenured workers depends on the Labor Court. While we cannot get the untenured workers rehired, they should be indemnified. However, this also depends on the Labor Court."

### Continuation of the exodus (1964-1969)

The military coup of March 31, 1964 reverberated immediately in the life of our union, which was the first in São Paulo to suffer official intervention. The new dictator-president named the head of PERUS' Personnel Department as intervener, a temporary governor serving as the chief executive's direct agent. We were arrested—various union leaders and I.

The courts had suspended the August 1962 police inquests initiated against us for embezzlement and interfering with the workers, but now the government reactivated them. We were pointed at like criminals. Abdalla hired two criminal lawyers onto the case as assistants to the government.

After an exhaustive inquiry, the courts again dropped the inquests against us. Meanwhile our other cases wound their way through the court system. We lost the case of the untenured workers. We lost the

São Paulo case of the 501 tenured workers, then won an appeal before the Superior Labor Court. This forced a retrial in São Paulo, which took place in early 1967.

As the hearing began, the atmosphere was one of expectation and apprehension. After all, we had lost the suit on behalf of the untenured workers. But now our diligence in using all available means to publish the reasons for the strike and make clear the Abdalla Group's brazen intent to crush the *queixadas* brought liberal compensation. One of the judges, in reexamining the six volumes of proceedings, changed his position and swung the vote in our favor. The tenured workers won the right to return to work at PERUS. PERUS was obligated to pay their salaries—with readjustments, interest, and correction for inflation—from August 1962 until the date they actually began work again.

The workers questioned why we had won one lawsuit and lost another. Why did the tenured workers get to go back to work while the untenured could not? After all, the cause of dismissal was the same. There was another, deeper doubt: Would Abdalla be able to overturn this decision in Brasilia (the capital)?

Abdalla did try. In fact, the courts evaluated the issue eleven times. Throughout, the wear and tear on the Abdalla Group was great. The epithet of "bad boss" appeared frequently in the papers.

Finally, in the Superior Labor Court in Brasilia, we were successful. In January 1969, 309 tenured employees (all but the deceased, the retired, and those who had made agreements) returned to work in the presence of court officials. The impossible was happening.

We looked for a way to have PERUS pay salaries from the time of the lawsuit's duration—January 1962 to 1969—through an increase in productivity. Production at the factory was well below normal. The old employees, who knew the factory well, pledged to strive diligently to increase the production of cement. We drew up a petition of agreement. The talks with management were progressing when the dictatorship's General Committee of Investigations summoned several workers, union leaders, and me for a few days. We were all arrested as a result of Abdalla's accusations. The authorities subjected us to long interrogations. As for myself, I was held at the air force base in Cumbica for twenty-nine days.

When I finally returned to the union, we talked about the continuing repression and our prospects. I warned union members about possible future pressures and arrests; I felt they were standing firm. Rafael—the same Rafael who, after the breaking of the strike in 1962 had alerted us to the need for the *queixadas* to pass through various sieves—said in a loud voice, "I'm not afraid of going to jail. My suitcase is already naked."

At this time we also sought to reestablish contact with the employer in order to receive the strike wages (estimated at five million *cruzeiros*, or \$815,000, plus interest and correction for inflation.) We planned to receive the delayed payment based on the increase in production, and we wanted to find a way to share it with the untenured workers who had not been rehired.

The Abdalla Group, however, changed the subject. Knowing they would be able to take advantage of the inertia of the public powers, they had in mind a new and dangerous ploy against the *queixadas*.

### The new ruse (1970 to 1973)

Although the Abdalla Group had more than thirty enterprises (besides numerous estates and buildings), much of their property did not officially appear in the Group's name. In order to disguise the blow they were preparing, they took advantage of one of their enterprises—SOCAL S.A.

First the Abdalla Group installed the SOCAL office in a workers' house in Cajamar and began to hire new employees to work in PERUS' quarries. Because it was a different company, they claimed the workers could not belong to the PERUS workers' union. However, there was no other union in Cajamar, and some of those new employees worked together with the PERUS workers at the same job. Slowly, under Abdalla's direction, PERUS transferred the employees it had admitted after the 1962 strike to SOCAL. If they did not accept the transfer they were fired. Later PERUS managed to have the tenured employees themselves—the strikebreakers of August 1962—become part of SOCAL. They also coerced the workers of Railroad PERUS-PIRAPORA (a railroad that links Perus to Cajamar for the transport of limestone) to be transferred to SOCAL. PERUS even put SOCAL employees to work in the factory at Perus. The only thing they did not achieve was the transfer to SOCAL of about a hundred employees—the *queixadas* who had been reintegrated in January 1969.

We went back to court and revealed the facts: compulsory transfers, blocking of unionization, and the fraudulent PERUS document written for SOCAL authorizing it to work the quarries.

Since Abdalla did not want to have any friendly contact, much less pay the strike wages he still owed, I pushed forward the labor lawsuit. But when the court moved to force Abdalla to pay what he owed within forty-eight hours, we discovered that PERUS was insolvent—all its assets had liens on them from other claimants. Abdalla offered up another property, Sitio Santa Fe, as compensation. We refused, proving that the Federal Court had already filed twenty-eight liens on that property for fines owed to the government.

The Abdalla Group had planned to deflate PERUS and then have it bought at auction by another of the Abdalla Group's enterprises or by a trusted person. The Abdalla Group had done this before with another of its organizations. Thus SOCAL would come to replace PERUS.

We suspended the collection of wages in the Labor Court and called for PERUS' bankruptcy. But the Civil Court thought the Abdalla Group still had other properties for which it could file liens. The Court proposed we claim the production of cement. So we returned to the lawsuit in the Labor Court. Before claiming the cement production, we filed a lien on PERUS' eucalyptus grove (twenty million trees standing) only to discover that Abdalla had already sold it. We also asked President Medici to confiscate PERUS' property.

After much delay, President Medici did confiscate PERUS' property in July 1973. The confiscation aimed at collecting payment of Abdalla's debts to the Public Treasury (about one billion *cruzeiros*, or \$63,000,000), payment of the strike wages (almost twenty million *cruzeiros*, or \$3,260,000), and the end of pollution in Perus.

The confiscation proved weak; the union felt it had to intervene once more. Federal officials confiscated the factory in Perus, but they did not get as far as Cajamar. Given the incomplete confiscation, the union found itself in a humiliating situation. The factory, in order to function, needed to buy limestone from the Abdalla Group, from SOCAL, which continued to direct PERUS' quarries in Cajamar.

Through the union, following the workers' decision, we resubmitted our petition to President Medici; but with this government we achieved nothing. In fact, the Abdalla Group had gotten Minister Alfredo Buzaid to order another police inquest against me. I was indicted again under the National Security Law. (After an investigation, the charge was finally dropped.)

### The truth wins out

With the inauguration of a new military president we renewed our efforts. On the first of May, 1974, we sent President Geisel a petition. Three thousand five hundred workers, their families, and community organizations from Perus and Cajamar signed. All were committed to *firmeza permanente* in search of justice. Among the demands were the following:

- 1) complete confiscation of PERUS;
- 2) payment of the overdue salaries, valued at nearly 20 million *cruzeiros*, for more than 400 workers and their heirs;
- 3) the end of government intervention in the union;

4) the withdrawal of SOCAL from Cajamar so that PERUS would once again operate the quarries, with the approval of all SOCAL workers who would then become part of PERUS.

We waited patiently, without ceasing our accusations against Abdalla's tricks with SOCAL. Press coverage was always very valuable.

In October 1974, President Geisel corrected the first failed confiscation by allowing the union to take possession of the quarries. SOCAL was turned out of Cajamar and all the workers went back to rendering service to PERUS.

In November of the same year the union received more than eighteen million *cruzeiros* (\$2,934,000) to pay the workers' salaries for the time of the lawsuit's duration—from 1962 to January 1969. By candlelight, in front of the union headquarters in Perus, the workers finally received their payment. A share went to those who had not been rehired. Two years later, the government finally lifted its intervention in the union.



After twelve years on strike, PERUS workers and families celebrate victory and finally receiving their back pay with a candlelight vigil in front of union headquarters on November 11, 1974.

The human wear and tear had been great. But *firmeza permanente* knows that the truth appears with time, if we do not grow discouraged. What is authentic prevails. The masquerader fails.

I believe it is useless to try to get rid of the group that fights for justice, when it knows how to resist and discovers ways to denounce

fraud, using courage, loyalty, skill, wisdom, acumen, and, if possible, faith. All of these are attributes of *firmeza permanente*.

The important thing is not that we be brave or violent once in a while, but resolute all the time, all our lives, in all of our attitudes, whether in the family, in the factory, or in society. To be resolute does not mean to be the owner of the truth. Rather, it means to always be willing to discover the truth, in the search for justice for the whole person and for all people.

Translated from Portuguese  
by Naomi Parker, Keith Elliot, and Philip McManus

### Notes

1. "Companions"—frequently used to denote those involved in a shared struggle. [Eds.]
2. At least some did just the opposite. One worker who broke the strike came home one day to find that his wife had moved to her parents' house. When he caught up with her, she told him, "I will come back to live with you only if you go back out on strike." He did, and they returned home together.
3. "*Pelego*" is the blanket worn under the saddle of a horse. The term is used for labor leaders who stick with the bosses, not their fellow workers, thus making the owners more comfortable. [Eds.]

### For further reading

- Carvalho de Jesus, Mário. *PERUS—Os 'Queixadas' Resistem As Artimanhas Do Grupo Chofi-Abdalla Em Cajamar*. Frente Nacional do Trabalho.
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