

“We Cannot Think about Democracy the Way We Used To”

The ABC Strikes and the Challenge of Popular Mobilization

On May Day 1979, up to 130,000 workers packed a stadium in the São Paulo suburb of São Bernardo do Campo to hear their leader, Luiz Inácio da Silva (commonly known as “Lula”), speak. Only a few weeks before, Lula had led metallurgical workers in the cities of Santo André, São Bernardo, and São Caetano (known colloquially as ABC) in a strike that had shaken Brazil. In a stunning statement in a country where working-class political participation had long been limited to casting votes, Lula insisted, “It’s up to us, the workers, to change the rules of the game, and instead of being ordered around like we are today, to start giving the orders around here.”¹ Such a scene must have been disconcerting to many Brazilian politicians, business leaders, and intellectuals. The thousands of workers were not simply asking for higher salaries or a greater role in the political system. Rather, they were calling for a fundamental reshaping of long-standing social relations, in which the working majority would seize the political initiative from the “directing classes.”

In 1964, the majority of Brazil’s politicians, along with practically the entire business elite, had supported a coup to drive away the specter of popular mobilization. Yet now workers mobilized not at the urging of a reformist politician like Goulart, a member of the landowning elite, but on their own initiative, unwilling to accept that the powerful should get a free pass as ever rising inflation ate away at workers’ salaries. How would the politicians, military officers, business leaders, and intellectuals who saw policy making as their exclusive domain react? By resorting to repression, as Brazil’s elites had done for centuries? By seeking to

appropriate the workers' struggle for their own ends? Or by joining the workers in demanding a new Brazil?

It is almost universally acknowledged that the ABC strikes and the wave of worker mobilization they unleashed were a pivotal moment in Brazilian history that shaped a generation of workers and set the stage for the massive expansion of social rights that accompanied the country's democratization in the 1980s. They have also attracted interest because of their central importance in the political trajectory of a future president, Lula.² The important role that politicians played in the strikes, particularly in 1980, has gone completely unacknowledged, along with the shifts they provoked in the way many Brazilian politicians responded to the very sort of working-class mobilization that the country's elites have feared for centuries. Opposition politicians, along with a few brave government allies, finally overcame their fear of the regime as they supported the workers' struggle, not only by giving congressional speeches, but also by risking their own safety to protect union leaders and striking workers from repression. Joining the workers in the streets were not only the autênticos but also leftist revolutionaries and intellectuals who were entering politics for the first time, as well as moderate oppositionists. Just as politicians in 1968 had rushed to UnB to protect students, in 1979 and 1980 they rushed to São Bernardo, this time to defend not the children of the elite but working-class trade unionists.

1978: "THE MOST PEACEFUL STRIKE EVER SEEN IN SÃO PAULO"

In early 1978 worker unrest was far from the minds of Brazil's politicians. Geisel had named his successor, but Minas Gerais senator José de Magalhães Pinto had also sought the ARENA nomination, and he began to issue increasingly severe criticisms of the regime. The MDB was considering running a candidate against Figueiredo in the October electoral college vote. They would soon select General Euler Bentes Monteiro, a leading representative of factions of the military convinced that Geisel and the generals surrounding him had betrayed the "Revolution" by concentrating power in their own hands and failing to formulate a sufficiently nationalist economic policy.³ And on the horizon were the November elections, which would elect a third of the Senate, the entire Chamber of Deputies, and all state legislatures.

Yet as the political class and the military debated the country's future, other groups began to demand a voice. The student movement, cautious since 1968, returned to the streets, not only to demand educational reforms, but also to protest the regime's authoritarianism as embodied in the April package.⁴ In February the Brazilian Committee for Amnesty (Comitê Brasileiro Pela Anistia) was founded, demanding a "broad, general, and unrestricted amnesty" for exiled foes of the regime, political prisoners, and those affected by institutional acts.⁵ In July

the Unified Black Movement would be formed in São Paulo, calling attention to the unequal treatment of Afro-Brazilians.⁶ The country's first gay rights organization was founded in 1978, and the women's movement was growing rapidly.⁷ These movements brought together intellectuals, activists, and members of the middle class inspired by discourses of human rights, economic justice, and identity politics. As the economist Luiz Carlos Bresser Pereira put it, it appeared that "the process of the disintegration of the authoritarian political model being applied in Brazil is accelerating day by day."⁸

Of all these social movements the most organized was labor, above all, in São Paulo, whose heavy industries formed the backbone of the Brazilian economy.⁹ Since the mid-1970s, a new generation of dynamic leaders such as Lula had encouraged greater contact between union leaders and workers and sought the end of state tutelage of unions. In 1977, a study revealed that since 1973 the regime had been underreporting annual inflation rates, which were used as the basis for wage adjustments; as a result, in the years since metalworkers had lost 34.1 percent of the value of their wages. Led by Lula, the São Bernardo metalworkers' union launched a campaign to pressure the government to restore their lost salary via a mandated raise.¹⁰

By 1978, Lula had become recognized as a spokesperson for workers. When he spoke at the National Encounter for Democracy in Rio de Janeiro, the British embassy noted that his speech "articulat[ed] dissatisfaction with the present regime, but without any clear ideological content."¹¹ Still, independent union leaders were cause for unease. The security services had been keeping an eye on Lula as early as 1976, when a report from naval intelligence to the Justice Ministry highlighted a "highly subversive speech," in which he allegedly claimed, "All the revolutionary governments have been of poor character," and called for unity among workers, "*so that we can go back to the way things were before 1964.*"¹² In Lula, the intelligence services saw the specter of a return of the "agitation" of the Goulart years; the fact that the brother who had recruited him for the union was a communist did not help matters. Similarly, in a June 1978 meeting of the CSN, Planning Minister João Paulo Reis Velloso commented, "The unions are apparently conducting themselves with a degree of independence. . . . Obviously we need to keep an eye on [their] behavior. . . . If they are acting to defend the legitimate economic interests of the workers, or if other influences exist."¹³

On the other hand, many opposition politicians and intellectuals were encouraged by this more combative unionism, which repeated much of what the MDB had preached since 1974. In May 1978, Cardoso argued, "I don't believe that we can think about democracy, now, the way we used to. . . . The number of workers in Brazil has doubled. A substantive democracy will depend on articulations between the diverse social classes."¹⁴ And Senators Montoro and Quéricia attended 1978 May Day festivities in Santo André, where Montoro blasted the government's wage policy, called for direct negotiations between unions and employers, and

affirmed that Brazilian history was not one of wars or generals but was a “history of the workers’ struggle.”¹⁵ Even a few regime supporters spoke positively about the workers’ movement. The legal scholar Miguel Reale had supported the coup and helped Costa e Silva write his proposed amendments to the constitution in 1969. Yet now he wrote that in contrast to old conceptions of liberalism, which focused on individual and electoral rights, a new “liberalism with participation” should recognize that “the right to participate socially and culturally in the wealth of the community, both in the realm of making decisions and in access to better forms of distribution of wealth, is inherent to every citizen.”¹⁶

Yet many unionists were unimpressed with the politicians embracing their cause. As Arnaldo Gonçalves, president of the Santos metalworkers’ union, explained, “If a bill favorable to workers arrives in Congress but will harm the class of politicians, they’ll vote in favor of their class. Most politicians are businessmen, landowners, bankers.” As for intellectuals: “If they want to help the worker, great. What is not possible is for them to want to command the working class.”¹⁷ Pedro Gomes Sampaio, president of the Santos oil workers’ union, pointedly explained, “The opposition should take note that the working class is changing and could join together to itself become the opposition. . . . If the MDB does not take note, it is going to be left on the outside.”¹⁸ For both, the argument was the same: workers could unite with other social groups to oppose the regime, but workers must represent their own interests.

May Day brought this latent discontent with politicians to the fore. When Montoro and Quércia arrived in Santo André, they received boos from the assembled workers, who cheered as one shouted, “We don’t need well-dressed and well-fed deputies and senators going to Congress to pretend like they are defending our interests.”¹⁹ Zé Maria de Almeida, a metalworker who was imprisoned for thirty days in 1977 for passing out pamphlets for the Trotskyist student group Liga Operária, called on workers not to support the MDB but to form their own political party: “The bosses have organizations, they have legislation that protects them. . . . And the workers—how will they defend themselves? . . . Let’s organize ourselves and form a party that will construct a more just society—a socialist party.”²⁰ Quércia agreed that workers might need their own party, but he argued that it should be more a labor (*trabalhista*) party than a socialist one, in order to “avoid deformations.”²¹

In the São Paulo suburb of Osasco, 2,500 workers and students gathered at a rally “without rulers, bosses, politicians, or *pelegos*,” in protest of their unions’ excessively conciliatory leadership. Special scorn was reserved for union leaders attending a banquet at the governor’s mansion. “The minimum wage we receive won’t even buy a bottle of wine at the dinner they’re going to hold today,” one protester said.²² Even some of the most conciliatory union leaders sounded combative notes. São Paulo state metalworkers’ union president, Joaquim dos Santos Andrade, demanded “union freedom, . . . the return of the rule of law, and

... full democracy." "Brazilian unionism has been distorted," he lamented, "just like the political parties, ... which are submitted to the same situation that has obliged the unions to be what they are today: entities under the total tutelage of the government."²³

The MDB was surprised to discover the disregard in which unionists held them. Quércia and Montoro claimed that the jeers in Santo André had originated from leftist students mixed among the workers.²⁴ The boos must have particularly stung Montoro, who thought of himself as highly engaged with labor issues.²⁵ Three days later, he gave a Senate speech decrying falling real wages and proposing direct negotiations between unions and employers, a 20 percent raise for salaried workers, and the establishment of a "democratic political model and the participation of the sectors of the community in decisions that have to do with them."²⁶ Still, a *Folha* editorialist, Samuel Wainer, pointed out that the boos were a response to the party "instinctively orienting its political behavior toward liberal sectors, intellectuals, and ... the urban middle class."²⁷

On May 12, 1,600 metalworkers at the Saab-Scania automobile factory in São Bernardo concluded that they could not count on politicians' promises or the labor court system, and they launched Brazil's first strike in a decade, demanding a raise on top of the inflation-based adjustment they had received for 1978.²⁸ By May 16, the strikes had grown to 20,000 participants in some of the main plants in suburban São Paulo.²⁹ Rather than make their demands through the union to the labor courts, as the law required, workers negotiated directly with their employers. Even when the Regional Labor Court (TRT) ruled by a 15-1 vote that the strikes were illegal, the number of strikers grew, and they were joined by 15,000 workers in Santo André.³⁰ Despite thinly veiled threats from state and federal authorities to send in police to break up the strikes, Egydio insisted that he would order police intervention only if he received a written request from the federal government, which never came.³¹ Geisel spokesman Colonel Rubem Ludwig sanguinely observed that the strike was "a sign of the times we live in" and that labor legislation "recognizes all these rights."³²

For the military and its civilian allies, although the labor mobilization of the early 1960s had been a sign that Brazil was sliding toward social disaggregation and communism, Lula's dynamic leadership and the workers' peaceful approach to making their demands rendered these strikes less threatening. A few went so far as to endorse them. Cláudio Lembo, state ARENA president, admitted, "The workers may indeed be breaking the law," but added, "The truth is that the current labor arrangement is obsolete, the government's wage policy does not satisfy, and all of this will necessarily have to be replaced by something new."³³ For the Labor Ministry and ARENA politicians, amid the deteriorating economic context it was reasonable to expect workers, whose decline in real wages was beyond dispute, to be discontented.

For the MDB, after the events of May Day, the strikes represented a fortuitous opportunity to demonstrate their solidarity. Quércia insisted that what mattered was not whether the strikes were legal but whether they were just: “[This] is a legitimate strike, because it originates with human beings who . . . have the right to demand better days, better salaries. . . . This strike . . . is a demonstration that popular longing . . . cannot remain subordinated, limited by the rigid structure imposed by our legal organization.”³⁴ Montoro insisted that the strikes’ “illegality” did not change three facts: the cost of living was rising, real wages were falling, and the government had based salary adjustments on falsified statistics.³⁵

The workers found other allies among clerics, civil society movements, and intellectuals. Cardinal Paulo Evaristo Arns, archbishop of São Paulo, stated, “We cannot restrict ourselves to the law when Justice demands more.”³⁶ The economist Eduardo Suplicy criticized the government for forbidding radio and television to report on the strikes, hesitating to meet with union leaders, and refusing to provide the formula it used for calculating salary adjustments.³⁷ One of the most eloquent defenses came from Cardoso, who was just launching a Senate candidacy.

It is democratization on the march, . . . from the feet of the people, from each one of us, from all those who are neither callous right-wingers nor ignoble exploiters. The union movement is reborn. Hope for better days is reborn. Eagerness to organize, speak, propose alternatives, negotiate is reborn. Now we can begin to speak of democracy without adjectives. It comes from below. . . . Everyone . . . who does not limit himself or herself to thinking of democracy as a crystal birdcage to make the interests of oligarchies and elites glitter, salutes the movement of the paulista workers as the sign of a more promising tomorrow. May it arrive soon, for we all want democracy—now.³⁸

Despite Cardoso’s praise, what was most striking was the projection onto workers of his position. The workers he imagined were centrists engaged not in a fight to transform long-standing social relations but in a benign struggle for just wages and political democracy. Although unionists had demonstrated little interest in party politics, he insisted, “[Workers] know that . . . there is a moment for politics. Without it, the poorest workers . . . end up being highly exploited when there are not strong unions and national political parties that support them.”³⁹ Even a renowned progressive academic was unable to imagine a world in which workers did not rely on a “national party” dominated, in all likelihood, by career politicians.

Despite the attempts of politicians, students, and intellectuals to render aid, they found that unions were hesitant to accept anything beyond moral support. When politicians called Lula asking how they could help, he refused to take their calls, stating that they should simply give legislative speeches—speeches that he knew no one paid attention to.⁴⁰ As for students, who had participated in the May Day rally in Osasco and were known to have “infiltrated” factories to instruct workers about class struggle, Lula said, “I think that the students, if they really

want to help workers, should stay in the universities."⁴¹ For Lula, independence for labor should not only be from state intervention but also from anyone who presumed to speak for them.

By May 30, the metalworkers had successfully negotiated raises and returned to work.⁴² For the first time since 1968, workers had defied the regime's laws restricting strikes, and they had won. Although union leaders such as Lula had assisted with mediation, the strikes had arisen without direct union involvement, and victory had been easy, with no significant opposition from the government. The regime was likely hesitant because the generals realized that as annual raises were quickly lost to inflation, the workers' demands were not unreasonable. Why couldn't the "Revolution" accommodate a labor movement that accepted the rules of a capitalist economy while avoiding leftist subversion? Arenistas were similarly wary; with elections six months away, it would be unwise to attack working-class demands. After all, ARENA's failure to connect with the working class had led to the fiasco of 1974.

For their part, MDB politicians were unprepared for politically articulate unions and perplexed by workers' ambivalence to them. But this did not stop them from seeing the electoral potential of a mobilized working class, and party leaders eventually invited Lula to a meeting at Cardoso's apartment in the hope of convincing him to join the MDB.⁴³ Quercia argued that the workers' struggle could be incorporated into the MDB: "Everything [union leaders] hope for . . . can be found within the MDB. . . . We think it's important for the union leaders to participate in the MDB, where they can apply pressure for the realization of the projects that interest them."⁴⁴ And when General Monteiro, the MDB's presidential candidate, met privately with Lula and autêntico union leaders, he begged them, "Don't let your organization be characterized by political behavior, don't let any type of outside forces distort your principle objectives, but continue being a instrument of struggle specifically for labor problems."⁴⁵ In the view of opposition leaders, the workers' struggle for fairer wages and labor laws should be incorporated into the struggle against the regime. Lula and his allied unionists, however, were formulating a vision of working-class politics that challenged an entire centuries-old socio-economic system.

Nevertheless, with only two parties, the MDB was the only route to political office for these union leaders and their sympathizers among intellectuals. The 1978 elections saw several unionists and leftist allies on the MDB ticket. Benedito Marcílio, president of the Santo André metalworkers' union, was elected federal deputy. Aurélio Peres, a São Paulo metallurgical unionist, militant in the PCdoB, and activist against the rising cost of living, had run with no hope of winning but merely to gain attention for communists; he was elected with nearly fifty thousand votes.⁴⁶ The twenty-eight-year-old Geraldo Siqueira Filho was a former Trotskyist student activist who had been arrested in 1970 for passing out pamphlets to workers; one of his comrades was tortured and killed in DOPS custody. In 1978, he

was elected state deputy for São Paulo.⁴⁷ His colleague in the legislative assembly, Irma Passoni, was a former nun and an organizer of ecclesiastical base communities; when she joined the state legislature, conservative politicians grumbled that she welcomed “tie-less ragamuffins” to her office.⁴⁸ Eduardo Suplicy, the economist who had defended the strikes in the press, was also elected state deputy. These new deputies would play a key role in supporting workers’ mobilization in 1979.

1979: “IT IS UP TO THE WORKERS TO CHANGE
THE RULES OF THE GAME”

On March 15, 1979, Figueiredo, chief of military staff under Médici and head of the SNI under Geisel, was inaugurated as Brazil’s fifth consecutive general-president. His father had commanded troops for the paulista rebels in the Constitutionalist Revolution and after the fall of the Estado Novo was elected federal deputy from the UDN; two of his brothers also became generals. As early as 1976, a foreign diplomat noted that he was Geisel’s most likely choice as his successor.⁴⁹ When Geisel designated him in 1977, despite a thwarted plot by General Sylvio Frota to pressure Geisel into naming him instead, there had been little consultation of the Armed Forces and virtually none of civilian politicians; Figueiredo was Geisel’s personal choice. Not only would he maintain détente, but he also expanded it to *abertura*—political opening. In the evaluation of the British embassy, Figueiredo believed in “less repression, some more liberty, and, indeed, more democracy within the limits set by the revolutionary framework, the concept of ‘relative democracy,’ and the accepted need for the State to maintain protective mechanisms in its own defence.”⁵⁰ While professing devotion to democracy, he warned that “intransigence,” signified by the MDB “attempting to impose the victory of its ideas,” could delay *abertura*.⁵¹ Whatever authoritarian measures they relaxed, the generals refused to lose control. But Figueiredo’s ability to impose his will on politicians would face limitations due to Geisel’s most significant reform: the repeal of AI-5. On September 21, 1978, Congress approved a constitutional amendment replacing it with “safeguards” designed to “defend” the regime against subversion. Although the revocation of AI-5 received the enthusiastic support of ARENA, it garnered only one MDB vote, as the party protested that the “safeguards” were as authoritarian as the act. Although the amendment restored parliamentary immunity (with limited exceptions) and habeas corpus, it also created a “state of emergency” that could suspend civil liberties for up to 180 days without congressional approval.⁵² For the MDB, the reforms constituted the institutionalization of a decade-old state of exception.

Still, change was in the air. Although politicians speculated about what other reforms Figueiredo might permit, such as amnesty, a multiparty system, or direct gubernatorial elections, these changes would have limited immediate relevance for workers, who faced the same declining real wages as a year earlier. For 1979,

São Paulo's metallurgical unions demanded a 29 percent raise above the inflation rate.⁵³ While most unions accepted a compromise offered by their bosses, united in the Federation of Industries of the State of São Paulo (FIESP), the ABC unions rejected the offer, and on March 12, three days before Figueiredo's inauguration, over 150,000 metalworkers went on strike.⁵⁴ Two days later, workers in several unions in the interior held assemblies in which they forced their union leadership to withdraw their acceptance of the FIESP proposal.⁵⁵

Maluf, sworn in the same day as Figueiredo, reacted sanguinely, affirming, "Strikes are a right in democracies."⁵⁶ Labor Minister Murilo Macedo, a career banker who had just served as São Paulo business and finance secretary, promised that he would only take a hard line if all other solutions failed: "[I will] maintain dialogue until it breaks down. I will continue until every option has been exhausted."⁵⁷ ARENA president, José Sarney, senator from Maranhão, admitted, "All classes have the right to manifest their demands," but he added that it was important to remain attentive, in order to make sure that "people who wish to exploit [the workers] politically" did not take control of the labor movement.⁵⁸ Indeed, this would remain the great fear of government officials and ARENA politicians alike—that undereducated workers might allow students or communist agitators to co-opt what should be an apolitical movement.

Yet this tolerance evaporated as it became clear that unlike 1978, this new strike was not a spontaneous occurrence; rather, the three local ABC metalworkers' unions voted to strike, and their leaders entered direct negotiations with FIESP, authorized by the businesses to negotiate on their behalf. This time, striking workers, instead of sitting at their stations without working, went to the streets and organized picket lines.⁵⁹ In São Bernardo, the union organized daily assemblies in the Costa e Silva Municipal Stadium; up to 80,000 workers came to hear Lula and other union leaders report on negotiations and vote whether to continue the strike as FIESP rejected their demands.⁶⁰ And this time, the workers, who usually lived paycheck to paycheck, were able to avail themselves of food banks organized by their wives, charity organizations, and, above all, the Catholic Church, led by Cláudio Hummes, bishop of ABC.⁶¹ MDB federal deputies launched a relief fund; within a week, 120 of 189 deputies had donated a total of 150,000 cruzeiros (\$6,643 at the time).⁶² As the strike entered its second week, the São Bernardo union issued a note soliciting support, arguing that theirs was "a struggle of all Brazilians and democrats, of those who, in the most diverse areas, struggle for [civil] liberties, amnesty, a constitutional assembly, for the establishment of . . . the true rule of law."⁶³

Within three days of the start of the strike, the TRT ruled that it was illegal; Lula commented that while the labor courts could take two years to resolve a worker's complaint against a business, the TRT had ruled for the bosses within hours.⁶⁴ As in 1978, the unions ignored the ruling. Regime officials and ARENA politicians now criticized the strike as an assault on law and order. Senator Antônio Lomanto Júnior of Bahia argued, "[The strike] is considered illegal by the justice system, . . .

which has conducted itself with complete . . . impartiality.”⁶⁵ Similarly, Jarbas Pas-sarinho, the Pará senator who had served as labor minister under Costa e Silva, asserted, “At this moment of democratic opening, when all of us are struggling for the implantation . . . of the rule of law, you cannot . . . just completely ignore a law.”⁶⁶ Maluf bluntly cited the infamous quotation attributed to First Republic president Washington Luis: “It’s no longer an economic matter—it’s become a police matter.”⁶⁷

Montoro retorted, “The strike . . . is not a police matter; it’s a question of justice.”⁶⁸ Quéricia, in a speech that used the word *just* or *justice* sixteen times, argued that the law arenistas defended was “an arbitrary law, a law of force, a law of violence. The workers stripped this law of its power last year, just as they are doing in the current strike, because what motivates the spirit of this strike is justice, and this law is not just.” If the strike was illegal, the law should be brought into line with justice.⁶⁹ Senator Marcos Freire commented that ARENA did not have the moral standing to demand respect for the law: “In this country, laws have been systematically disrespected, violated, beaten down, without these voices who want to speak up now . . . ever having defended the highest law, the Constitution.” Labor laws, particularly the Vargas-era, corporatist Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT), “which imposes an odious tutelage on unions,” were the problem, not strikes.⁷⁰

Yet for the regime and its ARENA allies, the problem was not simply that the strikes were illegal; they might also have been subversive. Otávio Gonzaga Júnior, the new state secretary of public safety, claimed that the workers had been infiltrated by the Trotskyist student-worker group *Convergência Socialista* and remarked that the pickets reminded him of “an old communist tactic.”⁷¹ DOPS director, Romeu Tuma, added that his officers had caught *Convergência* members distributing to workers a newsletter dedicated to the strike.⁷² When a socialist organization passed out propaganda and participated in pickets, what could it be other than a subversive plot? Senator Aloysio Chaves leapt on the claim of leftist infiltration, which proved, he argued, that the strike was not simply an attempt to gain better salaries for workers.⁷³

Some MDB politicians responded by denying the possibility of infiltration. Rio de Janeiro’s Roberto Saturnino Braga insisted, “There is nothing political about the movement, nothing of ideology, nothing of infiltration. It is a legitimate movement, sprung spontaneously from the breast of the working class.”⁷⁴ Quéricia, however, argued that if there was a leftist faction in the strike, it was surely made up of workers, who had a right to hold any political philosophy.⁷⁵ Strike leaders in ABC, cognizant that “infiltration” would serve to justify repression, also dismissed these claims. At a rally, Lula denied “any influence of any group foreign to our class.”⁷⁶ Almir Pazzianoto, an MDB state deputy and the lawyer for the São Bernardo union, told workers that if they were “radical,” it was radicalism in defense of a better life: “Yes, we are radicalizing. We are radicalizing so that we can bring

food to the worker's table, so that he can give the minimum condition of survival to his wife and children."⁷⁷

Despite these defenses, repression came quickly. The São Paulo military police sent its riot force, with two thousand officers, forty bulletproof cars, and weapons ranging from electric truncheons to AR-15 rifles.⁷⁸ Repression was widespread, with daily reports of violence. On the first day of the strike, even before the TRT ruled it illegal, military police appeared at a picket line outside a São Bernardo factory. They cursed the unionists, beat them with clubs, and pulled guns on them.⁷⁹ Over the coming days, riot police were housed inside the Volkswagen factory, from which they made periodic sorties to harass workers.⁸⁰ By the third day, armed police stood guard outside some of the factories to prevent lines from forming.⁸¹ In Santo André, police threatened picketing workers with arrest and beating.⁸² The situation became so tense that the government, only a week into Figueiredo's term, considered declaring a state of emergency.⁸³ As violence escalated, Lula protested, "Just to defend the boss's sidewalk, the police beat up workers, the main ones responsible for the greatness of the country."⁸⁴

Police violence helped produce a shift in opposition politicians' involvement, as members of the MDB began to intervene to protect workers. Those who took to the streets in 1979 had few ties to the traditional political class. Instead, they were former student activists, Catholic organizers, and communist sympathizers who had entered politics the year before. New state deputies like Siqueira Filho, Suplicy, and the nine-month pregnant Passoni drove to São Bernardo almost daily in their official vehicles, attempting to deter violence against workers. They were joined by federal deputies such as Alberto Goldman (who had just moved from the state legislature to Congress), the journalist Audálio Dantas, and the autêntico Aírton Soares, a second-term deputy who previously served as a lawyer for political prisoners.⁸⁵ With Lula's blessing, they joined picket lines as early as 4:00 a.m. to report incidents of police violence to state officials.⁸⁶ Strikers waiting at bus stops to convince their fellows to skip work were only saved from violence when deputies, journalists, and Bishop Hummes joined them.⁸⁷

On March 21, Macedo flew to São Paulo to broker an agreement.⁸⁸ Yet the next day, the unions rejected FIESP's counterproposal because it failed to budge on the amount of the salary adjustment. Lula scoffed that the proposal did not deserve "even 50 votes" from the workers in the stadium.⁸⁹ Hours later, Macedo, with the authority granted by the CLT, decreed intervention in the ABC unions. Lula, Marçílio, and the São Caetano union president were removed from their posts. The intervention order parroted the government's law and order argument. It read in part, "The defense of professional interests by resorting to a strike is only justified inasmuch as said right places itself within the framework of legality. . . . The tolerance of disobedience to what has been judged . . . is incompatible with social peace and citizens' rights."⁹⁰

For workers, intervention demonstrated how hollow a promise *abertura* was.⁹¹ As a Minas Gerais union president bitterly noted, “We have witnessed a demonstration of the promised *abertura*. . . . There is no way to deny that we live in a military dictatorship.”⁹² Indeed, the intervention looked like nothing less than an invasion. Police secured the streets around the unions’ headquarters early on the morning of March 23, arresting workers who got in their way and throwing them, battered and bleeding, into police vans. Workers fought back with kicks, rocks, and sticks, and several police officers were taken to the hospital.⁹³ When the MDB state deputy Geraldo Siqueira tried to stop an arrest, a punch in the face from a DOPS agent knocked him to the ground—an act of disrespect remarkably similar to the beating São Paulo deputy Santilli Sobrinho had taken at UnB a decade before.⁹⁴ The police moved into the unions’ buildings, holding hundreds of workers inside for hours; those inside the São Bernardo union were only freed when state deputy Wanderlei Macris made a phone call to Maluf to intervene.⁹⁵

São Bernardo was in an uproar. Up to 20,000 infuriated workers gathered in the plaza around the city hall, since the police had blocked off their usual meeting place in the municipal stadium a block away. One thousand riot police arrived and used tear gas to try to break up the demonstration, but the workers threw the canisters back and refused to leave. Fearing an imminent battle, Tito Costa, the MDB mayor, came down from his office and gave a speech asking the workers to return home. The police commander joined Costa, taking the microphone to say that he too was the son of a worker but begging them to leave before he had to resort to force. The workers responded by singing the national anthem, and the teary-eyed commander withdrew to call his superiors; with their permission, the riot police withdrew. Bishop Hummes then led the workers in the Lord’s Prayer before they left.

The next day, 25,000 workers filled the plaza. Cardoso and several MDB deputies stood watch, not only to express solidarity, but also to make sure that a restless crowd did not get out of control. “Where is the mayor?” Cardoso asked. “If he doesn’t arrive soon, someone’s going to have to take charge and calm this crowd down.” He pulled aside the union treasurer, Djalma Bom, the highest-ranking union official around, and asked him to “talk to the people, in order to avoid provocations.” Bom then gave a speech reminding the workers that their battle was with the bosses and asked them to go home.⁹⁶ The following day, Sunday, Hummes held a “metalworkers’ Mass,” attended by 4,000 workers in a church designed for 1,500. In the first row sat Lula, Marcílio, and MDB deputies. An additional 15,000 workers stood outside, listening via loudspeakers.⁹⁷ After the Mass, Hummes invited Lula and Marcílio to speak. The intervention notwithstanding, they retook command of the strike, urging the workers to stand firm but to avoid confrontations with police.⁹⁸ On Monday, however, the strike was smaller. Though the workers in front of the city hall may have been disposed to maintain the strike, two weeks of repression had taken their toll, and for many, bills and rent would be

due April 1.⁹⁹ The unions and FIESP thus reached an agreement on March 27. The strike would end immediately; a commission of union leaders, businessmen, and labor ministry officials would negotiate a salary adjustment within forty-five days, and Lula and the other deposed leaders would be restored to their positions. In a new stadium assembly, 70,000 workers approved the agreement.¹⁰⁰

One month passed, and no deal had been reached on the wage adjustment. By May Day, the possibility of a new strike loomed. One year earlier, May Day had demonstrated workers' restlessness. This year it showcased a mobilized working class in open rebellion against recalcitrant employers and government tutelage. Fifty thousand workers attended an open-air Mass in front of the São Bernardo city hall, where a choir sang a Portuguese rendition of "We Shall Not Be Moved." In place of the usual penitential rite, they prayed, "Christ, the workers were forced to go on strike, to seek a small pay raise, while the multinationals have enormous profits. Christ, help us to correct injustice."¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, the state government held its May Day festivities in Pacaembu Stadium. Perhaps 5,000 workers milled about the stadium, surrounded by banners reading, "Workers, the Labor Ministry is always on your side."¹⁰²

That afternoon, an astounding 130,000 workers packed the São Bernardo municipal stadium and the surrounding streets for an unprecedented "United May Day" rally that brought together workers, politicians, and a cross section of civil society. Tito Costa proclaimed ABC "the social capital of Brazil" and read a message from Guimarães: "Only your organization and struggle will enable the workers to have an effective participation in the fruits of the nation's economic development, opposing themselves to an authoritarian and unjust regime that enables the scandalous enrichment of few to the detriment of the whole of the Brazilian nation."¹⁰³ The workers listened to representatives of the Brazilian Amnesty Committee, UNE, and the women's movement, as well as federal deputy, Aurélio Peres, speaking on behalf of the Movement against the Cost of Living. A worker read a "Manifesto to the Nation" signed by unions and civil society groups. "Because workers have acquired consciousness," it read, "this May Day is a historic moment. It proves that the workers have begun to recover their own voice, to incorporate themselves into the national political scene, and to demand their effective participation in the economic, social, and political development of the country." Finally, Lula spoke. To thunderous applause, he said, "Today workers . . . understand that only uniting around their common cause will allow the entire class to achieve its political emancipation. . . . It's up to us, the workers, to change the rules of the game, and instead of being ordered around like we are today, to start giving the orders around here."¹⁰⁴

Here was a speech that challenged the status quo, nearly a call for (peaceful) revolution. The *Folha* called Lula's speech "as hard as granite and as incompetent as a high school student writing a paper about a topic he or she doesn't understand." The worst part was the call for workers to "give the orders," which was "excessively

fervent and sullied with a strong dose of romanticism.”¹⁰⁵ *O Estado* directed an editorial to Lula, who they accused of “growing Manichaeism.” “ABC is not the Sierra Maestra, Brazil is not Cuba, capitalism has 300 years of experience, and the Brazilian people do not want some other system.”¹⁰⁶ The press could accept workers mobilizing for better salaries, but mobilization to transform social relations was more than the papers’ owners, themselves practically a part of the political class, could accept.

On May 11, the ABC unions and FIESP finally reached an agreement, which the workers ratified in an assembly.¹⁰⁷ Four days later, Macedo revoked the intervention in the ABC unions and authorized the return of their presidents.¹⁰⁸ After a two-and-a-half-week strike and two months of mobilization, the unions ended up with exactly the salary adjustment FIESP had offered to begin with. The strike was a failure, and it had aroused the ire of the military, the police, and ARENA politicians. As Macedo put it, “Strikes for the sake of strikes are inconceivable in modern unionism, [which] must be apolitical. . . . There is no place among us for class struggle. . . . Thus [the government] will act against movements that are offensive to the law, peace, and the national common good.”¹⁰⁹ When a bus strike shut down public transportation in the state capital in May, Maluf commented that “liberty is being used as an excuse for licentiousness,” and “many people are confusing democracy with anarchy.”¹¹⁰ The vision that ARENA politicians, and certainly the generals as well, had for workers was not so different from the one the generals had for the political class: limited freedom to criticize and offer “constructive” suggestions while always letting others have the final word.

Yet some of the strike’s effects on labor were positive. In contrast to the year before, when Lula rejected overtures from politicians and social movements, this year he acknowledged that the workers fought in the context of a broader struggle against authoritarianism. As a result, the strike received the solidarity not only of leftist students but also the amnesty and cost of living movements and the Catholic Church. For the first time since defending students in 1968, politicians rushed to the streets to protect demonstrators from repression. At the same time, the politicians supporting the workers in the streets were usually civil society activists or communists. Meanwhile, politicians like Ulysses, Montoro, and Quéricia refrained from joining their leftist colleagues at the factory gates, instead remaining in Brasília or São Paulo, where they gave speeches and proposed changes to labor law. Beneath all this was a latent tension between MDB politicians and workers fed up not only with military authoritarianism and government tutelage but also with a system of social relations in which the political class was profoundly implicated. Opposition politicians sympathized with the workers’ struggle to cast off government supervision, and some of them were eager to protect the workers from violence, but how would they react if workers attempted to “start giving the orders around here”?

Over the next year, the political situation would change more dramatically than at any time in a decade. It had been ten years since over three hundred politicians had been removed from office in the wake of AI-5, and men like Mário Covas were eager to reenter politics. In late August, Congress approved an amnesty law that pardoned everyone who since 1961 had committed "political crimes," had their political rights suspended, or been purged from the civil service, judicial system, military, or unions. However, the amnesty excluded those convicted of "terrorism, assault, kidnapping, and personal attacks." Moreover, by offering amnesty to anyone who committed "crimes of any nature related to political crimes," the law pardoned military or police personnel who had tortured political prisoners. The MDB strenuously opposed both these latter measures, but ultimately the government's bill passed, excluding the guerrillas who had suffered the worst of the regime's violence but pardoning those who had tortured them.

The next step in abertura came in October: party reform. While politicians abhorred the ARENA/MDB binary, the MDB was incensed by a key provision in the bill: it would abolish the existing parties as a precondition to forming new ones. The party argued that the measure constituted a naked attempt to divide and conquer the opposition, since it was taken for granted that ARENA legislators would join the government party while the MDB's moderate/autêntico divide and the return of amnestied politicians would cause it to splinter. Despite spirited MDB opposition, the ARENA majority approved the bill, and Figueiredo signed it. Over the following months, politicians scrambled to form and join new parties. ARENA was reconstituted as the Party of Social Democracy (PDS). ARENA liberals such as former São Paulo mayor Olavo Setúbal and state party president Cláudio Lembo joined MDB "moderates" like Tancredo Neves to form the Popular Party (PP). The majority of MDB politicians joined the Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (PMDB), which, like its predecessor, billed itself as a broad front for the restoration of democracy. Former Rio Grande do Sul governor, Leonel Brizola, and Ivette Vargas, niece of Getúlio, were locked in a bitter dispute to found a Brazilian Labor Party (PTB) with the same name as the Vargas-founded labor party dissolved in 1965.

1980: THE REPUBLIC OF SÃO BERNARDO

The smallest new party was the Workers' Party (PT), formed by Lula, members of the labor movement, and a coalition of progressive politicians, Catholic activists, and leftist intellectuals. The party's program crystallized the consciousness that had developed among unionists through the strikes: "The great majorities who construct the wealth of the nation want to speak for themselves. They no longer expect that the conquest of their . . . interests will come from the dominant elites." The party was "born from the will for political independence of workers,"

who must participate in “all of society’s decisions,” not simply labor. “[The workers] know that the country will only be truly independent when the State is directed by the working masses.”¹¹¹ While the other parties had arisen through negotiations between factions of the political class, the PT proposed something unprecedented in Brazil. Whereas the PMDB proposed incorporating workers into a struggle against authoritarianism, and labor parties claimed to speak on their behalf, the PT asserted that the masses should speak for themselves.

Intellectuals like the political scientists Francisco Weffort and José Álvaro Moisés, the economist Paul Singer of CEBRAP, and the historian Sérgio Buarque de Holanda were founding members of the new party. They were joined by politicians, among them, federal deputy Aírton Soares, former deputy Plínio Sampaio, and São Paulo state deputies Suplicy, Siqueira, and Passoni, all of whom followed up on their solidarity with workers the year before. Yet the majority of opposition politicians joined the PMDB, while many longtime labor allies, including the Santo André union president Marcílio, joined one of the labor parties. Certainly they had legitimate electoral reasons to spurn a small regional workers’ party. Yet the rejection of the PT by figures such as Montoro, a former labor minister and longtime workers’ advocate in Congress, or Cardoso, who had long argued for the integration of workers into national politics, strongly indicates that many politicians and intellectuals were uneasy with the sociopolitical changes that the PT envisioned.

Cardoso’s failure to join was especially striking. In 1978, when he ran for the Senate, he received the unconditional support of Lula, who he said told him, in a jab at Montoro, “You don’t do what those others do, who spend their time giving lessons to workers, telling them what to do, and you don’t call yourself the workers’ senator.”¹¹² Yet when Lula founded the PT, Cardoso was absent. In part, this was due to ambition. Cardoso had finished second to Montoro in the 1978 Senate race, and if Montoro won the governorship in 1982 and left the Senate, Cardoso would serve the remaining four years of his term—but only if he remained in Montoro’s party. Yet more fundamentally, Cardoso’s decision stemmed from an abiding suspicion of mass mobilization. In a 1972 article for the *New Left Review*, he argued that “progressive social integration” could not originate from “the State or bourgeois groups,” but neither could the “marginalized sector” (i.e., the working class) be “the strategic (or revolutionary) side of dependent industrialized societies.” To create a more just society, what was needed was “denunciation of marginalization as a consequence of capitalist growth and the organization of unstructured masses—indispensable tasks of analysis and practical politics.”¹¹³ Of course, if the state, bourgeois industrialist and business classes, and “unstructured masses” were all untrustworthy, that left only analysts and “practical” politicians like Cardoso. When Cardoso worried in front of São Bernardo’s city hall that workers would get out of control without guidance, this merely repeated views he had espoused since at least 1972. Despite his progressive politics, he remained doubtful that the working class could direct its own destiny.

The PT, then, would have to be built without the support of some of its most natural allies. Moreover, Lula placed himself in the precarious position of having two roles; in addition to leading a new party, he remained head of the country's most militant union. As the annual salary negotiations approached, Lula's dual roles would add a new dynamic to the labor movement. For 1980 the unions demanded a reduction from a 48- to a 40-hour workweek, union representatives in factories, and a "productivity raise" of 15 percent. FIESP flatly rejected the first two proposals and offered only a 5 percent raise above inflation.¹¹⁴ On March 30–31, the ABC metalworkers again voted to strike.¹¹⁵ Several unions in the interior voted to join.¹¹⁶ The opposition parties in the legislative assembly immediately announced that they would keep a team of deputies waiting by telephones twenty-four hours a day, ready to assist workers.¹¹⁷

On April 1, the TRT met for the formality of declaring the strikes illegal. Yet in an astounding decision, the labor court ruled 13–11 that it was legally unqualified to rule on the strike's legality and set the productivity wage adjustment at 6 to 7 percent, depending on salary.¹¹⁸ The next day, Lula presented the decision to the stadium assembly and asked the union lawyer, state deputy Pazzianoto, to explain the ruling. Yet as Pazzianoto spoke, military helicopters began making passes overhead. The rotors blew a gale over the stadium, the noise was deafening, and soldiers aboard pointed their machine guns at the throng below. Cardoso had accompanied Pazzianoto and recalled years later, "When the helicopter accelerates like that, it's terrible. You don't know what will happen."¹¹⁹ It was a naked attempt at intimidation. As the helicopters roared overhead, Lula put the continuation of the strike to a vote, and despite their court victory, the workers raised their hands to vote to continue the strike until they received a concession on the question of the union representative and a moratorium on layoffs.¹²⁰ Pazzianoto warned Lula that he should quit while he was ahead, but the strike continued all the same.¹²¹

After a week without progress, despite Macedo's constant presence in São Paulo pressuring for a solution, the government, arguing that the TRT ruling was flawed, appealed to the Supreme Labor Court.¹²² Before the court could rule, Macedo was called to Brasília, where Golbery allegedly instructed him to end the strike any way he could.¹²³ The same day, the presidents of the opposition parties issued a joint statement: "The impasse . . . owes itself to the intransigence of the regime, the accomplice of large economic interests and the wealthy classes," whose "true objective [is] the perpetuation of an unjust and iniquitous social order through the maintenance of power in the hands of a privileged minority."¹²⁴ The opposition was correct in its accusation of regime complicity with employers, as Golbery and Macedo instructed FIESP, which had been inclined to accept the TRT ruling, to ask the court to reconsider.¹²⁵ On April 14, by a 14–12 vote, the court reversed its own ruling; several judges issued opinions directly contradicting opinions of two weeks before.¹²⁶

Labor Minister Macedo made halfhearted attempts to mend fences with workers. He claimed that no intervention was coming yet and that he was only

concerned with getting the workers back to work as quickly as possible in order to minimize the wages they lost from the strike. Trying to improve his public image, he agreed to an interview with a television reporter who brought questions from metalworkers. “Minister, you say that the strike is illegal. Is it also illegal for the worker to go hungry?” “If you had a daughter my age, making the salary that I make working 11 hours a day, . . . would you be in favor of or opposed to the strike?” “You said that the workers of São Bernardo make good money. Would you like to trade salaries with me?” Such aggressive questions violated nearly five centuries of Brazilian social norms governing how slaves should address their masters and workers speak to their employers. Upon discovering what the questions were, Macedo canceled the interview.¹²⁷

Lula and the unions defied the new decision, vowing that the strike would continue.¹²⁸ The stage was set for a showdown. Two days later, military police in São Bernardo arrested twenty-nine strikers for attempting to block nonstriking workers from going to work. Shots were fired, and workers were beaten, reported PT federal deputy Airton Soares.¹²⁹ As the unrest escalated, on the evening of April 17 Macedo again declared government intervention in the São Bernardo and Santo André unions (the São Caetano and interior unions had gone back to work).¹³⁰ Once again Lula and Marcílio were removed, but this time they would never return. Sources told the press that the order had come from Figueiredo himself, against Macedo’s wishes.¹³¹

In São Bernardo, Lula gave a short speech to a crowd of workers: “The union is not this building; the union is each of you, wherever you are. If I go to prison and hear that the strike has ended without our victory, I’m going to be pissed off.” He then led the workers in a rendition of Geraldo Vandré’s song “Pra não dizer que não falei das flores”: “Come on, let’s go / Those who wait will never know anything / Those who know choose the time / They don’t wait for things to happen.” Back inside, Lula, his directorate, and politicians stayed awake all night, waiting for government interventors to arrive. While Lula sat on a sofa, politicians, journalists, and academics speculated about Lula as a leader, Lula as future president of Brazil.¹³²

The next morning, the interventor arrived and police descended on the building while three hundred workers outside remained determined to resist. Pazzianoto and PMDB state deputy Flávio Bierrenbach attempted to persuade the police to withdraw, but Bierrenbach was knocked to the ground by the butt of a riot shield, and Pazzianoto was nearly trampled. Workers threw rocks and pieces of pavement, and the police responded with tear gas. The battle continued for hours, as more workers arrived and rained rocks on the police.¹³³ In São Paulo, Maluf remarked that Lula was finished; in six months the workers would forget him.¹³⁴

The following morning, DOPS agents arrived at Lula’s house and arrested him for “violating the national security law.” PT state deputy Siqueira, who had been sleeping at Lula’s house to ensure his safety after DOPS director Tuma

had surreptitiously warned him that an arrest was imminent, attempted to accompany Lula but was forbidden by the arresting officers.¹³⁵ Nearly simultaneously, nine other union leaders, two "political militants," a journalist, and other civil society activists were arrested.¹³⁶ PT deputy Soares and São Paulo federal deputy João Cunha rushed to DOPS headquarters, where they managed to see Lula and the other prisoners.¹³⁷ The next evening, twenty-five opposition deputies and senators from across Brazil, including paulista autêntico Freitas Nobre and Robson Marinho, PMDB president of the São Paulo legislative assembly, went to DOPS to see the prisoners, but Romeu Tuma advised the legislators that they were being held incommunicado.¹³⁸

The arrests dominated congressional debate for weeks. Members of the opposition parties were unequivocal in taking the side of the workers. PMDB senator Pedro Simon argued that the workers' militancy was part of a broad mobilization of society that could have only positive connotations. "A society that is agitated, debating, arguing . . . contributes to the future of this country and is not, as some imagine, something that creates crises and problems," Simon insisted.¹³⁹ Other opposition senators highlighted the regime's disingenuousness in promising political opening. Evandro Carreira (PMDB-AM) was perhaps the most impassioned: "On the part of the government, there is not really a desire for abertura, but the exclusive intention of directing the nation as though we were a cowardly herd, a nation of slaves with necks bowed before the scourge of the foreman."¹⁴⁰ Speaking for Brizola's labor party, Paraná's Francisco Leite Chaves asked why the regime cast strikes as a security threat: "They want free initiative for economic organizations to rake in profits . . . , but as soon as pertinent and just manifestations come from workers who are exploited like wild animals, the masters of power and privilege become afraid and indignant and loose the police to take charge of the repression."¹⁴¹ Even PDS politicians quietly advocated for the workers. PDS members of the Chamber's Labor and Social Relations Committee sent Macedo a proposal for reforms to the CLT, including "the strengthening of collective bargaining," a new law regulating strikes, and new restrictions on mass layoffs.¹⁴²

Certainly opposition politicians saw part of their role as holding the regime accountable for its inconsistencies from the rostrum. Above all, however, they promoted dialogue in the face of government heavy-handedness. And who more natural to facilitate negotiation than the elected representatives of the people? Even before the intervention, Marcos Freire begged the Senate to send a commission to São Paulo to help mediate. He told his colleagues, "This Senate should not just wait as a mere spectator."¹⁴³ PT senator Henrique Santillo insisted, "We have the duty—not just as men of the opposition, but also . . . the party that supports the government— . . . to exhaust every possibility to solve this impasse."¹⁴⁴ As Senator Teotônio Vilela explained, the situation was rapidly heading toward a crisis, and "if we are not able to do anything, tomorrow we will be held responsible, because . . . the appeal of the workers . . . was directed at all of us."¹⁴⁵

Before the arrests, the only politicians directly involved had been PT deputies and a few leftist PMDB politicians. Yet after the arrests, possessed by a belief that it was their duty to take up negotiations, opposition legislators made the one-and-a-half-hour flight from Brasília to São Paulo to meet with FIESP representatives, the police, state officials, local politicians, and unionists in an attempt to broker a solution. Perhaps without Lula to keep the workers in check, politicians feared they might respond to police provocations with violence. Perhaps they sensed an opportunity to earn workers' loyalty and enhance their credibility with a vibrant social movement. Or perhaps authoritarian military rule had caused these members of the political class to shift their attitude toward popular mobilization. After living under military tutelage for sixteen years, they may have had a new appreciation for workers' experience under the tutelage of the Labor Ministry—or even under that of the elite of which they were themselves a part.

Of all the politicians who supported the strikes, none was more active than the Alagoas PMDB senator Teotônio Vilela. A former member of the UDN, he had supported the coup in 1964. He was elected to the Senate for ARENA in 1966, and he had signed the telegram pledging support for Costa e Silva in the wake of AI-5. Yet by the time Geisel took office, Vilela had become disillusioned, and he became an even fiercer critic than most of the MDB. In 1978, he was the only member of ARENA to vote against the replacement of AI-5 with authoritarian "safeguards," and in 1979, he finally joined the MDB.¹⁴⁶ The morning that Lula was imprisoned, Severo Gomes, former minister of industry and commerce under Geisel whose increasing discontent had led to his dismissal in 1977, searched desperately for a politician to help him jumpstart negotiations between the unions and FIESP. The first to agree was Vilela, who took the next plane to São Paulo and commenced a dizzying succession of meetings.¹⁴⁷

Vilela would remain in the area for the next three weeks, only flying back to Brasília to give the Senate updates on his efforts. In the first three days, he met with federal and state deputies; Cardinal Arns; the Commission of Justice and Peace; state security secretary Gonzaga Júnior; and Theobaldo de Nigris, president of FIESP, who promised to reopen negotiations. He also spoke with Justice Minister Ibrahim Abi-Ackel.¹⁴⁸ And he met clandestinely in prison with Lula after Gonzaga Júnior convinced Maluf to authorize the visit.¹⁴⁹ In the end, however, his efforts came to naught. By April 30, Vilela was fuming: "When we searched for those who hold power, the ones who are responsible for it disappeared, and we remained without interlocutors, the opposition and that immense mass of . . . striking workers. . . . The military operation launched in São Bernardo is simply a strategy to revalidate power."¹⁵⁰

Many other politicians, including Montoro, Quércia, Guimarães, and Freitas Nobre, abandoned Brasília, making São Paulo and the ABC region their base of operations and returning only briefly to the federal capital to offer updates via speeches. On Tuesday, April 22, Guimarães, Cardoso, Covas (now serving as state

president of the PMDB), Vilela, and others attended an assembly at the principal church in São Bernardo. They did not speak to the crowd; instead, they met with union leaders after the assembly ended. Vilela informed them that de Nigris had advised him that he had received a call from Brasília advising him not to restart negotiations and raged, "You don't play around with something important like this. I'm not a child. You don't make a commitment only to break it without giving any satisfaction."¹⁵¹

The situation was rapidly deteriorating. Though violence against workers, who had heeded appeals not to form picket lines, was sporadic, strong police presence outside church assemblies and inconsistent permission to use plazas to accommodate the overflow kept workers off balance. On Saturday, April 26, one week after Lula's arrest, the tense situation exploded into crisis. After an assembly at a church, deputies and senators were giving rides to city hall to three union leaders in official legislative assembly cars. Suddenly, the car carrying Quércia, PMDB state deputy Fernando Morais, and union member Enilson Simões de Moura (called "o Alemão," the German) was surrounded by four police cars and forced to stop. About twenty agents jumped out and rushed the car, machine guns pointed, and demanded that the legislators hand over Alemão. Quércia and Morais demanded that the officers identify themselves and produce a warrant, which they refused to do. When Quércia rolled down a window slightly to continue to argue, an agent threw a canister of tear gas into the car.¹⁵²

While Quércia and Morais were arguing over Alemão's arrest, a car carrying Freitas Nobre (PMDB leader in the Chamber), Siqueira, and two unionists was also stopped. As Freitas Nobre and Siqueira hurried to lock the doors, shouting officers with machine guns stormed the car, opened the doors, removed the unionists, and sped off. Meanwhile, Montoro had arrived in yet another car and when he saw what was happening stopped and shouted, in the middle of the avenue, "Identify yourselves and leave, because the person talking to you is a Senator of the Republic!" When they refused, Montoro excoriated them for ignoring parliamentary immunity and told them that without a warrant no one was going anywhere. Just then, another officer arrived and identified himself as a DOPS agent but insisted that DOPS had nothing to do with the arrests. He attempted to take control of the situation by getting into Quércia's car and ordering the driver to take them to DOPS headquarters. Quércia, however, instructed the driver to take them to city hall. The car proceeded to city hall, already surrounded by cavalry, soldiers, firemen, and riot police with German shepherds.¹⁵³

At city hall, the crowd of politicians and Alemão, accompanied by a dozen plainclothes officers, took the elevator to the mayor's office.¹⁵⁴ Vilela had arrived too and promptly called DOPS chief Tuma to demand an explanation. Tuma insisted that this was not a DOPS operation. At the same time, Montoro was arguing with the DOPS agent that he could not arrest Alemão without a warrant; even after a call to Raymundo Faoro, head of the Order of Brazilian Lawyers (OAB) confirmed

that warrantless arrests were illegal, the agent insisted that “in special cases like this” warrants were not necessary.¹⁵⁵ Finally, a call to Gonzaga Júnior revealed that the warrant was en route.¹⁵⁶

While politicians argued with the officers, Alemão was locked in Costa’s office. Vilela was on the phone again, this time with Abi-Ackel, who already knew what was happening and was only surprised that a fourth union leader, Osmar Mendonça, had not been arrested too. “He wanted to know where [Osmar] was, but I wasn’t going to tell him,” Vilela said after he hung up. Vilela then called the president of the national vehicle manufacturers’ association. Though his exaggerated description of the situation received laughs from some of the reporters and politicians, it vividly illustrates how invested Vilela was.

They can take even the last worker in ABC, but you will be responsible for this national catastrophe. I also am a businessman. . . . Nothing justifies what is happening here; it is like a military operation of extermination. When they finish with the workers, next it will be us politicians. Then they’ll finish off the students, the Church, the middle class—then what will be left of this country? You will be responsible for this.¹⁵⁷

Costa was overheard commenting, “The republic of São Bernardo has been overthrown, but it is still a republic.” Finally, another officer arrived, warrant in hand. Alemão was arrested and hauled out through a crowd of dozens of politicians.¹⁵⁸

In response to this latest authoritarian measure, federal deputy João Cunha gave a speech so aggressive that even in this era of abertura it was withheld from publication in the *Diário da Câmara dos Deputados* (but preserved in a recording). He claimed that the events in São Bernardo “once again unmasked . . . the democratic cynicism of Mr. João Figueiredo, sung in prose and verse by the shameless and corrupt strategy of the regime.” He blasted the regime for “oppressing, offending, marginalizing, alienating, and compromising the rights of our people” and promised that one day they would have to answer to “the people, whose harm against traitors is implacable.” “Yoked to corruption, strangled by hidden ties, controlled by the powerful, they have no explanations beyond lies, violence, and explosions of authoritarianism and the clownish spectacle of the half-dozen generals who sustain them.”¹⁵⁹

MEDIA FILE 9. Clip of João Cunha speech criticizing attacks on legislators, April 28, 1980.

SOURCE: Câmara dos Deputados, COAUD, Arquivo Sonoro, <http://imagem.camara.gov.br/internet/audio/default.asp>.



Despite the arrests, the strike continued. “For every leader that is imprisoned, five more climb up here to speak,” proclaimed the leader of the April 28 assembly.¹⁶⁰ Three days later, May Day arrived. While the workers prepared to hold a mass, the police prepared to repress any demonstrations. When workers in the plaza outside

the church unfurled banners, the police chief ordered them removed; when the workers refused, the first canisters of tear gas were thrown. State deputy Irma Passoni called for calm to no avail, as workers grabbed the canisters and tossed them back. Yet just as the situation was spinning out of control, after a conversation with Vilela the police commander decided to withdraw.¹⁶¹ One hundred thousand ebullient workers marched from the church to city hall, followed by a boisterous rally in the stadium.¹⁶² It was the strike's final moment of glory. Hungry and running out of money, fearful that their employers would fire them after a month of absences, and worn out by police violence, workers drifted back to work. On May 11, they voted to end the strike.¹⁶³ A week and a half later, Lula and his fellow union leaders were released but faced a charge of "violating national security" for inciting an illegal strike. Despite providing some of the most emotionally gripping moments Brazil had ever seen, the final ABC metalworkers' strike had ended in total defeat.

CONCLUSIONS

As the final strike ended, José Álvaro Moisés, a political scientist and PT founding member, speculated, "Perhaps the ABC metalworkers' strike of 1980 will be recognized in Brazilian history as the episode that opened the process of the conquest of the fundamental rights of citizenship."¹⁶⁴ He was right. Despite the defeat of this strike, the metalworkers' movement was the catalyst for changes in Brazilian social relations that have endured for a generation. A mobilized working class demanded not simply better wages, but the right to enjoy and even define citizenship, "to start giving the orders around here." Although over the next few years the generals kept trying to salvage their "Revolution," one of its fundamental premises—a demobilized populace that passively accepted military fiat—had been dealt a punishing blow. And four and a half years later, as the next chapter shows, a vibrant civil society, acting in concert with the political class, would play a key role in finally forcing the regime from power.

The Populist Republic (1945–64) had witnessed a similar expansion in workers' political consciousness. As a host of labor histories have shown, the end of World War II and the fall of Vargas brought new opportunities for workers, above all, in industrializing São Paulo.¹⁶⁵ As a worker at a factory in São Miguel Paulista recalled, back in Bahia his political involvement had been limited to voting, but in São Paulo he was able to join a party and be heard: "[Here in São Paulo] we were part of it, and there [in Bahia], they gave us only the vote, just the vote, and we were gone."¹⁶⁶ For most workers before 1964, political participation meant the opportunity to pursue their interests within the system.¹⁶⁷ At times this might mean using Vargas's corporatist labor law and the labor court system to their advantage.¹⁶⁸ It could also mean joining a party that offered to advocate for their interests, most frequently the laborist PTB. Even the PCB (which, although officially banned, remained a significant force) largely chose to work within the system,

allying itself and the workers it organized with populist politicians like Vargas or Adhemar de Barros in an effort to wrest at least some gains for the working class.¹⁶⁹ And when the Left did flex its muscle in the immediate postwar years and then again under Goulart, reaction was swift and decisive, with the PCB banned in 1947 and Goulart deposed in 1964.

Scholars have rightly challenged the assumption that the “new unionism” of 1978–80 was a reaction against the supposedly “sell-out” unions of the three preceding decades.¹⁷⁰ But an overemphasis on continuities obscures very real differences. In fact, the 1978–80 strikes went much further than any of the worker mobilizations of the Populist Republic, for instead of joining a laborist party such as Brizola’s Democratic Labor Party (PDT), Lula and the metalworkers joined with intellectuals and civil society activists to form their own party, the PT. Moreover, they demanded fundamental changes to a centuries-old system of social relations that kept “peons” subservient to their bosses and the rest of their “betters” in the socioeconomic elite, including the political class. The last two times the political class had felt their class privileges threatened by popular demands, in 1947 and 1964, the vast majority of politicians had supported or accepted the banning of the PCB and the military coup. This time, even most regime allies were reluctant to criticize the strikes, and oppositionists, leftists and liberals alike, risked their physical integrity to defend the metalworkers from police repression. Certainly this support had limits. And decades later, in 2016, a majority of the political class leapt at the opportunity to carry out a parliamentary coup to stifle popular demands again. But in 1980 cracks were appearing in politicians’ conviction that the power to determine Brazil’s social, political, and economic course could continue to reside exclusively with people like them. By 1985, when the regime finally fell, these cracks would become too wide to seal.