

The “enemies of the country”: State Repression and Workers’ struggle in the Chemical Workers Trade Union of São Paulo (1964-1979)

Os “inimigos da pátria”: repressão e luta dos trabalhadores do Sindicato dos Químicos de São Paulo (1964-1979)

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RESUMO

O artigo tem como objetivo analisar o papel do Sindicato dos Químicos de São Paulo e sua relação com a categoria durante o regime civil-militar. Dessa forma, procura-se compreender o impacto do golpe e as mudanças provocadas no movimento sindical após o processo de intervenção estatal. Por meio da análise da trajetória do Químicos, considerado atualmente uma das entidades trabalhistas mais importantes do país, observam-se os mecanismos utilizados pelos governos autoritários para controlar a entidade sindical, bem como a atuação das diretorias conhecidas como “pelegas” e o movimento de luta e de resistência dos trabalhadores para reocupar a entidade.

Palavras-chave: movimento sindical; trabalhadores químicos; Ditadura civil-militar.

ABSTRACT

The article aims to analyze the role of the Chemical Workers Trade Union of São Paulo and its relations with the rank-and-file during the Civil-Military Dictatorship. It seeks to understand the impact of the coup d'état in 1964 as well as the changes in the labour movement. The trajectory of the Chemical Workers Trade Union, which is considered one of the most important in the country, enables an investigation of the strategies used by the authoritarian regime to control labour organizations. It also allows an examination of the role of trade unionists called “pelegos”, as well as the workers’ struggle to resist and to reclaim the trade union again.

Keywords: labour movement; chemical workers; Civil-Military dictatorship.

Founded in 1933, in the course of the 1950s and early 1960s the Chemical Workers Union of São Paulo became one of the principal labor organizations in the city. During this period that was characterized by the powerful rise of

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the trade union movement in Brazilian national politics, this Union came under the leadership of communist and nationalist militants. Under the slogan “the snake will smoke” (“*a cobra vai fumar*”) used by the *pracinhas* – soldiers in the Brazilian Expeditionary Force that fought in World War II – the Union won important victories. Their main achievements included a considerable increase in the number of unionized workers and the implementation of hundreds of recreational and educational activities, as well as the organization of campaigns to increase salaries, strikes, and protests. Many of these actions took place under the command of Adelço de Almeida, at that time one of the first black men elected president of a union in the city of São Paulo.¹

At the height of the intense and growing mobilization of the trade union movement during the presidential administration of João Goulart (1961-1964), the Chemical Workers’ Union was constantly monitored by the São Paulo political police (Deops), which considered the union a “center of communist activities.” The demobilization of this trade, however, came soon after the civilian-military coup of 1964.² With Marshall Castello Branco as President of the Republic (1964-1967) and the rise to power of conservative civilians, a veritable hunt began to root out Goulart’s supporters. Many labor organizers, attorneys for the movement, and workers linked to left-leaning organizations were arrested, others fled to wait for better days. This set in motion a long period, which extended over the next two decades, marked by police repression and exploitation of the working classes.

Despite the fact that the labor movement was the target of public policy characterized by the repression and systematic control throughout the entire period of the dictatorship, we know little about the interventions carried out in the main trade unions throughout Brazil, a process that began immediately after the fall of João Goulart. In retracing the trajectory of the Chemical Workers’ Union of São Paulo as a case study, this article seeks to contribute to our broader understanding of the relationship between the workers’ movement and the civilian-military dictatorship. Among other questions, this article will analyze both the reaction of union leaders to the coup in 1964 and the repressive mechanisms that the state used to control the chemical workers’ organization and demobilize workers in the trade, while emphasizing the role of workers involved in the armed struggle, as was the case for the chemical worker Virgílio Gomes da Silva. Furthermore, this article observes the role of unions’ pro-government boards of directors known as “*pelegas*,” as well as the struggle and resistance movement to recover the leadership of the labor organization by forming the Chemical Workers’ Union Opposition.

The questions that this article addresses are based in the analytical repertoire of the “Dictatorship and Repression of Workers and the Labor Movement” Working Group of the National Truth Commission (CNV). This group, established in April of 2013 and not coincidentally the last one to be constituted by the CNV, has the support of all of the major trade union organizations in Brazil, as well as the São Paulo State Truth Commission—Rubens Paiva. This article thus not only draws on questions raised by the Working Group but also aims to contribute some answers to these questions.³

The fact that the “Dictatorship and Repression of Workers and the Labor Movement” was the last Working Group to be organized and was approved only after the main unions applied strong pressure shows how little attention recent studies of the civilian-military dictatorship have paid to the workers’ movement. Even today, the scholarship on this period is dominated by studies of memory and the history of the student movement, the actions of the armed struggle, the economic changes and in social and military policy, or communism, among other themes.⁴ Likewise, there is a conspicuous absence of published works on the activities of the trade union movement after the coup, above all related to the events of 1964 and 1977.⁵ Such a statement can be explained, in part, by the fact that in the early 1980s many researchers were attracted by the great working-class mobilizations emerging in the waning years of the military-civilian regime.⁶ Furthermore, most studies carried out in the late 1970s and 1980s dedicated to analyzing the trade union movement during the dictatorship emphasized state control and manipulation/ cooptation of workers (Troyano, 1978; Costa, 1986). One can thus observe the dearth of studies dedicated to understanding the role of union leaders, including the so-called *pelegos*, by way of their relationships with workers.

THE IMPACT OF THE COUP ON THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

After the outbreak of the coup, the entire leadership of the Chemical Workers’ Union was forced out of their positions, as were the leaders of the Chemical Workers’ Federation of São Paulo (Federação dos Trabalhadores Químicos de São Paulo). Floriano Dezem and Adelço de Almeida, both militants of the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), like their colleagues in the leadership of the Union, were sought out by the police.⁷ Just days after the coup, a police investigation was set up by the Military Tribunal to investigate the supposedly “subversive acts” committed by the unionists in the chemical trade. Among those being charged were: Fidelcino Queiróz dos Santos, Gabriel

Alves Viana, José Ferreira da Silva, Virgílio Gomes da Silva, Floriano Dezem, Adelço de Almeida, and Manoel Mantonhani. Most of these defendants were just past forty years of age, and Virgílio, at 32 years old, was the youngest.⁸

In the police investigation, the Chemical Workers' Union was described as a "real communist cell acting by all possible means and at full force for to disseminate its idea to the São Paulo working class, in a conspiracy against the Constitution, for the overthrow of the government and for its takeover by the supporters of Moscow and Peking." Chemical worker militants were accused of involvement in the project aimed at implanting a so-called "Unionist Republic" in Brazil. The leadership, considered "enemies of the nation," were accused of having opened the doors of the union to "persons who were good friends in whom they absolutely trusted" whom the workers themselves would not have known, but who were linked with the Brazilian Communist Party. The objective, the political police alleged, was to make the workers' organization into an instrument of the Communist Party to exercise an "inglorious conspiratorial task, with the aim of handing the country over to the dominion of a foreign power, whose politics are an attack against individual liberties and exploit and enslaves people."

The investigation carried out in the headquarters of the Union would have uncovered an "abundance of proof" that the leadership, classified as "highly dangerous elements to the social order," would have acted in the service of communist interests. In a highly dramatic tone, the police inquest accused the union leadership of embezzling workers' contributions and applying these funds to "subversive acts." According to the investigators who made this report, the union leaders, in acting as if they were veritable "owners" of the union, manipulated "workers' money, which they had earned through their sweat, blood, sacrifice and tears, although in an honest and decent way." For the political police, the material apprehended in the organization's headquarters and the oversight carried out by the Regional Police Precinct for Workers of São Paulo (Delegacia Regional do Trabalho de São Paulo, DRT) proved these accusations. All of the union leaders accused in the investigation were placed under preventative detention.

With the union leadership forced out of their positions, the old, known "*pelegos*" of the chemical workers returned. Reynaldo dos Santos and Luiz Gonzaga Braga, *interventores* – employees designated by the federal government to intervene in the union – in 1947, assumed control of the Chemical Workers' Union. They accused the deposed leadership of having committed the crimes of bad administration, corruption, and negligence that caused the

physical infrastructure of the union property to become dilapidated. They alleged, more specifically, that the leadership had stolen approximately nine million *cruzeiros*. A part of this amount, they complained, had been spent on activities judged “foreign to union activities,” such as payments for trips abroad taken by union leaders, particularly to Moscow, and the printing of pamphlets and flyers. According to the *interventores*, the flight of members of the deposed leadership and of other important groups of chemical workers’ leaders was the strongest proof that these people had been involved in illicit acts.⁹ The *interventores* also sought to convince the few members present in an assembly that took place in October of 1964 of the supposed gravity of the union’s financial situation. On that occasion, the *interventor* Luiz Gonzaga Braga asked workers for a 5% increase in their contributions to the union, which would be received in the first month of a collective agreement in order to help create equilibrium the organizations accounts. According to the records from this meeting, the workers who were present “came out plainly in favor of the proposal that was presented.”¹⁰

The leadership of the Plastic Workers Union, an organization that had separated from the Chemical Workers’ Union in the 1950s, also suffered from repression.¹¹ The union’s president, Miguel Pereira Lima, had to leave the country in 194, having been arrested five years later.¹² The *interventor* of the Ministry of Labor, José Augusto Júnior, entered in his place. The new president had already been a member of the union leadership as secretary in the 1950s. In the first gathering of the plastic workers after the coup on November 8, 1964, the *interventor* warned the 117 members that were present that he would not tolerate any subject other than the order of the day. From that moment on, it was prohibited to speak of religion, political ideology, and, above all, workers were not allowed to “attack the constituted powers.”¹³

Likewise, the collective agreements debated in the Chemical Workers’ Union after the intervention came to be carried out with the bosses behind closed doors. The assemblies emptied out, and members sought the union only to request specific assistance. Yet the *interventores*’ tenure was not without resistance from the trade, and they encountered difficulties in their endeavors to gain workers’ trust. Workers pressured the new board to negotiate with management. Two months after the coup, the Brazilian Communist Party attempted to reorganize themselves and to understand the “error” that their own leadership had supposedly committed. In a document apprehended by the political police (Deops), the Party registered that that the working classes had

repudiated the coup and that the May Day celebrations had been a “true failure and an evident manifestation of the rejection of the current government.”¹⁴

A little while later, in September 1964, it was suspected that Manoel Mantonhani, the former director of the Chemical Workers’ Union who had been identified as a “a fully active communist,” would be putting together a slate to run in the elections in the Union. For the political police, the communists were exercising their activities in a subterranean form. Mantonhani, like other militants in the Party, would have been observed distributing manifestos that were clandestinely passed from one person’s hands to the next. The pamphlets would have been in circulation in the bathrooms and entryways of factories and on the sidewalks in front of union headquarters. There were complaints that he also had been mounting a campaign against the Castelo Branco government.¹⁵ These small yet courageous actions, such as the circulation of pamphlets, clandestine meetings, participation in May Day demonstrations, and attempts to reoccupy the unions indicate that many workers sought to understand the new historical conjuncture, to find the mean to reorganized, and to get around the repression installed soon after the coup.

The persecution of the leaders and militants of the trade union movement brought many to choose to flee. In March 1965, the assistant chief (*delegado-adjunto*) of the political policing unit (Deops), Adipe Abmussi, requested the preventative detention of eight leaders of the Chemical Workers’ Union: Adelço de Almeida, taken as a fugitive, Floriano Dezen, José Ferreira da Silva, Gabriel Alves Viana, Antônio Pereira da Mata, Júlio Ávila, Fidelcino Queiróz dos Santos e Manoel Mantonhani.¹⁶

The president forced out of the Union, Adelço de Almeida, remained underground between 1964-1967. During this period, he later described how he participated in the PCB dissidence under the leadership of Carlos Marighella. Yet he stated that he did not participate in the armed struggle, alleging that at that time he was rather well known, both within the movement and outside it, in addition to disagreeing with the various “fissures” occurring in left organizations. For Almeida, his entrance in the armed struggle would have exposed the group, since, if “he were to fall,” he argued, “lot of other people would fall, too.” In addition, he had managed to go three years without having been arrested, he added. Having made this decision, Almeida began to seek work, but he was not able to find a job in a factory. He found other means of making a living, however, selling books, for example, with the publisher Editora Brasiliense, which had been founded by Caio Prado Junior.¹⁷

Other trade unionists also went through enormous difficulty to find new work. When Antônio Pereira da Mata, leader of the Chemical Workers, tried to get his old job back at the Nitro Química company, management rejected him. He did manage, however, to negotiate an indemnity for having been fired and received his benefits and even received a letter of recommendation. In his view, this outcome was only possible thanks to his trajectory as a laborer, and to his being known as a “good worker.”¹⁸

THE RETURN OF UNION ELECTIONS

Like most labor organizations that went through a government intervention, voting to choose a new board for the Chemical Workers’ Union, after the Castello Branco government permitted the return of union elections, but this did not happen without tensions and internal disputes. Scheduled to occur in September 1965, two electoral slates were made up. The blues slate was headed by Antônio Cyprian da Silva and Reynaldo dos Santos (then the interventor). The green slate, by contrast, contained names that were then still unknown in the union movement. They had been recruited by members of the board who had been forced out of Power. The objective was to seek out names of people who were not registered by the police, thus composing an opposition slate to that of the interventors.

Waldomiro Macedo, a worker in the Nitro Química plant, was one of these yet-unknown names. According to his testimony, he was recruited by militants of the PCB in his place of work. The meetings, assisted by the Party, were carried out clandestinely and in different locations, in order to get around repression.¹⁹ To the distaste of the authorities at the Ministry of Labor and those in favor of maintaining the state interventors in power, the green slate won the election. For Macedo, who assumed the position of treasurer of the organization, his slate’s electoral victory had been possible thanks to workers’ strong rejection of state intervention in the union.²⁰

For instance, Macedo narrated what transpired in the Legal Department of the Union during the administration of the state interventors. According to him, in that period when a worker approached the headquarters of the organization to initiate proceedings to redress a labor dispute, the lawyers posed numerous questions – in such a way as to make it difficult for the complainant to carry the case forward – in stark contrast with the era in which the organization was led by militants of the communist party. At the beginning of the 1960s, Macedo explained, under the old leadership “the worker arrived and

proceedings were initiated right away. The company would fire someone, and they thought up a story right away and came out swinging.” But, from the workers’ perspective, the new leaders were far less willing to fight for workers’ rights. Macedo continues, “The interventores did a kind of triage. The workers said that [these new leaders] were on the other side.”

For the Deops investigators, the victorious electoral slate represented a threat to the “order” established by the military. It was not only Deops who feared that the communist and nationalist leaders would return to the unions. In the early years of the Castello Branco administration, observers and supporters of the regime, including some labor attachés and labor organizations from the United States, in addition to the Ministry of Labor, expressed concern about distancing themselves from these more radical labor leaders. Thus, such organizations as the American Institute for the Development of Free Unionism (Iadesil) and the Cultural Labor Institute (ICT) invested heavily in the training of new leaders who would be committed to supporting the new government and who valued what they called “free unionism,” a model promoted by trade unionism in the US during the Cold War (Corrêa, 2013). Nonetheless, although at that moment Waldomiro Macedo represented the danger that militant communists might return to the leadership of the union, he remained as the head of the organization for most of the period of the dictatorship, pacifying management and the state and keeping chemical workers away from the organization.

In a Deops document dated from August 19, 1964 based on reports from unidentified “collaborators”, police registered the actions of “elements directly linked to the Communist Party” in the factories of the city of São Paulo and the surrounding, working-class suburban area known as the “ABC.” In the Trol S/S toy factory located in Vila Anchieta, communist militants were seen having conversations with workers. The objective, this document asserted, was “to determine who the innocent individuals were of whom they could take advantage.” In another factory, also in the plastics industry, located in the Santo Amaro neighborhood in the South Zone of the city of São Paulo, an informant denounced the actions of three militants. These three individuals, the source emphasized, “were so active that they were worth ten.” They were: Adão José da Silva, Benedito Apolônio Fonseca, and Anísio Volpe. The first of these was said to have attended secret meetings of the Party and to have been responsible for transmitting information to the other two. Proof of these supposed “subversive acts,” the police reported, could be found in the hands of

the interventor of the Union, who had taken a photograph of the documents and provided the negatives to the informant.²¹

In the company Atma Paulista, located in the Lapa neighborhood in the West Zone of São Paulo, Deops investigators were notified that the militants Raimundo Coelho dos Santos, João Ferreira das Neves, and Osmar Miguel de Souza, promoted “communist agitation” in the factories of the chemical and plastics sector, under the command of the director of the deposed Plastics Union, Miguel Pereira Lima. Lima was accused of preaching at the union meetings “whatever the Party ordered him to.” According to the accusations, the leader had been a fugitive since April 1, the last day of the coup. He had made contact with his family several times, according to what his accuser claimed to have overheard in a conversation between the accused and his wife. Lima’s wife had been instructed to say that her husband had been arrested, to avoid having people trying to find him.

Deops also registered the accusation that the worker Paulo Benicio de Oliveira was determined to “catechize” the employees of Indústrias Reunidas Balila, located in the neighborhood called Brooklin in the south zone of São Paulo. According to this denunciation, which clearly appears to have been made by an employee of the union, an “agitator” needed to have a “lesson in morality,” as the “collaborator” explained to the police:

[Paulo Benicio de Oliveira] is from the extreme left, and when interrogated he tries to claim that he is from the right, but in reality he’s from the left. He wants to do away with the Union interventor and with me as well, and he’s taking action to remove us from here and in the next elections to enter into the union leadership himself. He intends, once his is here, to invite the reds here again for each of them to take back their positions.²²

The collaboration between agents of Deops and interventors/employees of the unions appear to have been quite advantages for all parties. On the one hand, the investigators had access and control of the unionists’, militants’, and workers’ movements. On the other hand, interventors sought to preserve their recently achieved positions in the organizations, making use of such strategies as denunciations to prevent the return of the former leaders. This climate of denunciations powerfully contributed to the spread of unease and mutual distrust between the workers and rank and file militants within the factories, who feared the political persecution and the loss of their jobs.

THE EFFECTS OF LABOR POLITICS ON THE CHEMICAL SECTOR

Although Castello Branco had given assurances that labor politics in his new government would be completely favorable to workers' social rights, his actions quickly showed his stance to be prejudicial to the working classes. To carry forth his economic development plan called the Government Economic Action Program (PAEG), three measures were adopted to halt inflation: wage decreases, intervention in the decisions made during collective negotiations in the labor courts (Justiça do Trabalho), and the repression of the trade union movement.

With respect to labor, the installation of the civilian-military government bore a direct impact on the way the Ministry of Labor and the Social Security Office (MTPS) functioned. Concerning collective bargaining for example, the new law regulating labor action, the Strike Act (Lei da Greve), law number 4330 passed on June 1, 1964, attempted to make it as difficult as possible to categorize work stoppages as legal. Strikes carried out to force the payment of unpaid wages and improvement of work conditions were permitted, but the burdensome bureaucratic channels that the unions had to navigate made it hard for them to achieve recognition in the labor courts of the legality of these actions (Costa 1997, p.136). Such measures drastically diminished the number of movements in which workers could claim their rights.

After the coup, however, it was common for workers in the chemical and plastics industries to vote in favor of strikes, even though they knew that these actions would not occur. It was with Law number 4725, passed on July 13, 1965, that new rules for legal proceedings against collective action (*dissídios*) and complicated calculations to determine salary readjustments, the threat of a work stoppage became a strategy broadly used by labor unions with the intention of accelerating the judicial process.

To compensate for measures taken to keep salaries from rising, the Castello Branco government announced some initiatives that supposedly aimed to benefit workers, such as the construction of housing projects financed by the National Housing Bank (BNH) and the law that permitted the monetary correction of indemnification payments authorized by the labor courts. Late in 1966, the government also announced as a benefit the implantation of a system based on the Guarantee Fund for Time of Service (FGTS), which it offered in exchange for the previous policy that ensured job stability that a worker could gain based on his or her time in service. The introduction of the FGTS and the loss of job stability, however, dealt a new blow to workers.

Something that workers interpreted as an important achievement, the right to job stability after 10 years of service in the same company, had allowed many employees to fight for their rights without the risk of being fired. Removing the obligation from management to maintain the contract of a worker who had gained stability after a certain number of years of service caused an increase in worker turnover and limited labor militancy.

Chemical and plastic workers, like workers in other industries, reacted against the loss of stability. In the Chemical Workers’ Union assemblies, members put pressure on the leadership and suggested that they organize a petition against the loss of this right.²³ Years later, a study carried out by the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (Dieese), published in 1971, showed the impact of the FGST system on the firing of workers in the chemical industry. Based on the results of the collective action of the Union, the survey concluded that the FGTS, from 1967 on, brought about a significant increase in the dismissal of chemical, pharmaceutical, and plastics workers in the years that followed.

Between 1968 and 1970, the number of persons fired in the sector increased by 75%. The study also observed that 87% of workers employed during 1969 had fewer than 10 years of service, and 68% of the total had fewer than 3 years of work in the same company. In the plastics sector, stable employees were practically inexistent, while the petroleum industry in São Paulo still held the highest number of stable workers, 41%.²⁴ In this period, the supply of jobs in the chemical, plastic, and pharmaceutical sector also decreased. This was due to increased automation and also to the large number of extra hours during which workers were obligated to work to make up for their low wages.²⁵

Chemical workers also debated in their union assemblies the wage policies of the Castello Branco government. To gain the support of the membership, union leaders complained about the decrees and laws designed to present organized action on the part of laborers. They also criticized the wage policies and the ways in which these were being carried out by the government. In the assemblies, union leaders said that downward wage adjustments represented a “true deterioration of wages.”²⁶ Nonetheless, in their campaigns to raise wages, leaders advised the workers in their sector to demand that any salary adjustments follow the indices indicated by the National Council of Wage Police, acting together with workers in accordance with collective bargaining agreements. Taking issue with the way the negotiations carried by the union leadership were going, chemical workers asserted that the data provided by state agencies did not correspond to economic reality. In fact, the minister of

the Treasury, Delfim Netto, later admitted that official inflation data had been manipulated in 1973 and 1974, indicating that this practice might have been utilized by the regime in the earlier periods, as well (Almeida, 2011, p.133).

In 1967, a period when the workers' movement began to organize itself again, 1,365 members of the Chemical Workers' Union went to the organization to elect new leaders. The blue electoral slate, headed by Augusto Lopes, had the support of the then president of the organization, Waldomiro Macedo, who also was a member of group, and won a major victory with more than 90% of the votes. Other leaders from the previous administration remained in their positions.²⁷ Soon after that, some recently appointed trade unionists became involved in a corruption scandal. Those involved were Augusto Lopes from the Chemical Workers' Union, and Alcir Nogueira, leader of the Chemical Workers' Union of Santo André, in addition to other leaderships from different entities. They were accused of having received tips from the US labor organization Iadesil and the International Federation of Chemical and Petroleum Workers. The accusation was made by Trajano José das Neves, the president of the Federation of Chemical Workers, an old leader of the Union of Chemical Workers of Santo André, known for his "*pelega*" activities – in other words, his cooptation by the government.

Although the infraction was never proven, news of his corruption scandal spread through all major newspapers, the case having been followed directly by the minister of Labor, Jarbas Passarinho (1967-1969) (Corrêa, 2013, p.170). When Augusto Lopes had to explain the situation to the union members, he alleged that he had been the victim of slander by his "enemies in the union."²⁸ Apparently, this was actually an internal dispute between leaders of the chemical workers of the ABC region in the suburbs of São Paulo and those from the city of São Paulo, who battled over the highest positions in the union.

The investigation of the corruption case in the *paulista* unions took place during a period when a new phase in the history of the Brazilian civilian-military regime was beginning. For workers, 1968 was marked not only by their organizing a series of events by which they resisted the authoritarian politics of the regime, but also by the intensification of repression by the passing of Institutional Act number 5 (AI-5) on December 13 of that year. Even the union leaders known as "pelegos" and supporters of the regime came to criticize the labor politics of the Costa e Silva presidential administration, and they organized the Inter-Union Anti-Wage Adjustment Movement (MIA). This was an attempt to mobilize the unions and to put pressure on the government to adopt a more flexible set of policies to contain salaries. In an assembly

carried out at the Chemical Workers’ Union on July 5, 1968, the president Augusto Lopes spoke of the creation of the MIA to the workers that were present. He explained that the Movement received a great deal of criticism by the federal government and that it had been organized to “show the government the problems with law number 4725, the so-called ‘wage adjustment law (*lei do arrocho*),’ and with the continuation of this law and without the right to strike, no worker will be able to survive.”²⁹

According to Fernando Almeida, these conservative leaderships saw in the Movement a bargaining chip in negotiations with the authorities (Almeida, 1982, p.22). The opposition electoral slates – formed by old leaders of the PCB and of the General Command of Workers (CGT), a union organization that was demobilized after the coup, and also by new militants who initiated the opposition within the unions – had participated in the MIA.³⁰ It is likely that “pelego” union leaders, in seeking strategies to maintain their positions, saw movements like the MIA as an opportunity to move closer to the “base” and at the same time to forge relationships with the Ministry of Labor and with employers. Thus, they attempted to play a “double” game, inciting workers to fight for their rights, and at the same time attending public assemblies and private meetings with representatives of management and members of the Ministry.

With the strict repression of the union movement undertaken by the governments of Castello Branco and Costa e Silva, workers stopped attending union meetings. Periodic arrests, interrogations, and torture, later systematized by the agents of repression, intimidated workers. The first assembly of the Chemical Workers of São Paulo carried out before the passage of AI-5 was limited to the discussion of only of an increase in the monthly membership fee.³¹ In one assembly in 1969, the Chemical Workers’ Union had just 14 workers. Still, that same year, the Chemical Workers’ Union was called to a meeting to deliberate the outbreak of a strike. Around 150 employees attended, a number that is especially expressive if one considers the climate of repression, but that is insufficient to make up the quorum defined by the Strike Law number 4330.³²

WORKERS AND THE ARMED STRUGGLE: VIRGÍLIO GOMES DA SILVA

If the worlds of labor have been little explored by researchers interested in understanding the period of the Civilian-Military Dictatorship, one could say that even less attention has been paid the participation of workers in the

armed struggle and its relationships with the militants coming from other social sectors.³³ Similarly, these studies have assigned little importance to the specificities of union and worker militancy and its connections to other social movements. How many workers participated in direct actions against the military regime without, however, having been identified as worker-militants in the collective memory of the regime? The trajectory of Virgílio Gomes da Silva, a militant worker associated with the Chemical Workers' Union in the pre-1964 era and persecuted by the Dictatorship in the years that followed, furnishes useful evidence of the nature of these relationships.

While most leaders restricted their action to the unions and the working class sought means to survive the factory exploitation to which it was submitted, other, some workers experienced more radical options for fighting the authoritarian regime. This was the case for Virgílio, who today stands as one of the most important symbols of the struggle and of resistance in the chemical sector. Born on August 15, 1933 in Rio Grande do Norte, Virgílio was another one of the thousands of northeastern migrants who chose the city of São Paulo as their destination. While still very young, Virgílio passed through numerous jobs until he arrived at the Chemical Workers' Union, where he worked as a bookkeeper in the sub-headquarters in São Miguel (Pimenta; Teixeira, 2009).

In the organization, Virgílio became politicized, and he began to develop into a militant. He participated in the great strikes that took place in the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s. With the outbreak of the coup, Virgílio had to flee but was arrested for his political and union activities. When he was freed in October 1964, he went into exile in Uruguay. He soon returned to Brazil, however, with the objective of taking up his political activities again. Among the unionists, he was known as a "great fighter" and was admired even by the "pelegos" who were then in control of the union leadership after the coup.³⁴

A little while later, Virgílio joined the so-called Communist Group of São Paulo, created by Marighella, which generated the National Liberating Action (ALN). In São Miguel, Virgílio led a dissidence in the PCB. It was then that he came to use the alias "Jonas" and opted for armed action to combat the Dictatorship. His choice also implied the necessity to lead a clandestine life, far from his family, just like the many others who opted for this manner of fighting the military regime. Virgílio was one of the first militants of the ALN sent to Cuba for military training, and he remained there until 1968. Among the various "expropriations" in which he participated, Virgílio became best known for the largest and most controversial armed actions: the kidnapping of the US Ambassador, Charles Burke Elbrick, in 1969.³⁵

In the film, *O que é isso companheiro?*, released in English as *Four Days in September*, directed by Bruno Barreto and based on the book written by Fernando Gabeira, the way in which Virgílio was portrayed angered his comrades and those who knew him well, as well as specialists on this topic.³⁶ In the film, Virgílio appears as an ignorant man, authoritarian and truculent with his colleagues. As Marcelo Ridenti observed, in order to create a character that would contrast with the naïve militant, the revolutionary journalist inspired by Gabeira himself, the filmmakers created the role of the “supervillain based on the militant Jonas [Virgílio], who has all of the defects of the Russian bandits in films of the Cold War: calculating, insensitive, treacherous, and resentful of the youth...” (Reis Filho, 1997, p.28).

Virgílio was captured on September 29, 1969 by agents of Operação Bandeirantes (Oban), a paramilitary information and investigation center established by the Brazilian Army. He was taken by the team of captain Benoni de Arruda Albernaz to the headquarters of the DOI Codi, another organ of repression. There, Virgílio was brutally tortured. His wife and his brother Francisco Gomes da Silva were forced to witness all of the barbarity that he suffered. The violence was so intense that he did not survive two uninterrupted hours of torture. According to a report sent to the bishops of Brazil in 1973, his blood was seen as the “glory of the torturers” and displayed for the other political prisoners as one of the greatest achievements of the military personnel from that unit. His body has still not been found today. It is possible that he was clandestinely buried in the Vila Formosa cemetery, in the west zone of the city of São Paulo (Sindicato... 29 set. 2009).

Yet, as we know, Virgílio was not the only worker tortured and killed by the organs of repression of the Dictatorship. Another example involves the case of Olavo Hansen, a chemical worker in the ABC region of São Paulo and a member of the Trotskyist Revolutionary Workers’ Party (PORT), who was arrested during the celebrations of May Day in 1970. He was accused of distributing flyers considered “subversive.” He died of renal failure caused by the ingestion of a highly toxic chemical product, after having been subjected to interminable torture sessions. (Pereira Neto, 2013). Aloísio Palhano, another example, was a bank clerk and union leader of his trade. He was removed from his position as soon as the military came to power and was eventually persecuted by the organs of government repression. He went into exile in Cuba, but he returned to Brazil in 1970 clandestinely, joining the organization Popular Revolutionary Vanguard (VPR). There are reports that he was arrested in 1971, in São Paulo. His body, to this day, has not been found.³⁷

In addition to these cases, Joaquim Alencar de Seixas, who worked in the mechanical section of Varig airlines, was arrested with his son, Ivan Akselrud Seixas, who was 16 years of age at the time. Joaquim was assassinated in 1971 within the DOI-Codi building. In many reports about deaths and disappearances carried out by the military regime, the name Joaquim Seixas does not appear as identified as a worker, but only as a militant in the armed struggle. IN 1964, he was an employee of Petrobrás and was a militant in the union movement. Persecuted, Seixas had his house staked out several times, as also occurred with his comrades in the struggle. He was fired without receiving any indemnification and faced difficulties finding a new job, since he name was registered in the infamous “black lists” created and circulated among companies. Many other workers lived through the same situation.

“PELEGOS” AND WORKERS’ DEMANDS

Like other workers’ organization in rural areas and in cities in the course of the 1970s, the leadership of the Chemical Workers’ Union sought to attract workers by offering them different types of assistance, like doctor’s and dental visits, summer camps, scholarships, and sewing courses. Another way of convincing workers of the importance of the union was to attach the organization to the offering of public and bureaucratic services. The investment in offering assistance, however, was not sufficient to expand the number of union members. In 1970s, a period of major expansion in the chemical and pharmaceutical industry in the São Paulo region, the president of the Chemical Workers’ Union, Waldomiro Macedo, called on the 40,000 workers in the sector to participate in the union’s activities. Only 7,000 were members.

With the installation of new factories, most of them multinational, the ranks of chemical and pharmaceutical workers grew considerably. Even so, workers participated little in the political life of the union. Waldomiro Macedo, however, decided, with relative autonomy, on where the extra resources would be spent, and most of these resources were directed toward the expansion of social assistance activities of the organization. In addition, the high turnover in the chemical sector was a disincentive for workers to join the union.

Since the unions were prevented from claiming wage increases beyond the indexes imposed by the government, the complaints focused on work conditions. In 1971, the union launched a campaign for hazard pay, considering that the largest problems in the chemical sector were caused by numerous substances that were dangerous for workers in contact with them. Hazard pay was assured

by the Consolidation of Labor Laws (CLT) and varied according the degree of danger involved in the tasks carried out by the worker. The union encouraged workers in the sector to seek out the union in order to denounce the terrible conditions in their workplaces. The claims for their right to hazard pay was a demand frequently directed from the Juridical Department of the Union to the Ministry of Labor. The benefit would be delayed for years and even a decade, however, as occurred with the workers in United Industries Francisco Matarazzo, which waited for a decision from the labor court for 10 years.³⁸

Another right that workers called for in the 1970s was job security for pregnant woman. Workers in the sector demanded that this benefit would be in effect from the moment she notified her employer of her pregnancy to 6 months after the birth. In an assembly that met on September 13, 1974, the organization’s lawyer Almir Pazzianotto, later the minister of Labor (1985-1988) during the José Sarney presidential administration, spoke with his associates about the importance of women in the life of the union. According to him, this was evident in the number of women present at that very meeting. For the lawyer, female workers were not just “an element of adornment and beauty”; women should have an active role in the organizing workers in the sector.³⁹ During that period, women represented more than half of the workers in the chemical industry. They confronted all sorts of problems, such as receiving lower wages than men who performed the same jobs as them, the dearth of daycare services for their children, and the lack of time to take care of domestic tasks and work at the same time. For this reason, most women workers did not manage to participate in union activities.

Among the varied bureaucratic tasks and providing assistance to workers, the chemical workers’ organization also concerned itself with organizing workers’ congresses, many of which took place on the beaches of the coast of the state of São Paulo. The events attracted a great deal of interest from the agents of Deops, who most often described what took place at these labor conferences with in a calm and unperturbed manner. Union leaders became involved in the construction of a new union headquarters, which was inaugurated in 1977. Later, during the process of redemocratization in Brazil, the same location became the stage for meetings and important gatherings for social movements.

THE FORMATION OF THE CHEMICAL WORKERS’ UNION OPPOSITION

Repudiating the dictatorial regime and the exploitation of their bosses, some activists decided to participate in the life of the union to seek greater

representation in conflicts with their employers and to reoccupy the space that the organization had lost since 1964. Having forged ties with Catholic Base Communities (Comunidades Eclesiais de Base da Igreja Católica) and the variety of social movements that emerged in the periphery of the city of São Paulo in the second half of the 1970s, these militants had a critical vision of the trade union tradition from before 1964. Unionization, just like active participation in assemblies, were the forms that these workers found to show their disenchantment with the performance of the union's board. Gradually, dissonant voices began to be heard in the assemblies. In the middle of 1978, one can observe certain changes in the relationship between the leadership and the membership. From this time forward, assemblies ceased to be mere bureaucratic rituals. For Aloizio Marcadante, 1978 can be understood as the moment when the union struggle "began its rebirth in the Chemical Workers' Union, thanks to the growing participation of workers and the emergence of a group of new militants that would form the Opposition" (Marcadante, 1985).

Curiously, despite ideological differences and the rejection of the union structure, this new militancy utilized a strategy similar to that of the pre-1964 PCB, acting "from the inside" of the union to fight against the "pelega" board and making the very union structure into space of struggle. Inspired by the wave of strikes organized in the late 1970s by the Metalworkers' Union of São Bernardo do Campo led by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, or simply Lula, working men and women from the chemical and pharmaceutical sector came to organized themselves both in and outside the union. Labor militancy was constructed and organized on the basis of the social relationships that grew in neighborhoods and in the course of daily life of workers outside their factories. Interfactory committees, organized in the south zone of São Paulo, are an example of this type of articulation, identifying combative workers from a variety of different trades. In this process, the opposition formed by the metalworkers' union of São Paul played a decisive role because, among other reasons, many metal factories were located near chemical factories. This geographical proximity made viable the intense exchange between workers in both of these sectors (Batistoni, 2010).

Waldomiro Macedo, feeling pressure from young militants who, little by little, had been gaining the support of workers in factories in different regions, sought to co-opt these new leaderships as a strategy to maintain their positions. The board thus felt an obligation to take more progressive positions and to allow space for the participation of these dissidents in the union. Under the impact of the great strike carried out by metalworkers in the ABC region and

in the capital city, the board of the Chemical Workers’ Union came to criticize the supposed apathy of workers in that industry. In an assembly carried out on October 24, 1978, August Lopes declared that he was “surprised by the small number of members present at the meeting, at precisely this phase in which workers are more aware of their rights.” The leader demanded better salaries and cited as an example the struggle of workers in the ABC. He then criticized the lack of freedom to unionize, given that the legislation did not allow the board of the union to pass a proposal for a work stoppage alleging that their decision had to be called for by the membership.⁴⁰

In 1978, the union’s leadership completely changed their position with respect to the National Confederation of Workers in Industry (CNTI), presided over by Ari Campista, one of the greatest “pelegos” in the history of the labor movement. After decades in an alliance with the largest and most powerful labor organization in the country, the union eventually denounced the organization for its collaboration with the dictatorial government.⁴¹ In incorporating certain rules created by the union opposition movements, the leadership of the Chemical Workers’ Union sought to maintain control of the organization and to minimize the role of the young leaderships that had begun to gain importance. In repeatedly using the pronoun “we,” the union leadership wanted to reinforce the sense of collectivity and unity in the organization, trying to avoid any kind of dissidence and to attract workers from the Opposition. During this period, the newspaper of the organization came to publish more combative content vis-à-vis abusive bosses.

In April 1979, the newspaper *The Chemical Worker* could not ignore the strike movement lead by Lula, which broke out in factories throughout the ABC region. In a story entitled, “The power is great with the machine stopped” accompanied by a photograph of Lula delivering a speech to the workers, the union declared its support for the strike and participated in public acts of protest against the intervention of the organization of Metalworkers of São Bernardo do Campo.⁴² The assemblies took on a permanent character with the objective of debating questions related to workers in the industry and the labor movement, only failing to carry out only the bureaucratic procedures as they were formerly done.

During the process of the softening of the civilian-military regime, the leadership eventually adopted most of the campaigns of the workers’ struggle. These demands came connected to the movement for the redemocratization of the country. The union came to support, for example, the fight for amnesty for political prisoners. In the following years, the Chemical Workers’

Opposition continued to grow. Each year, the group recruited a greater number of sympathizers and allies, timidly winning small internal disputes within the union and organizing in factories until, finally, managing to organize a slate and defeating Waldomiro Macedo in 1983.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis of the historical trajectory of the Chemical Workers' Union has allowed us to observe the actions of trade unionists who were persecuted after the installation of the civilian-military government and the process of the return of union elections in 1965. In this period, the efforts to that workers and PCB militants undertook to reorganize themselves to reoccupy the trade union organizations at the beginning of the Casello Branco administration are particularly noteworthy. To understand this process, one can observe the importance of what were known as "small tasks," such as sending around flyers or participation in clandestine meetings, for instance, considering the risks that these militants ran in their struggle against authoritarianism and police repression. When their names came to appear on the "black lists" they hardly were able to exercise their trades. Beyond the financial difficulties of being black listed, these workers had to confront the risks of torture and death, as occurred with Virgílio Gomes da Silva.

Nonetheless, we still need to know how many men and women workers suffered, either directly or indirectly, the abuses of the dictatorial regime, and what form these abuses took. A systematic accounting of the relationship between the economic policies of the Dictatorship and authoritarianism within private companies, as well as the exponential growth in the number of workplace accidents and health problems, remains to be carried out. Recent publications, as well as the events organized to debate the 50 year anniversary of the coup, make clear the dearth of analyses that treat workers' reactions to the dictatorial regime and that take into consideration the choices workers made based on the conditions to which they were subjected.

Based on the reports of the political police, interviews with labor leaders, and documentation from the union, one can also observe workers' reactions to the economic and labor policies of the Castello Branco government and workers' rejection of the government interventores within the union. These analyses can contribute to an effort to deconstruct the conventional idea, commonly shared among different political groups, that workers did not react to the civilian-military coup. In examining the principal aspects of the labor

policy initiated by the Castello Branco government, I sought to analyze the impact of these changes in the labor conditions in the chemical industry, showing how the implantation of the FGTS led to the firing of thousands of workers in that sector, in addition to generating a high turnover rate and distancing workers from the trade union movement. This process was even more accentuated with Brazil’s economic development measures that culminated with the “economic miracle,” known in workers’ bitter memory by the famous quotation by Delfim Neto, the minister of the Treasury during the Medici administration (1969-1973), “to make the cake bigger to be able then to share it.”

Finally, one can observe the actions of the union led by the “pelegos” after the coup and even until the end of the 1970s, demonstrating the how members’ relationship with the organization developed. This research thus seeks to add to the few works in the Brazilian historiography on the role of these leaders, showing how they were exposed to pressure from base movements and from workers who were dissatisfied with the direction that social and economic policy has taking. From the second half of the 1970s on, the calm and tightly controlled routine that characterized the union’s time under its president Waldomiro Macedo began to change because of the actions of young militants and workers who strategically decided to associate themselves with the union and occupy the bureaucratic apparatus to promote labor organizing within their sector. At this time of internal disputes within the union, which did not necessarily take the form of open conflict, one can recognize that the old leadership tried to appropriate the movement as a way of guaranteeing that they would remain in their positions. Nonetheless, this strategy did not prevent the Opposition from continuing to fight for the organization with their electoral slate with which they were able to compete with the old leadership. The victory of the Opposition in 1983 marked a new phase in the history of the organization of *paulista* chemical workers.

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NOTES

¹ A preliminary version of this article can be found in the commemorative book, *Químicos de São Paulo: 80 anos de lutas e conquistas (1933-2013)*, 2013.

² I use the expressions “civilian-military coup” and “civilian-military dictatorship” to emphasize the participation of civilian sectors in the process through which João Goulart’s government was destroyed, as well as the activities of groups within the ministries and administrative organs of the regime. I am thus following the mode of thinking introduced by the classical study on this subject by DREIFUSS (1981), also considering the more recent historiographical debates provoked by the researchers Daniel Aarão Reis, Carlos Fico, Samanta Quadrat and Denise Rolemborg, among others, although I believe that these concepts still call for greater definition.

³ Among the points raised on the Working Group’s research agenda are: 1) an initial inquiry into which unions suffered invasions and government intervention during the coup and the period that followed; 2) an investigation into how many and which union leaders were removed from their jobs (*cassados/as*) by the dictatorship; 3) which and how many union leaders suffered immediate arrest immediately after the coup; 4) an inquiry into the destruction of the documentary record and the physical patrimony of union organizations; 5) an investigation of arrests, torture, and assassinations of union leaders and labor militants, both urban and rural; 6) the connections between companies and repression, among other things. See: <http://trabalhadoresgtnv.org.br/>; Accessed on March 10, 2014.

⁴ A representative example of the dearth of analyses on the trade union movement and the role of workers in studies dedicated to the period of the Civilian-Military Dictatorship can

be observed in an edited volume recently organized REIS, RIDENTI and MOTTA (2014). The only article dedicated to the topic in this volume concerns the new unionism period.

⁵ The work of NEGRO (2004) is one of the few studies that analyze the actions of unions and workers beyond the strikes of 1968 and 1978. See also: RODRIGUES, 1998.

⁶ There is an extensive bibliography on the period of new unionism. See: MARONI, 1982; ABRAMO, 2000; RODRIGUES, 1999.

⁷ On the history of the Sindicato dos Químicos and of workers in that sector in São Paulo, see: TROYANO, 1978; FONTES, 1997; 2008.

⁸ Autos de Inquérito Policial de 4 abr. 1964, anexado no prontuário de Floriano Dezen nº 113.931. APESP, fundo Deops, série prontuários. The two following paragraphs are based on the same source.

⁹ Ata da Assembleia Geral realizada em 21 jun. 1964. Centro de Documentação e Memória do Sindicato dos Químicos de São Paulo, livro 4, de mar. 1960 a jul. 1970.

¹⁰ Ata da Assembleia Geral realizada em 2 out. 1964.

¹¹ The organizations of Chemical and Plastics workers were unified again in 1994.

¹² In 1964, Pereira Lima was 45 years old, he was from Ceará and had a primary education. He was arrested in 1969. Prontuário Miguel Pereira Lima nº 87.809. APESP, fundo Deops, série prontuários.

¹³ Ata da Assembleia Geral Extraordinária do Sindicato dos Trabalhadores das Indústrias de Material Plástico, 8 nov. 1964. Centro de Documentação e Memória do Sindicato dos Químicos de São Paulo, livro de atas de assembleias geral extraordinária de 8 nov. 1964 a 19 out. 1980.

¹⁴ “Documento do PCB”, de maio de 1964, nº 30-C-1-16484. APESP, fundo Deops, série dossiês.

¹⁵ Report on Manuel Mantonhani, de 9 set. 1964, nº 30-C-1-16698. APESP, fundo Deops, série dossiês.

¹⁶ *O Estado de S. Paulo*, March 11, 1965, p.16.

¹⁷ Interview with Adelço de Almeida, by Paulo Fontes and Hélio da Costa on April 25, 1994. Personal archive of the interviewers, tape nº 3 A.

¹⁸ Interview of Antônio Pereira da Mata, by Paulo Fontes, March 15, 2000. Personal archive of the interviewer, tape nº 2 B.

¹⁹ Interview of Waldomiro Macedo, by Paulo Fontes, May 23, 2000. Personal archive of the interviewer, tape 1 B.

²⁰ *Idem*, tape 2 A.

²¹ Report on August 19, 1964 on “elementos ligados ao PC nas fábricas”, nº 30-C-1-16.695. APESP, fundo Deops, série dossiês. The following paragraphs are based on this same source.

²² *Idem*.

²³ Ata da Assembleia Geral Extraordinária do Sindicato dos Trabalhadores das Indústrias de Material Plástico, 20 fev. 1966. Centro de Documentação e Memória do Sindicato dos Químicos de São Paulo, livro 4 de atas de assembleias, de mar. 1960 a jul. 1970.

²⁴ Reporto on the survey by Dieese sent to Federação dos Trabalhadores Químicos and archived by Deops, documento nº 50-B-259-227. APESP, fundo Deops, série dossiês.

²⁵ One might say, however, that the impact of the political-economic actions with respect to chemical workers, brought about during the period know as the “economic miracle,” was similar to what took place with workers in other sectors. SINGER, 1977.

²⁶ Ata Assembleia Geral Extraordinária do Sindicato dos Trabalhadores das Indústrias de Material Plástico, 9 out. 1966.

²⁷ Ata da Assembleia Geral Extraordinária do Sindicato dos Trabalhadores das Indústrias de Material Plástico, 10 set. 1967.

²⁸ Ata da Assembleia Geral Extraordinária do Sindicato dos Trabalhadores das Indústrias de Material Plástico, 19 jan. 1968.

²⁹ Ata da Assembleia Geral Extraordinária do Sindicato dos Trabalhadores das Indústrias de Material Plástico, 5 jul. 1968.

³⁰ This was the beginning of the resurgence of the trade union movement in that region, which would culminate in the Osasco and Contagem strikes in Minas Gerais and the work stoppages of autoworkers in the greater ABC area. NEGRO, 2004, pp.237-269. Also see the classic study by WEFFORT, 1972.

³¹ Ata da Assembleia Geral Extraordinária do Sindicato dos Trabalhadores das Indústrias de Material Plástico, 24 jan. 1969.

³² Ata da Assembleia Geral Extraordinária do Sindicato dos Trabalhadores das Indústrias de Material Plástico, 26 fev. 1969.

³³ Among the most important studies on the armed struggle, see: REIS FILHO, 1990; RIDENTI, 1993; GORENDER, 1987.

³⁴ Interview with Waldomiro Macedo, cit.

³⁵ On the kidnapping of the US ambassador, see: DA-RIN, 2007.

³⁶ The film *O que é isso companheiro?* was released in 1997 and directed by Bruno Barreto, with a script based on the book of the same name Fernando Gabeira published in 1979. Another edition was released by Companhia das Letras in 2009.

³⁷ Dossiê Mortos e Desaparecidos Políticos no Brasil. Available on: www.desaparecidospoliticos.org.br/pessoa.php?id=49&m=3; Acesso em: 14 mar. 2014. This source was also used for the following paragraph.

³⁸ *O Trabalhador Químico*, n.27, abr. 1977, p.6.

³⁹ Ata da Assembleia Geral Extraordinária do Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Químicos, 13 set. 1974.

⁴⁰ Ata da Assembleia Geral Extraordinária do Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Químicos, 24 out. 1978.

⁴¹ *O Trabalhador Químico*, n.31, jul.-ago. 1978, p.9.

⁴² *O Trabalhador Químico*, n.34, abr. 1979, p.4.