



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Uruguayans general strike against the military government, 1984

January

1984

to: November

1984

**Country:** Uruguay

### Goals:

Plenario Intersindical de Trabajadores (PIT, Interunion Workers' Planarian) called the strikes to support demands for wage increases, union rights for public employees, freedom of political prisoners, and respect for democratic liberties.

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 028. Symbolic sounds › Banging pots
- 097. Protest strike › One-day strike
- 117. General strike

### Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 028. Symbolic sounds › Banging pots
- 097. Protest strike › One-day strike
- 117. General strike
- 182. Stay-in strike

### Methods in 3rd segment:

- 028. Symbolic sounds › Banging pots
- 097. Protest strike › One-day strike
- 117. General strike

### Methods in 4th segment:

- 028. Symbolic sounds › Banging pots

### Methods in 5th segment:

- 028. Symbolic sounds › Banging pots

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 028. Symbolic sounds › Banging pots

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Change

**Cluster:**

Democracy

Economic Justice

Human Rights

**Group characterization:**

- Union Workers

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Andres Toriani and Richard Read (representatives of the PIT), 2-3 other unidentified leaders (they went into hiding for fear of being arrested and their names were never released)

**Partners:**

Outlawed political parties of the Broad Front Coalition (the Socialists, Communists, and Christian Democrats), General Líber Seregni Mosquera (imprisoned leader of the Broad Front), opposition publications

**External allies:**

Legal political parties (Blanco, Colorado, and the Civil Union); Students' Social and Cultural Association for Public Education (ASCEEP)

**Involvement of social elites:**

Not Known

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- Broad Front

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

- ASCEEP
- Blanco Party
- Civil Union Party
- Colorado Party
- Gen. Seregni Mosquera

- opposition publications

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

**Groups in 6th Segment:**

**Segment Length:** *Approximately 2 months*

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

### **Opponents:**

General Gregorio Alvarez's military regime

### **Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

Not Known

### **Campaigner violence:**

Not Known

### **Repressive Violence:**

Riot police ejected strikers from workplaces where they were conducting stay-in strikes

## Success Outcome

### **Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**

5 points out of 6 points

### **Survival:**

1 point out of 1 points

### **Growth:**

3 points out of 3 points

### **Notes on outcomes:**

Many of the group's goals could only be reasonably met with a return to a democratic government. When this occurred in March of 1985, the new president, Juilo María Sanguinetti, was quick to reinstate the rights of unions and workers, free political prisoners, and reinstate democratic liberties. However, because the country was in such an economic recession, increased workers' wages did not occur until much later.

After the reestablishment of civil government in 1985, labor unions returned to their normal activities. The PIT changed its name to PIT-CNT as homage to the older group Convención Nacional de Trabajadores outlawed under the military junta. Today the PIT-CNT is the biggest labor union in Uruguay.

From the beginning, the PIT had substantial support for the general strikes, with approximately 90% of their members participating and full recognition from three of the outlawed political parties. Their real triumph, however, lied in their ability to gain the support of the legal, semi-conservative, political parties. The Blanco, Colorado, and Civil Union parties all eventually supported and participated in the PIT's general strikes.

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Before 1973, Uruguay had been one of few countries in South America with a near perfect record of political stability and a strong democracy (others included Chile and Costa Rica). The military coup in 1973 came as a profound shock to Uruguay. To make matters worse, this once peaceful nation was now living under a regime that used fear, threat, and intimidation to keep control of its populace. Many people were arrested and jailed as political prisoners, people “disappeared” or were tortured,

political parties were banned, parliament closed, trade unions repressed, income concentrated, and the media censored. General Gregorio Conrado Álvarez served both as the head of the armed forces and as the self-proclaimed president.

In 1980, the generals attempted to legitimize their regime through a plebiscite authorizing a revised constitution. With a censored press and little chance for opposing views to be heard, the results were expected to go in favor of the state. However, the public voted against the referendum. The government, convinced that it would succeed, waited too long to falsify the results. Even though the results made no immediate difference, the legitimacy of the repressive regime was severely damaged. Pressure to reform forced the government to agree to hold free and fair elections in November 1984, but the regime reserved the right to cancel the elections “if necessary.”

In the following years, the government started making limited concessions, specifically allowing the labor union confederation Plenario Intersindical de Trabajadores (PIT) and the Students’ Social and Cultural Association for Public Education to hold a May Day rally. Some believe this concession was designed to bring back the specter of the Left to scare the middle class, however efforts proved futile when an organization formed by all political parties, legal and illegal, as well as social movements attracted a stunningly large crowd of about 150,000 people to rally against the government at the capital.

Empowered by the May Day Rally, the PIT (consisting of 150 unions making up approximately 90% of the workforce), led by Andres Toriani and Richard Read, decided to organize a general strike. The national strike, the first since the military coup over a decade before, reflected a sense of popular discontent and anger with the 15% unemployment and 51% inflation rates within the country. The PIT released a statement demanding wage increases, union rights for public employees, freedom of political prisoners, and respect for democratic liberties.

The strike was held on January 18, 1984, and lasted for 24 hours. It paralyzed the daily workings of the capital city as well as a substantial part of the outlying rural areas. The outlawed Broad Front (representing the Communist, Socialist, and Christian Democrat parties) immediately recognized the strike but the legal Colorado party refused to endorse it, arguing that the time was simply not right. However, the reaction of the regime was relatively mild. PIT was formally made illegal but its leaders were not arrested. It is rumored that the president was ready with a secret plan to retaliate against the general strike by ordering mass arrests of politicians, but the commanders refused to comply without written orders.

Less than two months later, the PIT again organized another 24-hour strike, this one specifically calling for the release of former Broad Front leader, General Líber Seregni Mosquera, imprisoned since January 1976. 90% of the country’s workers refused to go to work and those who did initiated a sit-in in their factories. This time the government responded by sending in riot police to eject the protesting workers occupying the factories, banning any media coverage of the event, and declaring strikes illegal. When three opposition magazines, *Aqui*, *Opinar*, and *Busqueda* did publish articles on the strike, the publications were quickly shut down. The government ordered public transportation to resume, but only empty buses drove through the streets with signs in the windows reading, “obligatory emergency service.” At this point, the legal political parties (the Blanco, Colorado, and the Civil Union) as well as the Students’ Social and Cultural Association for Public Education (ASCEEP) endorsed the strike. With the city essentially shut down, the government had to choose between giving in to the protesters’ demands and initiating stronger repressive measures. Fearing a backlash to increased violence, the military decided to release Seregni. Though he was deprived of political rights, Seregni made a public announcement calling for national reconciliation and pacification in order to peacefully transition to democracy.

On June 27, the 11th anniversary of the military coup, the opposition parties organized one final strike before the planned November elections. The event was officially called a “civic stoppage” but followed the same plan of action as a general strike; however, at the Colorado party’s urging, the organizers chose not to call it one. The main focus of this strike was really to foster inter-party dialogue, to reach a consensus, and to coordinate the opposition’s actions and demands in order to better negotiate with the government. The June strike, like the two before it, paralyzed the country without using violence to intimidate the government. The military chose not to respond to this strike, though the reasoning behind this decision is unknown.

The general strikes were used primarily to demonstrate the country’s potential power against the military government. These

symbolic one-day strikes showed the influence the PIT and the political parties had over the populace of Uruguay but without creating a state of permanent disorder.

Over the course of the next few months, the military continued to negotiate with the political parties, but having lost most of its support, the military's bargaining power was severely diminished. Unless they wanted the strikes to continue, the military would have to stick with their timeline of relinquishing power and allowing presidential elections in November. The elections occurred without any violence and the Colorado party's candidate, Julio María Sanguinetti was elected president. When he took office the following March, Sanguinetti freed all political prisoners, legalized trade unions and political parties, and allowed a free press. However, the country's economy was extremely weak and it would take years to decrease inflation, pay off the foreign debt, and increase wages for the workers in Uruguay.

The year 1984 was a critical turning point in Uruguay's political history. The once powerful military government lost support within the majority of the country's population, the opposition parties were able to unite against a common enemy, and peaceful one-day strikes and cross-party negotiations were able to end a military regime.

## Research Notes

### Influences:

The strikers were influenced by the success of strikes internationally, as well as the 1973 general strike in Uruguay following the military coup. The 1973 strike lasted just over two weeks and ended with most of the trade union leaders in jail, dead, or exiled, but was still a powerful influence in the strike of 1984. (1)

### Sources:

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### Additional Notes:

Throughout the rule of the military regime, Uruguayan fans at football (soccer) matches used a small but powerful form of nonviolent protest. When the national anthem was played, they would sing the words half-heartedly and in a mumble. However, when the words "Tiranos temblad!" ("May tyrants tremble"), the fans would bellow the words with force, implicating their military leaders as tyrants. This form of protest put the military leaders in a bind. They could not stop the singing of the national anthem, nor could they remove the words without acknowledging their tyranny. They were forced to bear this protest until leaving power following this general strike. (<http://www.yesmagazine.org/people-power/10-everyday-acts-of-resistance-that-changed-the-world>)

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**Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:**

Meghan Auker Becker, 21/02/2010

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