

National Review

Death by Hunger Strike - A Cuban prisoner of conscience and an extreme method

March 22, 2010

By Jay Nordlinger

Many go on hunger strikes, few die from doing so. On February 23, Orlando Zapata Tamayo died. He was a Cuban political prisoner, one of about 200 kept in the Castros' cells -- in the "Cuban gulag," as it has been rightly called. Conditions in that gulag are monstrous and unspeakable. The cruelty of man seems to know no bounds. Since the Communist triumph in 1959, many Cuban political prisoners have gone on hunger strikes, out of desperation. They feel they have no other option, no other card to play.

Hunger strikes are problematic, morally and otherwise, and we will discuss some of those problems in a moment. First, however, a word or two more about Zapata.

He was a plumber and bricklayer, and he was black -- an "Afro-Cuban," as so many leaders of the democracy movement are. He was 42 years old when he died. Zapata was fearless in his demands for basic human rights, one of those dissidents who will risk everything. He was arrested, for the final time, in the notorious crackdown of March 2003, known as the "Black Spring." In prison, the guards beat him constantly. They also tortured him in the usual, shocking ways. He began his hunger strike on December 3. He wanted to be recognized as a prisoner of conscience and not be forced to wear the uniform of common criminals. He also wanted, ideally, to be treated as Fidel Castro was treated, when the future dictator was a prisoner, for a year and a half, of the Batista regime. Oh, did Castro have it made! Large, comfortable quarters, full mail privileges, conjugal visits, daily exercise and sports, excellent food, two baths a day. He said in a letter, "They're going to make me think I'm on vacation."

When Zapata was on his hunger strike, the authorities denied him water for 18 days -- they typically do this to hunger strikers. Zapata suffered kidney failure. Then they held him naked over a powerful air conditioner, which gave him pneumonia. As Zapata was dying, protests were staged throughout Cuba: vigils, sit-ins, and the like. The prisoner's mother, Reina Luisa, pled with his fellow Cubans to express solidarity. "Do not be afraid of blows," she said, for "it is worthier to die upright than to die kneeling."

Zapata held out for a remarkable 83 days. When he died, his mother accused the Cuban state of murder, and so did many others. There was fierce anguish among Cubans both on the island and in exile. Not a great deal was said by the world's governments and social leaders. Lula da Silva, the lionized president of Brazil, was in Havana the day after Zapata died, to pay court to the Castros. He said nothing.

The people at Cuba Archive, a trustworthy resource, have documented twelve deaths by hunger strike in Cuban prisons. The best-known such case is that of Pedro Luis Boitel, the poet who opposed first the Batista dictatorship and then the Castro. He died in 1972 after a 53-day strike. His friend Armando Valladares, another poet, was in the gulag for 22 years. He went on hunger strike eleven times, for as few days as three and as many as 36. He left the gulag alive, and wrote the classic memoir *Against All Hope*.

A hunger strike is an extreme act, and an extremely coercive one. In a sense, the striker has a gun to his head, saying, "If you don't meet my demands, I will kill myself. What's more, it will be your fault." People go on hunger strikes in the service of good causes and bad causes. Great men do it and wicked men do it. They do it in prison and out. They do it in democracies and under tyrannies. Some strikers are mad, others are perfectly sane. Some are mere showboaters, some are in earnest, even saintly. Some strike for a limited period of time -- "I will deny myself food for a week. Let's see what that achieves." Others vow to go unto the end. Also to consider is the question of force-feeding. This is a miserable decision for authorities to make, and a miserable practice.

There was hunger striking in ancient times, particularly in Ireland and India. It really got going at the beginning of the 20th century, when British suffragettes, incarcerated, went on hunger strikes. The image of the self-starving woman -- alone and in jail -- was a poignant one, to say the least. As June Purvis wrote in the *Guardian* last year, these women were using their bodies "as a political statement." Later, Gandhi, of course, went on hunger strikes, in protest over British rule in India. Great dissidents in the Soviet Union struck: Sakharov, Sharansky, Bukovsky. In 1981, the whole world watched the drama of the IRA hunger strikers -- the members of the Irish Republican Army who starved themselves to death, one by one, putting tremendous pressure on the British government. The IRA got a big propaganda boost out of these deaths. Bobby Sands and his friends may have been cold-blooded killers, but they looked pitiable as they wasted away. Their case caused a problem in the Catholic Church: Many members and officials were sympathetic to the IRA, but, as in a number of churches and religions, suicide was proscribed.

The hunger strike is a peculiar kind of suicide -- a slow one, that others are invited to stop. This makes a hunger strike different from what, say, Jan Palach did -- he was the Czech student who self-immolated, in 1969, protesting the Soviet invasion. Two others followed him. Of course, some Buddhist monks in Vietnam self-immolated, too, making a huge difference in world opinion. In 2006, a Serbian warlord being tried at The Hague went on hunger strike: That was Vojislav Seselj, a sidekick to Milosevic. At the Guantanamo Bay prison, terror detainees have gone on hunger strikes as well. They have been force-fed; so was Seselj. This can be a brutal process, force-feeding -- hunger strikers have died from it. The British suffragettes were force-fed, and they likened the process to rape. Bukovsky was one of the Russians who were force-fed. His account of what happened makes for excruciating reading.

America has seen a fair amount of hunger striking. In 1994, Randall Robinson, the head of TransAfrica, struck for 27 days. He wanted President Clinton to intervene in Haiti; the president did so. Did Robinson's act make a difference? Almost certainly. But is that any way to press a policy, or military, point -- particularly in a democracy, where there are multiple avenues of expression? What about those who opposed intervention in Haiti? Should they have

threatened to kill themselves in support of that position?
Inaugurated dueling fasts?

Last December, a politician in India went on hunger strike -- ten days -- because he wanted his home area to become an official state. A national drama ensued. In "a game of high-stakes political poker," as one report said, the government "blinked." The politician got his state. Fine. But what about the next guy who wants the same thing? Can New Delhi always comply, "ending the fast"? At the moment, there are hunger strikes going on all over the world, by many people, for many reasons. Albanian miners want better terms. So do Disney workers in California. (You can bet that the Disney workers have better terms than the miners.) Imprisoned and tormented bloggers in Egypt and Morocco are hunger striking. So are members of a group called "Climate Justice" -- they want governments to step in line on global warming.

One striker who is not likely to garner much sympathy is Terry Nichols, a conspirator in the Oklahoma City bombing. From his Colorado prison, he has announced that he is tired of "refined" and "dead" victuals that "defile" his body. He is striking for a different diet, demanding whole-grain foods, more fresh raw vegetables and fresh fruit, a wheat-bran supplement, and other items. Planners of mass murder in America are very picky prisoners.

I think we can say that a hunger strike is a neutral weapon. Like a gun, a bomb, or a poem, it is different things in different hands. When is a hunger strike justified and when is it not? Very hard to

make this call, with certainty. It seems to me that a hunger strike should be a last resort -- a last, desperate act when no other option is available. Hunger strikes in a democracy are hard to justify, in my view. They are often stunt-like and selfish. Moreover, they make a mockery of hunger strikes by the truly desperate. In a democracy, we have an abundance of options.

In Cuba, prisoners of conscience have almost none. That is what Valladares stressed to me, after Zapata's death. A Cuban prisoner has control of virtually nothing: Refusing to eat may be the only thing he can do. A spokesman for Amnesty International, Gerardo Ducos, put it admirably: "Faced with a prolonged prison sentence, the fact that Orlando Zapata Tamayo felt he had no other avenue available to him but to starve himself in protest is a terrible indictment of the continuing repression of political dissidents in Cuba."

I remember being horrified in 2008 when an inmate in this gulag -- Juan Carlos Herrera Acosta, an independent journalist -- sewed his mouth shut. My horror was magnified when I saw an artist's rendering of what the prisoner might look like in that condition. He had been tortured for so long, and was so deprived of hope, he committed this desperate, barely comprehensible act. What would we do in his shoes? Luckily, the likes of us will never find out.

LOAD-DATE: March 5, 2010