Cuban political prisoners who perished during hunger strikes: 1959 to present

Updated September 2020

Fidel Castro served only 18 months of a 15-year prison sentence for leading an attack on the Moncada Army Barracks of Santiago de Cuba. During their captivity, they enjoyed privileges for political prisoners—comfortable living conditions, visitors, plentiful reading materials, and participation in group sports. Moreover, dictator Fulgencio Batista caved to public demands and freed all the attackers less than two years into their sentence. During over six decades of the Castro regime, political prisoners have been subjected to appalling treatment and extremely harsh conditions—hard labor, torture, beatings, malnourishment, lack of medical attention, and killings at the hands of prison guards. Many have resorted to protest hunger strikes; at least fourteen have paid with their lives. Common prisoners also face abhorrent conditions and many have also gone on hunger strike; at least eleven are documented to have died.

14 documented cases of political prisoners who died in hunger strike
in chronological order

Roberto López Chávez, age 25, died 12/11/1966 at Isla de Pinos prison on the 70th day of a hunger strike. In prison since 1961, he went on hunger strike to protest prison conditions after enduring a savage beating by prison guards. He was moved to a punishment cell and denied drinking water. As he screamed for water, several guards entered his cell and one urinated over his open mouth as he lay on the floor. He died the next day without receiving medical attention.

Luis Álvarez Ríos, age 31, died 8/9/1967 at Príncipe Castle prison of Havana. He had been sentenced to 20 years of prison for counter-revolution. He went on a hunger strike with fellow prisoners demanding to be separated from dangerous criminals. On the 11th day, prison authorities agreed and they ended the strike. Instead of receiving medical attention and knowing food must be ingested gradually after fasting, they were served a heavy meal. Alvarez died almost immediately after eating.

Francisco Aguirre Vidarrueta died September 1967 at Príncipe Castle prison of Havana demanding treatment as a political prisoner and refusing to wear the blue uniform of common prisoners and criminals.

Carmelo Cuadra Hernández died 7/29/1969 at a Havana prison during a hunger strike, denied medical care.

Pedro Luis Boitel, age 34, died on 5/25/1972 at the Príncipe Castle prison of Havana. A leader of the struggle against the Batista regime, he turned against the hijacking of the democratic process by the Castro brothers and was sentenced to ten years of prison for counter-revolution. In prison, he was tortured, beaten, and abused plus his sentence was extended. He and fellow prisoners went on many hunger strikes to protest executions and inhumane prison conditions. The hunger strike that took his life on his 12th year of incarceration lasted 53 days. He was denied medical care and was ill treated by prison guards as he lay dying.

Olegario Charlot Spileta died 1/15/1973 at Boniato Prison, Santiago de Cuba. He died during a hunger strike without receiving medical attention.

Enrique García Cuevas died at the Pretensado Provincial Prison of Las Villas on 5/23/1973, the 25th day of a hunger strike to protest inhumane prison conditions and the forced hard labor prison regime. Already very weak from malnourishment, he did not have medical attention.
Reinaldo Cordero Izquierdo died 5/21/1975 in a Pinar del Río prison. During his last year of confinement, he had been tortured severely. Having served his ten-year sentence in its entirety, it was arbitrarily increased. He went on hunger strike to demand his release, was denied medical care, and died in his cell.

José Barrios Pedré died on 9/22/1977 at Pretensado Provincial, Las Villas, province during a hunger strike to protest his confinement in an extreme punishment cell.

Santiago Roche Valle, age 45, died 9/8/1985 at Kilo 7 Prison of Camagüey during a hunger strike. He was denied medical attention and died of heart failure.

Nicolás González Regueiro, age 42, was killed 9/16/1992 in Manacas Prison, Las Villas, while on hunger strike. He was serving a four-year prison sentence for distributing enemy propaganda when he developed a duodenal ulcer. He went on hunger strike to protest the lack of medication and his internment among common criminals. Prison guards pressured him to accept the common prisoner uniform for common prisoners and went on hunger strike demanding his release. Confined to a punishment cell naked and denied water, he contracted pneumonia. He had no medical care and was transferred to a hospital only when his condition was critical. He left a wife and two small daughters.

Orlando Zapata Tamayo, age 42, died 2/23/2010 on day 82 of a hunger strike. In prison since 2003, he was sentenced to three years of prison for contempt, disrespect, and public disorder. His sentence was subsequently increased over 30 more years for disobedience for his repeated protests against prison abuses and his unjust incarceration. After enduring numerous beatings and torture, he went on hunger strike demanding his safety and recognition of the status of prisoner of conscience. He was denied water for 18 days, which led to kidney failure, and was held naked over a powerful air conditioner, which provoked a pneumonia.

Wilman Villar Mendoza, age 31, died 1/19/2012 in Santiago de Cuba. He had been sentenced to four years of prison for “contempt, resistance, and attempting against the state” for a reportedly fabricated domestic violence incident. Upon arriving at the prison, he refused to wear the uniform for common prisoners and went on hunger strike demanding his release. Confined to a punishment cell naked and denied water, he contracted pneumonia. He had no medical care and was transferred to a hospital only when his condition was critical. He left a wife and two small daughters.

Yosvany Aróstegui Almenteros died 8/7/2020 in Camagüey. The human rights activist died on the 40th day of a hunger strike to protest his 15-year sentence for apparently fabricated charges of domestic violence. He was transferred to the Kilo 8 prison of Camagüey, punished with isolation, and denied water. Moved to the hospital shortly before his death, his family was not allowed to visit him and his body was immediately cremated. His activism and confrontational attitude had bothered the political police.

11 documented cases of prisoners not serving strictly political sentences who died in hunger strike

Lázaro Abreu Godínez, age 45, Dec. 2, 2019
Fernando Arsola Suárez, age 42, Aug. 10, 2017
Yordánis Ballagas Ramírez, age 27, Jan. 25, 2013
René Cobas Arzola, age 46, Jan. 1, 2012
Vladimir Cuné Vélez, age 31, Aug. 25, 2014
Modesto Díaz, age 63, Nov. 11, 2018
Alexander Duarte Vidal, age 40, Sep. 6, 2014
Andrés Menéndez Malagón, age 45, Mar. 3, 2012
Roberto Ribalta Junco, age 44, Feb. 16, 2013
Hugo Riverón Aguilara, age 59, Jul. 8, 2017
Noel Roque Ruiz, age 40, Aug. 4, 2013

See details in the individual case records at cubaarchive.org/our-database/

Distribution and reproduction of this material is authorized as long as its source is cited.