

At least 27 Cuban prisoners have died in protest hunger strikes: 1959 - present

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In over six decades of the Castro dictatorship, political prisoners and prisoners of conscience have endured deplorable treatment and conditions including forced labor, torture, beatings, malnutrition, lack of medical care, and murder at the hands of their jailers. Common prisoners have also suffered terrible conditions and many received long prison sentences without due process of law. In such extreme situations, many feel that their only recourse is a protest hunger strike. At least twenty-seven are known to have paid with their lives, 14 were political prisoners and 13 were imprisoned for not strictly political causes.

On the other hand, Fidel and Raúl Castro, together with some thirty insurgents sentenced to prison for the attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba in 1953, enjoyed privileges granted to political prisoners, including visits, reading material, group sports, correspondence, and various amenities. Furthermore, dictator Fulgencio Batista released them all after only eighteen months in jail; Fidel was serving a fifteen-year sentence and Raúl was serving thirteen years.

14 political prisoners who died in hunger strike



*Right to left, 1st row: Luis Álvarez, Carmelo Cuadra, Pedro L. Boitel, Enrique García;
2nd row: Santiago Roche, Orlando Zapata, Wilman Villar, Yosvany Aróstegui*

Documented cases in chronological order

See individual case records at <https://cubaarchive.org/database/>

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 the executions of fellow prisoners and inhumane prison conditions. He died on his 12th year of incarceration on day 53 of a hunger strike, denied medical care and 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 mal nourishment, 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 Camaguey 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 regime and beat him to death, reporting he had committed suicide.

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 Camaguey. 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.

13 prisoners not serving strictly political sentences who died in hunger strike



Right to left.: Roberto Rivalta Junco, Lázaro Abreu Godínez, Maykel Acosta Sánchez, Andy Reyes Cruz

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- René Cobas Arzola**, age 46, Santiago de Cuba, Jan. 1, 2012
- Andrés Menéndez Malagón**, age 45, Havana, Mar. 3, 2012
- Leonardo Brindis Villalón**, age 22, Havana, Feb. 3, 2012
- Yordanis Ballagas Ramírez**, age 27, Camagüey, Jan. 25, 2013
- Roberto Ribalta Junco**, age 44, Villa Clara, Feb. 16, 2013
- Noel Roque Ruiz**, age 40, Sancti Spiritus, Aug. 4, 2013
- Vladimir Cuné Vélez**, age 31 Havana, Aug. 25, 2014
- Alexander Duarte Vidal**, age 40, Havana, Sep. 6, 2014
- Hugo Riverón Aguilera**, age 59, Holguín, Jul. 8, 2017
- Fernando Arsola Suárez**, age 42, Santiago de Cuba, Aug. 10, 2017
- Lázaro Abreu Godínez**, age 45, Havana, Dec. 2, 2019
- Maykel Acosta Sánchez**, age 35, Havana, May 6, 2021
- Andy Reyes Cruz**, age 27, Sancti Spiritus, Sep. 27, 2022



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