

BEHIND THE CURTAINS: WOMEN ON STRIKE AND THEIR STRUGGLES

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this research the memory of members and former members from the 17 Section of the “Centro de Professores do Estado do Rio Grande do Sul”¹ that participated on the strike movements developed by the institution during the period of 1979 to 1991 will be used to identify possible situations of repression and discrimination imposed to these women by the state and the society due to their involvement with the trade union environment.

It is important to emphasize that this research is part of my undergraduate thesis presented to the Letras Línguas Adicionais: Inglês, Espanhol e Respectivas Literaturas undergraduate program in 2019. That being said, the importance of this investigation is directly linked to the program since I understand that, as an undergraduate program that trains almost unanimously female teachers, recognize the struggles of those who came before us it is important not only to provide new perspectives to the future, but also to understand the processes that involves our struggles as women within the society.

To start it is necessary to situate the historical moment that the Brazilian society was living. Even though the country was already experimenting certain transformations due to the political opening process, as the strengthening of the civil society and the trade union movement, a lot of what happened since 1964 was still in the air.

According to Reis (2010), each day was a come and go of measures more or less ostensible such as threats of intervention on the trade union institutions, disfranchisement of their leaders and use of violence towards the strikers.

It was in this context that CPERS/ Sindicato was inserted and it was it that made the teachers' fight increase. Not without the troubles mentioned above and many others, since according to Bastos (2004), these women were about to break two hierarchies: gender, in this moment still very present on Brazilian society, and the power itself placed with the 1964 coup.

¹ CPERS/ Sindicato is one of the greatest Brazilian trade union institutions, it was founded in 1945 and nowadays represents around 80.000 workers that operate in state schools from Rio Grande do Sul.



2. METHODOLOGY

As data collection instrument semi-structured interviews were made with 5 integrants of the institution during the period investigated here. A questionnaire with 10 open questions was used with the goal to organize the participants' narrative. The interviews were recorded and had the average duration of 90 minutes.

This research follows Oral History (SENNA e MATTOS, 2011) standards since regarding the authors this tool privileges the paths of individuals and groups, and also that the specificities of the societies must not only be known but respected.

In order to preserve the teacher's identity pseudonymous² were designated by the author, they reference important female latin american figures that, just like the participants of this research, had their lives marked by struggles.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In general all participants mentioned a tense atmosphere and discomfort due to the constant possibility that some action might be taken by the State, even with the "slow, gradual and safe" process of political opening.

To start, Luz (2019) says that everything was done with difficulty and fear, but also demonstrates the commitment to resist the answers they might get from the regime, regardless of what they could be.

In the moment that these women refused to go back to the schools or to the kitchen and went to the streets showing that they were too many and would not be silent, the answer was repression through physical violence.

(...) We did marches, walks with the dogs beside us, with the police riding horses, with nightsticks on hand. **There was a teacher who broke his hand on the Palace door, they closed the door on his hand.** They pushed us and knocked us down (...) If they had to dissolve a walk they used horses, putting the horses over us. The police dogs were this size and escorted us. (PETRONA, 2019, my emphasis)

She also mentions the attempts to stop the busses from the countryside to arrive at the capital to the protests and the trade union general assemblies.

There were times where the buses left from Bagé and all the entrances to Porto Alegre were closed and the driver kept on making turns and turns trying to get in and the police would not let it, making barriers. And we having to take shortcuts, having to go back from I do not know where to be able to get to Porto Alegre. (PETRONA, 2019)

² Eva, Olga, Anita, Luz e Petrona.



Along the interviews the tense atmosphere experienced by them gets to another proportions, according to what Olga (2018) says:

We were coming back from lunch, crossing in front of the *Catedral* and we had never seen so many police officers together. And back then only men were allowed in the *Brigada*. (...) The *Brigada Militar* places itself in three lines of men between us and the Palace. And we went up! I was on the first line (...) I got face to face with the police officer, if he did as much as blink I would punch him.

Regarding the rest of the society, there were no nightsticks or pushes, the repression aimed at scaring them and many times it would come from where they least expected. Olga (2018) e Luz (2019) talk about their families disapproval after knowing about their involvement with the striker movement.

While the rest of the society used to discredit their efforts, saying that, as women, that space was not for them.

Women were not seen with good eyes. “**Oh, go home! Go teach the children!**” When we went out, when we went on marches, we always listened swearings and never words of approval. (PETRONA, 2019, my emphasis.)

Even repeating the old habit to attack women that decided to cross the border between the places that had been reserved, as Anita (2019) says “**We passed for people that called us sluts and told us to go to work.**” (My emphasis)

The ones who believe that schools were safe places for them are mistaken, Luz (2019) says that striking teachers were discriminated also inside the schools:

A strike was called and there at the school there were only two teachers on strike: me, the biology teacher, and a colleague, the english teacher. So we used to have a lot of fun because when we arrived at the teachers’ room it looked like we had leprosy because everybody would live. (...) The english teacher used to say: “Now you get in and everybody lives, we seat down and you get a coffee.” We did not care, we talked to them as if nothing was happening but we realised that they had certain restraints towards us.

From what Luz (2019) said it is possible to see that, even mixed with her sense of humor, there was certain isolation and segregation amongst the striking teachers and the others.

Besides that, she also mentions occasions where their own coworkers tried to adopt discriminatory attitudes with them:

The girls used to say: “**Are you not ashamed?**” And the principal too: “**Is this the example you want to set for your students?**” And we would answer them: “Yes, they have to fight for their salaries!” But it was not only for the salary, we fought for everything because as I said, back then the schools had nothing so we had to fight for our salaries but also for the school itself, for school meals for the students who did not have it. (LUZ, 2019, my emphasis)



Luz (2019) justifies the behavior of their coworkers by saying that they were afraid due to the threats the class received during this period, but she also mentions the belief that women did not belong to these environments, that they were doing something wrong or even immoral.

I think that one of the things was fear, fear of losing the job. And also because it was not well seen, you know? **“Where in the world do women go on strikes? Especially teachers...”** “What are people going to say?” “They should be teaching the kids instead of going on strikes.” (My emphasis)

Therefore, it is clear the discriminatory conduct between the colleagues, even at the school, behavior that had the goal to embarrass the striking teachers and make them go back to their proper place.

4. CONCLUSIONS

According to the data exposed it is possible to say that repression occurred in different ways and even though it did not stop their fight it certainly was another element on the list of concerns with which they had to deal on a daily basis just for occupying/ being in public spaces.

In conclusion, it becomes important to highlight the pioneer role that these women had on opening the path so that others could be present in these environments claiming for their rights along with the rest of the society. Yet, it is just as important to mention that their presence in these spaces did not necessarily meant liberation from the roles imposed by society and which we still struggle with nowadays.

5. BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

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