

Jennifer Eaglin

Ohio State University

Changing the Tide: Ethanol, Caneworkers, and the Guariba Strikes of 1984

On May 15, 1984, over 5,000 temporary agricultural workers, known as *boias-frias*, led a dramatic strike to protest their exploitative work conditions and underpay in the small town of Guariba within the dominant sugar and ethanol-producing region of Ribeirão Preto, São Paulo. These workers migrated to the region to find labor in the booming sugar sector, which supplied the country's sugar-ethanol industry. However, workers found the conditions extreme, violent, and insecure despite promotion to the contrary.

The strike drew national attention when it briefly brought large sugar and ethanol mill's production to a halt in the important agricultural region at the beginning of the harvest. Sugarcane production was not only of economic import in the region, but it was also the foundation of the military government's large-scale National Alcohol (or Ethanol) Program, *Proálcool*, which guaranteed ethanol serve as a supplement and substitute in the national fuel supply. To meet these fuel demands, the program required a dramatic and continual national expansion of sugar cultivation accompanied by a pliable labor force to produce it. As such, these temporary workers' actions in the major sugar and ethanol-producing region of Ribeirão Preto threatened the national fuel supply.

Strikers' efforts challenged the effective marginalization of rural labor that the Brazilian military government's agriculture-focused development agenda had promoted since the 1960s and which the state program, the National Alcohol (Ethanol) Program, deeply intensified in the 1970s and 1980s. This paper explores the connection between the massive agricultural expansion that accompanied the state development program, rural workers' marginalization, the conditions that led to the important strike, and the strike's broad impact thereafter.

I argue that workers actions were an important part of bringing the social costs of the ethanol program into national debate just as the program's economic costs became more visible as well. However, underlying these social and economic costs were glaring environmental costs that laborers largely had to pay. Air pollution from burning cane and

water pollution from fertilizers and ethanol distillation runoff exacerbated the everyday struggles of rural laborers, which pushed broader debates- although not always in terms of environmental factors- about the program's long-term viability over the rest of the decade.

By examining the strike in the context of its social and environmental importance, this project illustrates the ways that people traditionally left out of analysis of the state-led program were able to briefly insert themselves in national debates about ethanol's long-term impact and the costs associated with the industry's expansion. Government and producers' rhetoric about the benefits of the program conveniently presented the industry as a producer of jobs and its environmental impact as minimal. However, these assertions were incomplete pictures of the industry's historical development. The Guariba strikes help reveal a more complete history of the industry's impact on labor.