

CELS Joins Court Probe to Uncover Corporate Complicity in Crimes Against Humanity

Although Argentina's military dictatorship led the campaign of terror carried out between 1976 and 1983, the security forces were not the only ones to blame for the bloodshed. Civilian collaborators, including prominent business executives, played a key role in identifying suspected activists and facilitating their abduction, detention and even murder. These were not isolated incidents but rather formed part of a systematic plan by the de facto government and corporations to reduce the power of organized labor and transform the country's economy.

On September 15, a federal court accepted the Center for Legal and Social Studies (CELS) as a plaintiff in the investigation of the role of Molinos Río de la Plata S.A. in the disappearance of 26 people—the vast majority of them union activists at one of the company's plants. Among the victims was a baby girl who was illegally appropriated when her parents were targeted by the dictatorship and whose whereabouts remain unknown to this day.

CELS has fought for accountability on crimes against humanity since its founding in 1979, and the human rights organization believes that uncovering corporate complicity in these atrocities is crucial for collective memory, truth and justice. The 1976-1983 military dictatorship perpetrated the worst rights violations in Argentine history, affecting tens of thousands of people.

This latest court probe centers on the forced disappearance of union activists and former workers at Molinos Río de la Plata between July 1976 and October 1978. At that time, the food company belonged to Bunge & Born, which was later bought by Bunge Argentina, part of global agribusiness giant Bunge.

The most incriminating incident under investigation took place on July 7, 1976, when numerous employees arriving for the morning shift were rounded up and carried off in Army trucks. According to witnesses, the military officials used lists provided by the company to decide who to detain. Three of the workers abducted that morning were never accounted for again.

Testimony indicates that anywhere from 20 to 80 people were loaded onto the Army trucks that day, so it is possible that additional victims could surface in this case.

Over the course of two years, other Molinos workers and ex-employees were kidnapped in their homes and on the streets, taken to clandestine detention centers and presumably killed.

“Their abduction, torture and disappearance ... at the hands of the military and security forces had the direct complicity of company officials, who in principle handed over the identities and home addresses of the most active employees so these crimes could be committed,” CELS said in its legal complaint, filed with a federal court in La Plata, the capital of Buenos Aires province.

“We must emphasize that the disappearances are directly associated with the dispute for their labor rights and their union activism,” the complaint states.

In the years prior to the 1976 military coup, union activists at the Molinos plant in the Buenos Aires suburb of Avellaneda led several strikes to push for better working conditions. They also formally accused the company of illicitly hoarding its production to await higher prices.

CELS has participated in other judicial investigations in Argentina that aim to clarify the extent of corporate complicity in dictatorship-era crimes. The organization is a plaintiff in a court case examining the role that Mercedes-Benz executives played in the disappearance of dozens of workers. CELS also filed an Amicus Curiae brief in a case involving top officers at the Ledesma sugar company, accused of providing vehicles to the military to abduct some of its employees.

Separately, three former officials at Ford Motor Company in Argentina have been charged with involvement in the kidnapping of 24 workers between March and August 1976. The military actually tortured some of these employees on company grounds.

These investigations are part of a global movement to hold companies responsible for their participation in human rights violations. Cases have come to light in recent years in Kenya, Liberia, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Brazil and Colombia—underscoring the significant role played by economic actors in the context of armed conflicts and authoritarian regimes.