



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Austrian communist workers general strike for better wages, 1950

September 26,
1950

to: October 5,
1950

Country: Austria

Location City/State/Province: *Mainly Vienna*

Goals:

The Communist Party of Austria did not view the fourth price and wage agreement as satisfactory. It was also upset that the agreement was discussed and developed completely in secret. Consequently, the Communist Party of Austria called for even higher wage increases and a freezing of the food prices.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 117. General strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 117. General strike
- 171. Nonviolent interjection
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

- 116. Generalised strike
- 171. Nonviolent interjection
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 6th segment:

- 116. Generalised strike

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Communist Workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Communist Party of Austria (CPA), CPA Leader Johann Koplenig

Partners:

Gottlieb Fiala (Head of the Austrian Trade Union Federation)

External allies:

Soviet Union

Involvement of social elites:

Not Known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Communist Party of Austria
- Communist Workers
- Gottlieb Fiala
- Socialist Workers
- Soviet Union

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Socialist Workers (exit)

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 2 days*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Austrian coalition government, including the Socialist Party

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

Strikers harassed non-striking workers. Marchers clashed with police on the first day of the first strike, leaving 23 police injured. Campaigners attacked a leader of the Austrian Trade Union Federation,

Repressive Violence:

The coalition government appealed to the non-striking workers to resist the influence of the CPA. They were divided in groups and sent to combat the communist strikers. Police also clashed with protestors

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0.5 points out of 1 point

Growth:

1 point out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Neither strike was successful. The first strike was widely popular, but the coalition government did not concede anything. Additionally, the coalition government effectively crushed the second strike by organizing the non-striking workers and sending them to combat the strikers.

The first strike lasted several days, but the second strike was squashed almost immediately. While the Communist Party survived the campaign, it was in poor condition by the end.

The first strike was very successful in arousing support; 120,000 people participated. Once the first strike failed to promote any change, however, the support declined and the campaign struggled to remain relevant.

Following the conclusion of World War Two, Austria was separated from Germany and zones were created, each of which was controlled by one of the four allies (United States, United Kingdom, France, Soviet Union). Austria had a crippled economy because the markets had been designed to serve Germany and its economy, not Austria. Monetary war damages only worsened the already ill economy and the Austrian economy would suffer from high inflation. Fortunately for Austrians, Austria was able to receive aid from the United Nations and the European Recovery Program. With help, Austria was able to enact three successful price-wage agreements to combat the inflation. The agreements were meant to adjust wages to the constantly increasing price of food and a fourth such agreement was planned for 1950.

The details for the fourth agreement were scheduled for release to the Austrian public on the 26th of September, and the Communist Party of Austria (CPA) decided that it would take action on the same day. The CPA saw the fourth agreement as not being generous enough to the workers; it wanted even greater wage increases. The CPA had also been upset that the entire agreement was discussed and developed in secret. It had announced plans of a general strike two days prior on the 24th of September, when it stated, "Now it is the workers' turn!" The next day, on the 25th, the Soviet Military ordered police in the Russian zones to remain in their zones if a conflict were to arise. The Soviet Union held similar ideologies with those of the CPA and wanted the CPA's campaign to succeed because it would improve the credibility of communism in Austria and around the

world. The decision to restrict police mobility would safeguard the strikers from any potential resistance from the police officers stationed in the Russian zones.

The first day of the strike began with communist workers in Vienna leaving their factories and visiting other factories to persuade workers to go on strike. By 10:00 a.m., the number of strikers had reached 15,000. The 15,000 strikers marched to the center of Vienna to protest the fourth price-wage agreement and were met with police resistance. The conflict resulted in 23 police injuries before ending around 1:00 p.m. In the province of Lower Austria, the strikers created obstructions on railroad tracks leading to Vienna and others occupied the post offices to control communication amongst cities. By the evening, the CPA organized a conference where leader Johann Kopleinig gave a rallying speech alongside Gottlieb Fiala, the most powerful communist in the Austrian Trade Union Federation (ATUF), which was controlled by socialists. Reports suggest that 120,000 workers participated in the first day of the general strike.

As the numbers demonstrated, the CPA had acquired majority support in most Workers Councils, but the socialist-led ATUF remained stubborn. On the second day of the general strike, almost 3,000 communist protesters appeared in front of the regional headquarters of the ATUF; they commanded the leaders of ATUF to resign. In a clash with members of the ATUF, the protesters savagely attacked one man, Heinrich Kandl. The protesters even threatened to throw Kandl, who was 76 years old at the time, off the nearby balcony. Communist workers continued to visit factories and now, they were pressuring the workers to go on strike. Other strikers continued to blockade the railroads.

By the third day of the general strike, the campaign had started to lose momentum. The CPA struggled to send 70 communists to the ATUF's national headquarters. Once there, the communists failed to gain entry into the building and were swiftly removed by police. Historians believe that the campaign had started to lose momentum at this point because many of its initial supporters, frustrated socialists that were not satisfied with the price-wage agreements, left after listening to requests from the Socialist Party and ATUF. Both the Socialist Party and ATUF had repeatedly accused the CPA of wanting to overthrow the coalition government.

Deflated by its inability to find more than 70 protesters to send to ATUF's national headquarters and its loss of socialist support, the CPA organized a conference similar to the previous one. This conference took place on the 30th of September and marked the official end of the general strike. A Soviet radio program had previously issued a statement on the 27th that advised strikers to go back to work. It was, however, at this conference where the campaign issued an ultimatum to the coalition government. The ultimatum called for a doubling of the wage increase, a freezing of food prices, and the repaying of lost wages to the strikers. According to Kopleinig and the rest of the CPA, the coalition government would have until the 3rd of October to agree to the demands of the ultimatum; otherwise, a second general strike would be organized on the 4th of October.

The coalition government did not meet the deadline and a second general strike was organized. This general strike was much more contained and strategic. Kopleinig knew that the campaign would not be able to reach the number of strikers that first general strike generated without the support of socialists. Instead, Kopleinig planned to focus on Vienna and Lower Austria with the intention to create as much chaos as possible so that the Soviet Union would send troops in to intervene.

Fearful of a potential Soviet intervention, the coalition government made preparations in the days leading up to the next general strike to resist the second general strike and maintain order. The government appealed to all workers and asked them to forcefully resist any threats from the CPA. The government also made an attempt to transfer troops to Vienna.

While the CPA and the coalition government were planning their next courses of action, the Soviet Union was also crafting a strategy to support the CPA. First, the Soviet military ordered police in Soviet-controlled areas to once again remain stationed there, even if major conflict were to arise. Afterward, a Soviet commander challenged the coalition government's motion to transfer additional troops to Vienna, effectively blocking it.

The second general strike attracted 19% of the workforce in Vienna and Lower Austria to participate. It was a much smaller turnout than the opening day of the first general strike when over 100,000 workers participated. The second general strike did,

however, exhibit the same pattern of action from the first strike; some strikers occupied local railroad stations and blocked the tracks while others went factory to factory and harassed workers, who would not respond well to the CPA's threats.

Franz Olah, leader of the construction workers' union, led small bands of workers into battle against the strikers and successfully repelled them. At the railroad stations, railroad employees also fought back and it was them, not local law enforcement that engaged the strikers and eliminated their presence at the stations.

Having been met with strong resistance from the socialists, the second general strike was a complete failure; it ended a day later when the communists were forced to call it off. Following the campaign's embarrassing conclusion, many communists expressed frustration with the lack of Soviet involvement and historians later suggested that the Soviets were too preoccupied with the conflict in Korea to intervene in Austria. The failure of the second general strike led to the fall of the CPA and the removal of Fiala from his position at the ATUF. Despite rapid growth in support with the first general strike, the campaign was completely incapable of achieving its goals. Having forced no concessions from the coalition government, both support and momentum rapidly declined, which resulted in a swift defeat at the hands of the Socialist Party and its army of workers.

Research Notes

Influences:

Not Known

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Additional Notes:

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