



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Belgian socialists general strike for universal suffrage, 1913

Time period notes: Although the general strike did not begin until April 12, 1913, the threat of the strike and protest meetings after January are considered part of this campaign for universal suffrage. Because of the division of segments, segment 6 is only 2 weeks long, from April 16-28, 1913

January

1913

to: April 28,

1913

Country: Belgium

Goals:

1) To win universal suffrage

2) To preserve Belgian Socialist unity

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 4th segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 5th segment:

- 048. Protest meetings
- 117. General strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 048. Protest meetings
- 117. General strike

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Group characterization:

- Belgian Socialists

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

The Liberal and Socialist Opposition, The Socialists of Hainaut, Labour Party, the National Committee

Partners:

not known

External allies:

France, Holland, and Germany offered 6,000, 4,000, and 1,000 houses, respectively, for provisional housing to the wives and children of the striking workers for 1,000 francs a day.

Russian workers contributed in aid of the strike, and Pravada, a Russian periodical, regularly reported the development of the strike.

Involvement of social elites:

The Mayors of the principal provincial towns acted as mediators between the Prime Minister and the leaders of the Labour Party.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Labour Party
- Liberal and Socialist Opposition
- National Committee
- Socialists of Hainaut

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Belgian citizens
- workers

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

It is unclear when the external allies joined the campaign

Segment Length: 3 weeks

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

The Catholic Belgian Government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

Not Known

Repressive Violence:

The widespread stationing of troops was threateningly violent, but no active violence occurred

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Many historians regard this campaign as successful in achieving universal suffrage. Soon after the movement ended the strike, the First World War started and engulfed Belgium. After the war suffrage was implemented. We took one point off "success" because the implementation of one of the two major goals did not happen within the two years that this database uses as a grace period after the end of a campaign. The campaign did immediately force the Parliament to begin an Inquiry Commission. It also increased the loyalty among workers.

The number of participating numbers grew by over 100,000 during the two-week strike.

Not only did the group survive, but it strengthened a great deal due to the encouraging outcome and surprising peacefulness of the strike.

The general strike of 1913 was organized by the Socialist Party of Belgium as the last desperate measure to make the Government create a system of universal manhood suffrage rather than the system of plural voting which was practiced at the time.

The exasperation of the Liberal and Socialist Opposition had increased significantly after the elections of June 2

nd

, 1912, which had resulted in an overwhelming and largely unpredicted victory for the Catholic Government. The Socialists of Hainaut presented the idea of holding a "general strike for universal suffrage" to the Extraordinary Congress of the Labour party

on June 30

th

, 1912. The Congress enthusiastically accepted the idea and gave the responsibility of arranging the execution of the strike, including setting a date, to a National Committee.

When the Parliamentary Session opened in November of 1912, the Socialist deputies gave notice of a motion for a universal manhood suffrage amendment to the Constitution. The motion was not debated until January 1913, at which time the Government ruled by majority to adjourn the whole question and even refused the proposal of Mr. Hymans, the leader of the Liberal Opposition, to appoint a Commission of Inquiry. At that point, the National Committee set the strike to begin on April 14, 1913.

The Mayors of the principal provincial towns then made desperate attempts at mediating between the Prime Minister and the leaders of the Labour Party. The Mayors believed that the Government might appoint the desired Commission of Inquiry if the threat of a strike was withdrawn and so the Strike Committee decided to abandon the strike on March 8, 1913. However, the Prime Minister then refused to extend the scope of the proposed inquiry to the Parliamentary franchise, intending to confine the amendment to the municipal and provincial franchise. Discontent broke out among the Socialists and although Socialist leaders MM. Vandervelde and C. Huysmans protested the decision, it was resolved by large majority on March 24 to begin the strike on April 14, 1913.

By April 9

th

, 1913, the last hope of intervention by the King to prevent the large-scale general strike by granting manhood suffrage had disappeared, due to the fact that such an action by the King would have been unconstitutional and regarded by the Clericals as a coup d'état. The likelihood of compromise was low as demonstrated by the fact that the Belgian government was undergoing military preparations, distributing troops among the various industrial centers of the country.

The Socialists were also becoming well prepared. They had a growing strike fund due to contributions that were donated by many outside sources and were sending many of their wives and children on trains to neighboring countries--such as France, Holland, and Germany--to live in provisional homes that had been made available to rent at a low daily rate. The strike caused a great deal of social paranoia and unrest, causing wide-spread fear of unfathomably large political changes, a revolution, the separation of the Walloon and Flemish provinces, catastrophes, violence, and terrorism. Most families took precautions by stocking up on coal, non-perishable food, lamp oil, and candles and many families did so hugely out of proportion to the danger. The widespread panic was significantly upsetting but was also one of the main reasons why certain disasters that the strike could have caused were averted.

The strike began on April 14

th

with nearly 300,000 strikers and grew by April 19

th

to over 400,000. Since the working population of Belgium was estimated at over a million at that time, the goal of a universal strike was certainly not met. Small independent businesses, home industry workers, farmers, transport industries, State railways, tramway services, and the public gas and electric works were all virtually unaffected, with the major exception of the Port of Antwerp being strongly affected. However, all of the great manufacturers were paralyzed, with at least 350,000 participating protestors of the 700,000 workers in those industries.

The economic life of Belgium was not brought to a standstill and the immediate needs of the nation were met, but large-scale production was completely arrested. Liege and Charleroi, especially, were reported as appearing to be completely deserted. All retail trade, as well as restaurant, café, and picture theater patronage, visibly declined. Approximately 10 to 12 million francs were lost in wages and retail and export trade experienced serious declines that continued for months after the strike ended.

The strike completely monopolized Parliament's attention when it reassembled on April 16

th

. The strike was continuously discussed until the Prime Minister was eventually forced to change his previous declaration and allow the Inquiry Commission to talk about amending the parliamentary franchise as well as the municipal and provincial franchises. The Socialist Opposition considered this revised declaration to be satisfactory and became hopeful that the desired Constitutional amendment would soon be passed. A Socialist Congress called a meeting on April 23

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, at which point they decided to call for a resumption of work, which took complete effect on April 28, 1913.

The Labour Party, having demonstrated an impressive amount of control over the working population, earned a significantly enhanced reputation after operating this completely peaceful general strike and enjoyed a renewed and very strong sense of unity. Universal suffrage was not put into effect in Belgium until after the First World War, but the general strike of 1913 is still regarded by many historians as being significantly successful in its execution.

Research Notes

Influences:

Influenced by Belgian Workers General Strike to End Plurality Voting System, 1902 (1). The relative success of this strike gave international Socialism a new confidence in the general strike as a powerful labor weapon. (2)

Sources:

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Additional Notes:

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