



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Belizean unions strike to increase political participation and prevent increased taxation, 2005

January 20,

2005

to: February 14,

2005

**Country:** Belize

### **Goals:**

The unions demanded that the government implement various financial reforms, delay implementation of tax increases recently legislated, and implement contract salary increases for teachers and public officers.

## Methods

### **Methods in 1st segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 020. Prayer and worship
- 034. Vigils
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 085. Merchants' "general strike"
- 118. Hartal
- 121. Refusal of public support

### **Methods in 2nd segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 117. General strike

### **Methods in 3rd segment:**

- 001. Public speeches

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 117. General strike

**Methods in 4th segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 013. Deputations
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 117. General strike

**Methods in 5th segment:**

- 001. Public speeches
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 013. Deputations
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 117. General strike

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 013. Deputations

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Change

Defense

**Cluster:**

Democracy

Economic Justice

**Group characterization:**

- Belizean unionized workers

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

National Trade Union Congress of Belize (NTUCB) led by general secretary George Frazer; Opposition leader Dean Barrow

**Partners:**

Belize National Teachers Union; Public Service Union; Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry; Belize Business Bureau; Public Service Union; Belize Water Services Limited Union; Belize Medical and Dental Union; Telecommunications and Electricity Union

**External allies:**

Students at the University of Belize and Saint John's Junior College; Maya Leaders Alliance of southern Belize; Society for the Promotion of Education and Research; People's United Party; United Democratic Party

**Involvement of social elites:**

Not Known

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- Belize Business Bureau
- Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry
- Belize National Teachers Union
- National Trade Union Congress of Belize

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

- Belize Medical/Dental Union
- Belize Water Services Union
- Fuel Suppliers Union
- Maya Leaders Alliance
- People's United Party and United Democratic Party
- Society for the Promotion of Education and Research
- Students
- Telecommunications/Electricity Union

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

- Belize Business Bureau (exit)
- Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry (exit)
- Public Service Union

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

- Belize National Teachers Union (exit)

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

**Groups in 6th Segment:**

**Segment Length:** *Approximately 4 days*

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**

Prime Minister Said Musa's proposed federal budget and the Belizean Government in general

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

Used radio broadcasts to call for an end to the strikes.

**Campaigner violence:**

Set fires in government offices. Campaigners also got into one known fight with police, but there were no known injuries.

**Repressive Violence:**

Use of tear gas and rubber bullets by the police against the protesters.

## Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**

6 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**

1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**

3 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**

At the end of the negotiation period, the unions had succeeded in having their three goals met. Salaries were raised, tax increases were delayed, and the financial processes of the government became more open.

The NTUCB and its partner unions remained active and firm in their demands for the duration of the campaign.

In this short 3 week period, the majority of unions in Belize had joined the protest, thousands of citizens had pledged their support, and they made allies in many sectors of society

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Belize formally became an independent nation in 1981 and quickly established itself as a parliamentary democracy with a high degree of electoral participation and a Constitution that guaranteed basic rights and freedoms to all citizens. In 1998, the People's United Party won a landslide victory and party leader Said Musa was sworn in as Prime Minister - a position he held until 2008.

On January 14, 2005 the Belizean government announced its proposed national budget for 2005-2006. The budget included major tax increases for real estate, financial institutions, tobacco, and rum. After years of popular frustration at alleged financial mismanagement and corruption by the current administration, the new budget sparked public outrage from local interest groups and organizations.

The day before the budget debate was set to begin, the National Trade Union Congress of Belize (NTUCB) called for a general two-day strike to begin the next day, January 20. This action was quickly followed by a call to strike by the Belize National Teachers Union (led by President Anthony Fuentes), the Public Service Union, the Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry (represented by Senator Godwin Hulse), and the Belize Business Bureau. On January 20 and 21, most of the schools and 80% of businesses in Belize City were closed.

The unions were protesting the proposed tax increases, which amounted to about 45.8 million U.S. dollars, saying that they were not for the benefit of the majority of people of Belize and would be borne by those least able to pay them. They demanded that the government reconsider the tax increases and delay their implementation, increase salaries for teachers and public officers, and institute financial reforms to increase citizen participation and decrease foreign debt. The leader of the opposition, Dean Barrow, called on all Belizeans to reject the proposed tax measures in any way possible.

Instead of reporting to work, many of the union members staged a protest outside the Parliament building in the capital city of Belmopan as the budget debate was taking place. They broadcast radio and television advertisements of nationwide demonstrations, urging citizens to participate. The NTUCB also scheduled simultaneous ecumenical services at different locations throughout the country to be followed by candlelight vigils. At one point the offices of the Minister of Housing, Servulo Baeza, and the Minister of State for Nation Development, Ismael Cal, were set on fire. Fire services quickly contained the blaze but the building was partly burnt and some of the contents destroyed.

On January 24, the teachers and public services unions announced that the strikes would become indefinite until their demands were met. Two days later, on January 26 more than 200 workers of Belize Water Services Limited walked off the job, the unions of the telecommunications and electricity workers went on strike, and the Fuel Suppliers Union issued directives to their members not to report to work until further notice. The Belize Medical and Dental Union announced a partial strike, saying that while they would continue to offer adequate healthcare, in solidarity with the movement had decided to temporarily suspend all elective surgical procedures and elective outpatient clinics. On January 28, the Public Service Union (which represented the majority of government workers) also announced a general strike.

Prime Minister Said Musa often turned to the radio to urge the protesters to be patient, to reconsider their actions, and even went so far as to suggest that the trade unions were trying to overthrow the government. While day-to-day actions of many Belizeans were disrupted, the budget debates in Congress continued as scheduled and the budget was eventually approved 19 to 10.

While union workers led the strikes against the proposed budget, other sectors of the Belizean population also became involved in the protests. The Maya Leaders Alliance of southern Belize and the Society for the Promotion of Education and Research announced their unequivocal support of the actions of the strikers and unions. On January 26, in a show of solidarity with the striking teachers, students at the University of Belize and Saint John's Junior College staged a peaceful demonstration in the capital. At the same time, the ruling People's United Party of Belize and the opposition United Democratic Party bussed in supporters for rallies to coincide with the budget debate in the capital. Reports of a scuffle between United Democratic Party protesters and police officers resulted in the police firing rubber bullets and tear gas into the crowd. However, calm was quickly restored and there are no documented serious injuries of either protesters or police officers.

On January 27, the government was able to reach an agreement with the business community. The Belize Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Belize Business Bureau had only participated in the first two days of the strike, after which it assessed the effectiveness and financial implications of the shutdown. In order to prevent another strike, the government agreed to make amendments to the Finance and Audit Bill to address the concerns of the business community. They also discussed a possible constitutional amendment to make these provisions permanent.

While the teachers' and public workers' strikes continued, Musa and his government continued their attempts to negotiate with the protesters. They proposed to pay half of the salary increases demanded by the teachers by April 1, with the remainder being paid by April 1, 2006, but the offer was dismissed. The teachers had decided they would settle for nothing less than their full demands.

On February 3, a new agreement was proposed. The Minister of National Development Assad Shoman and Financial Secretary Carla Barnett met with the National Trade Union Congress of Belize with a document outlining Said Musa's acceptance of the demands put forth by the NTUCB. The government agreed to pay teachers and public officers their salary increases immediately and to delay implementation of the tax measures announced in the budget from February 1 to March 1. As part of the agreement, the administration also said it would not withhold pay from the salaries of the teachers and public officers who had been on strike, provided they made up for lost time. The leaders of the teachers' union signed the agreement, however the NTUCB rejected the offer and continued to strike.

The next day, three thousand people took part in a demonstration outside the Parliament. Despite the fact that the teachers' union had signed the agreement, many teachers refused to comply by returning to teach and schools remained closed for the 12

th

day in a row. While the protesters were happy that the majority of their demands had been addressed in the proposed government agreement, they still demanded more substantial financial reform.

On February 7, after continued negotiations between the two sides, the NTUCB officially called for an end of the strikes. While they agreed to engage in negotiations, the unions threatened to resume the strikes if changes were not made to some aspects of the agreement proposed the previous week. They stated that if both sides had not signed an agreement by February 10, the

strikes and industrial action would resume. However, after a week of negotiations, on February 14 an agreement was finally reached by the two sides without having to resume the protests. The 10-point agreement addressed salary increases, tax implementations, and financial reforms. The trade unions were guaranteed a seat on the Central Bank's board, a three-member working group was appointed to review the proposed budget, and public officers were promised that they would not be penalized for striking.

In a public address the next day, Said Musa announced the following: "Our government has been engaged in a quiet revolution in the last few weeks to open the budget process as never before in the history of our nation." The unions were not only able to convince the government to increase their salaries and reexamine the budget, but also to open up the national financial processes to public input and debate.

## Research Notes

### Influences:

Not Known

### Sources:

Selected articles from Caribbean Media Corporation News Agency, Jan. 10 - Feb. 20, 2005

### Additional Notes:

Edited by Max Rennebohm (04/04/2011)

### Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Meghan Auker Becker 04/04/2010

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