



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Black miners strike in the Northern Rhodesian (Zambia) Copperbelt, 1935

20 May

1935

to: 29 May

1935

**Country:** Zambia

**Location Description:** *Rhokana (Nkana), Mufulira, and Roan Antelope (Luanshya) mines in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia)*

**Goals:**

The strike was called in response to a reduction in wages coupled with an increase in the 'native tax.' Stated goals not known.

### Methods

**Methods in 1st segment:**

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 097. Protest strike
- 105. Establishment strike
- 179. Alternative social institutions

**Methods in 2nd segment:**

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 105. Establishment strike
- 140. Hiding, escape, and false identities
- 179. Alternative social institutions

**Methods in 3rd segment:**

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 105. Establishment strike
- 179. Alternative social institutions

**Methods in 4th segment:**

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 105. Establishment strike
- 179. Alternative social institutions

**Methods in 5th segment:**

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 105. Establishment strike
- 179. Alternative social institutions

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 105. Establishment strike
- 179. Alternative social institutions

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Defense

**Cluster:**

Economic Justice

National/Ethnic Identity

**Group characterization:**

- black African mineworkers

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

Several sources indicate that the Bemba people provided much of the leadership in the strikes through the Mbeni dance association (Henderson; Perrings 1977, 1979; Steele).

**Partners:**

Not known

**External allies:**

Not known

**Involvement of social elites:**

Not known

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- Mufulira mineworkers

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

- Rhokana mineworkers

### Groups in 5th Segment:

- Roan Antelope mineworkers

### Groups in 6th Segment:

**Segment Length:** 1.5 days

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

### Opponents:

British colonial administration, military police, askari (local soldiers serving in European armies), mine company officials, and mine compound managers and assistants

### Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

### Campaigner violence:

Striking miners threw stones and sticks, at times advancing toward compound managers, assistants, and askari at the Roan Antelope mine.

### Repressive Violence:

Arrest, imprisonment, and deportation of dozens of strike leaders; askari beat strikers with batons and eventually opened fire on the strikers, killing six men and wounding twenty-two.

## Success Outcome

### Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

1 point out of 6 points

### Survival:

0 points out of 1 point

### Growth:

1 point out of 3 points

### Notes on outcomes:

While no stated goals are known, it seems likely that strikers acted in response both to the wage decrease and tax increase as well as against the daily injustices of the colonial mine compound. The commission of inquiry that followed the conclusion of the strike obscured the fundamental causes of the strike; the commission concluded the tax increase was 'fair and reasonable' and therefore inadequate grounds for strike action. The commission did acknowledge the existence of corporal punishment at Mufulira as a 'cause' of the strike, formed some oversight committees, and even dismissed an unpopular compound manager, which accounts for some degree of success. However, many sources view these results as token changes enacted by the administration; no fundamental change was made in the working conditions or political status of black African mineworkers. Others claim that the independent direct action by the labor force had a considerable influence on British colonial attitudes and policies. Further research should investigate how the 1935 strikes fit into the context of anti-colonial resistance in central Africa, including the independence movement in Zambia, to assess how 'successful' the 1935 actions were in prompting other resistance and the significance of the actions on their own right as early anti-colonial resistance.

The campaign was relatively short and virtually ended after violent repression. Also, after another wave of strikes in 1940, no comparable demonstration of mineworker resistance was seen until the 1950s. Even though the 1935 strikes didn't win mineworkers immediate gains, they set the stage for further struggles in the coming decades, including later significant success by the African Mineworkers' Union. More research should investigate the 1940 strikes in Northern Rhodesia to see how linked its organization was to those of 1935 and how it might inform our understanding of growth. Also, as with success, study of the broader anti-colonial struggle following 1935 and the history of miners in the Copperbelt might be elucidating.

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By 1924, Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) was administered and occupied by the British government as an official British protectorate. While the Colonial Office headed administration, a group of interconnected companies financed by Britain, South Africa, and the United States came to control what became the 'Copperbelt' in Northern Rhodesia. Copper was becoming more valuable due to increased demand for electrical components and motors and regional deposits were easy to extract and profitably attracted investors.

During the decade leading up to the strike, the Northern Rhodesian Copperbelt was booming, especially the mines of Rhokana (Nkana), Mufulira, Roan Antelope (Luanshya), and Nchanga. By 1930, up to 32,000 workers were employed in mining operations in Northern Rhodesia. White artisans and middle level management had been recruited from South Africa and Britain, while black African laborers and miners came from all over Central Africa.

Work conditions were very poor for all miners and there were deep wage inequalities between white and black mineworkers. Black mineworkers were practically barred from working skilled and many semi-skilled jobs due to the privileging of such roles for whites. Conditions in the mines themselves were deplorable, with high rates of silica-based diseases. African workers lived in company compounds, which were very cramped, basic, and uncomfortable. There was a permanent group of urban unemployed, and, finally, physical abuse often took place in the workplace and mine compounds.

In May 1935, black African mineworkers experienced a reduction of industrial wages following a sudden 'native tax' increase for those living in urban areas. The tax increase came at a time when demand for labor was falling and black worker mobility was becoming more difficult as white farmers were taking opportunities for agricultural production.

On May 20, notices were posted at the Roan Antelope mine alerting mineworkers of the tax increase. At Rhokana, no public notice was given; only when miners went to government offices to pay taxes were they informed of the increase. However, in Mufulira, mine police shouted the news around the compound to inform the miners. It was the Mufulira mine where mineworkers struck first. The following days were filled with organizing activity, general work stoppages, and mass meetings of protest.

By May 23, mine management claimed to have the 'situation under control.' The provincial administration had acted immediately, detaining those it considered to be strike leaders. However, some lead organizers escaped to Rhokana, where the next stoppage occurred.

On May 25, workers at Rhokana gave notice of intent to strike. Two days later the strike began, even after at least 75 men were arrested and imprisoned between the announcement and the strike. The day of the strike, troops were flown from Lusaka to patrol the mine compound. Feeling their act of protest was made sufficiently during the day, night shift mineworkers showed up to work as normal.

The next day, May 28, a worker from Rhokana was caught distributing leaflets to fellow mineworkers at Roan Antelope. It was soon discovered that miners were planning to strike there the following morning. In response, management requested more troops be sent to the mine. The next day eighty askari (local soldiers serving in European armies) arrived from Rhokana and immediately began attacking strikers with batons. Striking miners responded by throwing stones and sticks, at times advancing toward compound managers, assistants, and askari. Ultimately, the police opened fire on the strikers, killing six men and wounding twenty-two, shocking both sides.

In contrast to the scene at Roan Antelope, strikers in Mufulira were in lighter spirits. There, strikers protested in groups, congregated around compound offices, and shared occasional laughter. When the District Officer tried to address the strikers from atop his car he was shouted down by the strikers. He read the riot act aloud, ordering the strikers to disperse. When nearby askari were called to march into the strikers, the strikers scattered. A compound assistant present at the scene recalls, "everyone just ran, cleared the square in no time. It wasn't unpleasant at all, a lot of laughter from the strikers, a lot of jeering" (Perrings 1977, p. 47).

Back at Roan, the askari were withdrawn and replaced by a contingent of military police. The strikers continued to demonstrate on the 30th, but on that night forty-four of the supposed lead organizers were seized and sent to Ndola. The following day, most of the strikers returned to work.

Even though renewed calls for work stoppage and written protests against the tax were made at Rhokana and Mufulira in late July, it was the end of the 1935 strike.

Several sources indicate that the Bemba people (who made up the largest percentage of workers) provided much of the leadership in the strikes of 1935 (Henderson; Perrings 1977, 1979; Steele). A Bemba dance association, the Mbeni, was the main organizing hub for disseminating news, rumors, and instructions among strikers. Other forms of worker associations and regional groupings formed to help miners cope with life on the compounds. Many held regular collections for funds for self-help and general community support, including death and burial practices. Groups such as these among mineworkers may have contributed similarly to organization of the strike.

The conclusion of the strikes in Northern Rhodesia was followed by a commission of enquiry under the colonial administration. Obscuring the fundamental causes of the strike, the commission concluded the tax increase was 'fair and reasonable' and therefore inadequate grounds for strike action. The commission did acknowledge the existence of corporal punishment at Mufulira as a 'cause' of the strike, formed some oversight committees, and even dismissed an unpopular compound manager, but no fundamental change was made in the working conditions or status of black African mineworkers.

After another wave of strikes in 1940, no comparable demonstration of mineworker resistance was seen until the 1950s. The independent direct action by the labor force had a considerable influence on British colonial attitudes and policies. Even though the 1935 strikes didn't win mineworkers immediate gains, they set the stage for further struggles in the coming decades, including later significant success by the African Mineworkers' Union.

## Research Notes

### Sources:

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

Zein Nakhoda 14/05/2011

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