Black Rhodesian railroad workers strike for better pay, 1945

20 October
1945
to: 4 November
1945

Country: Zimbabwe
Country: Zambia

Location Description: Southern and Northern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe and Zambia

Goals:
This is the list of demands submitted by strikers in Bulawayo to the General Manager of Rhodesia Railways:

"Sir,

With most respectful we beg to inform you and your Administration that the strike of the African employees here in Bulawayo is due to the fact that the African employees submitted their requests to the General Manager, but however met with no satisfactory results.

Wages as No. I

... they should be paid according to their grades or a class of work they perform. That no man shall have to work for less than 5/- to 7/6 per day which is due to the fact that no man can ever live with the money paid to Africans by the Railways.... [This represented a 5x increase in pay. -WL]

Overtime

That the overtime should be paid just as it has been paid before ... he must get what he usually gets that is his daily pay instead of 3d per hour which is regarded as an increase and yet it is not.

Ration

That every African here is prepared not to receive any ration from the Railways. [This is a request to be paid always in cash, rather than food rations. -WL]

Office of the Supervisor of Natives

One of the things which causes much misunderstanding ... is the Office of Supervisor of Natives, because of what it does, it never do anything for the Africans, which is quite clear that since this Office came into existence nothing has been done for the good of the Africans.

... We assure you that we are prepared to go back to our work at any time provided our requests being granted.

We are Sir,
Your most humble servants.

Rhodesia Railway Native Employees.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 015. Group lobbying
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 013. Deputations
- 048. Protest meetings
- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 013. Deputations
- 048. Protest meetings
- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 048. Protest meetings
- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 105. Establishment strike

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Defense

Cluster:
Economic Justice
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Railway workers
Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Members of the Rhodesia Railways African Employees Association (RRAEA); The leadership "Committee of 18" included some workers that were not from the RRAEA
Partners:
None known
External allies:
Railway workers in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia)
Involvement of social elites:
Seeking to maintain order, the colonial government intervened to mediate between the strikers and the company. It favored the company in this mediating process, but nevertheless helped the strikers achieve their limited victories.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- RRAEA
  - workers in Bulawayo

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- workers at Wankie colliery
- workers in Fort Victoria
- workers in Gwelo
- workers in Salisbury
- workers in Selukwe

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- workers at Wankie colliery (Exit)

Groups in 4th Segment:

- workers in Northern Rhodesia

Groups in 5th Segment:

- workers in Bulawayo (Exit)
- workers in Fort Victoria (Exit)
- workers in Gwelo (Exit)
- workers in Salisbury (Exit)
- workers in Selukwe (Exit)

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: Approximately 2 days 16 hours

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Workers in the British colony of Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, bore an increased workload to support the war effort during WWII. As extraction of mineral resources increased, employees of Rhodesia Railways worked upward of 65 hours per week to transport the minerals to ports on the Indian Ocean. While white European railway workers had strong unions representing them, black African employees received inferior treatment and lower pay grades than whites. The Rhodesia Railways African Employees Association (RRAEA) was formed in spring 1944 in response to poor working conditions, and soon grew to include several hundred members, most of them in the hub city of Bulawayo. By 1945, it had submitted many written requests to the company, all of which were ignored. Company managers believed Africans were incapable of organizing themselves to demand more rights.

On September 27, 1945, Rhodesia Railways management decided to standardize the formerly disorganized overtime compensation policy for black employees. Although the company claimed that the change represented an improvement for most workers, and asserted after the fact that it immediately communicated the new policy to its employees, black employees denied being informed about the change. The miscommunication may have resulted from an unequal, intimidating work environment in which superiors would regularly “joke” about firing employees or cutting wages. Any actual attempts to inform workers of a changed policy may not have been taken seriously.

In any case, black employees were not aware of the change, which for some caused a wage decrease, until October 19. The next day, when monthly wages were calculated, several hundred employees at a material routing station in Bulawayo left their workstations and converged on the office of the “Supervisor of Natives,” Harold Farrar. Farrar heard their requests for an explanation, but refused to engage in any discussion. In fact, Farrar missed an opportunity to explain that the new policy would raise wages for lower-paid employees. He invited dissatisfied employees to speak to the General Manager, W.J. Skillicorn, but asked that they not mention his (Farrar’s) name.

The workers then proceeded to the Rhodesia Railways headquarters at Metcalfe Square. They peacefully waited outside the door as Farrar, having thought better of sending over two hundred angry men to his boss’s office, ran inside to consult with Skillicorn. Farrar returned with a message from the General Manager: “You may wait here for six months but you will not see him. You are wasting your time.” The crowd lingered for a while longer, then returned home. The next morning, October 21, a large number
of workers gathered in one of the employee housing compounds and resolved to strike the next day. Some members of the relatively small RRAEA gave leadership to the strikers, but other leaders were not RRAEA members. Leaders judged that alcohol would be detrimental to the behavior of strikers, and thus ordered that beer-making equipment be removed from housing compounds for the duration of the strike. A.J. Huxtable, the “Native Commissioner” of Bulawayo, addressed the crowd in an attempt to discourage the strike, but the workers simply ignored him.

On Monday morning, October 22, every one of the 2,708 black railway workers in Bulawayo went on strike. Picketers met incoming trains and convinced the black employees on them to join the strike. In mid-morning, General Manager Skillicorn addressed an assembly of workers and told them that, although he was willing to negotiate, he could not do so while the strike was on. The next day, the workers sent a delegation to Skillicorn’s office with their statement of demands. This time, Skillicorn agreed to meet with them. The strikers demanded, in order: (1) a five-fold increase in wages, to a level that would nevertheless be below a European worker’s salary, (2) a return to the former overtime pay guidelines, (3) to always be paid in cash rather than food rations, and (4) a termination of the office of the Supervisor of Natives. In response, Skillicorn reiterated that he would not negotiate before strikers went back to work.

The strike continued on Tuesday and Wednesday, with the strikers holding daily meetings to emphasize their organization and resolve. On Wednesday, the strike spread beyond Bulawayo to railway workers in Gwelo, Selukwe, Fort Victoria, Salisbury, and the Wankie colliery. The few workers who actually traveled on the trains had spread news of the strike to these locations. Even more workers joined the strike on Thursday, bringing the total amount of strikers to around 80% of the company’s 10,000 black employees. With the expansion of the strike through the Southern Rhodesian railway system, company management and colonial officials began to fear the possibility of a general strike across all industries.

The strike also took a significant toll on the daily operations of the Rhodesian economy. Limited shipping by train continued with the labor of white workers, convicts, and some blacks, but supplies of staple foods and coal dwindled nevertheless. Colonial Prime Minister Godfrey Huggins, having been notified by the Electricity Commission that power plants were running out of their coal reserves, decided on Thursday that the government needed to intervene. His administration promised to appoint an independent investigatory commission into railway labor conditions if the strike ended. Fearing that they would lose their leverage if they abandoned the strike, strike leaders in Bulawayo—known as the “Commission of 18”—refused the offer on Friday, October 26, and suggested instead that the commission convene while the strike was still occurring. Most other railway depots followed the lead of Bulawayo, with the exception of workers at the Wankie colliery, who returned to work in response to the government’s offer.

Pressure on Rhodesia Railways and the government increased on Saturday with the publication of the 18-month correspondence between RRAEA and the company. These letters completely disproved Skillicorn’s prior statements that the striker’s demands had not been previously articulated to him. Following the publication of the letters, Skillicorn publicly promised to respect and follow any findings of a government commission, were it to be formed. Meanwhile, strike leadership began to feel that the creation of an independent commission was a significant concession that should not be passed up. On Saturday afternoon, the Committee of 18 asked government representative H.D.D. Simmonds for a written guarantee that the government would appoint the committee immediately, that the committee would report its findings within three weeks of the strike’s end, and that Rhodesia Railways would respect the committee’s findings. Simmonds signed the written agreement.

Some effort was required by the Committee of 18 to convince strikers in Bulawayo that the deal was an acceptable outcome, but all eventually agreed to return to work on Monday, October 29. In other parts of the colony, strikers mistrusted incoming reports that a deal had been made; not until November 2 was everybody convinced that the agreement was not a company-engineered deception.

Even as the deal was being negotiated on October 27, the strike spread from Southern Rhodesia into Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia). Employees of Rhodesia Railways in Broken Hill struck for the next nine days, but a far smaller percentage of total workers struck in Northern than Southern Rhodesia. Broken Hill workers returned to work when another investigatory commission was appointed by the government of Northern Rhodesia.
Both investigatory commissions published their reports in December 1945. They called for a 25-30% raise in wages, but the new wage level was still far below the poverty line. In Southern Rhodesia, the railway was told to improve its sick leave practices. And in both territories, a new African Affairs department was established to supersede the Supervisor of Natives position. Although the strikers’ other demands were not met, they accepted these limited gains.

Research Notes

Influences:
The railway strike began a period of labor unrest in Rhodesia that culminated in the general strike of 1948. (2)

Sources:

Additional Notes:
So as not to divide segments down the middle of a day, I separated the segments as follows:

October 20-21
October 22-24
October 25-27
October 28-30
October 31-November 2

November 2-4

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
William Lawrence, 15/2/2011

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