



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Central African Republic Unions Strike for Democracy 1990-1993

- African Democracy Campaigns (early 1990s)

March

1990

to: August

1993

Country: Central African Republic

Location City/State/Province: Bangui

Goals:

Worker and student unions campaigned for the payment of owed salaries, the formation of a multi-party national congress, and the resignation of President Kolingba.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 104. Professional strike
- 117. General strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 104. Professional strike
- 117. General strike

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

Notes on Methods:

Strikes seemed to continue, but to a lesser extent, in segments 4-6

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- students
- union workers (civil servants and private workers)

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Teachers Trade Union Federation leaders Messrs Jackson Mazette and Pierre Ngaga-Mangou, secretary-general of the Trade Union of the Public Works Ministry's Workers Germain Zoungala, trade union leader Theophyle Sonikole, and student union leader Cyrus-Emmanuel Sandy

Partners:

Union Syndicale des Travailleurs de Centrafrique (USTC)

Central African Democratic Rally (RDC)

Coordinating Committee for a National Congress (CCCN)

Federation of Trade Unions of Central African Republic

External allies:

French government

Involvement of social elites:

General Timothee Malendoma

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

It is unknown when Central African Democratic Rally (RDC) became involved, though they were involved in the May 1991 demonstration.

Coordinating Committee for a National Congress (CCCN), Union Syndicale des Travailleurs de Centrafrique (USTC), and Federation of Trade Unions of Central African Republic were formed in March 1990. Though the Federation of Trade Unions of Central African Republic organized the strikes, evidence suggests that the other two were supportive and possibly involved in the planning.

Segment Length: 7 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

President Anre Kolingba

Prime Minister Edouard Frank

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

During the demonstration on 4 May 1991, some of the demonstrators assaulted passersby and destroyed property. The federation of unions and the Central described that the perpetrators of the violence infiltrated the demonstration with intentions to undermine its purpose.

Repressive Violence:

In 1990-1991, Kolingba's government arrested a total more than eighty-four campaigners. Police used tear gas on demonstrators during demonstrations in May and June 1991.

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:

It was not possible to verify that a national multi-party congress was formed. It seemed that under the newly elected President Patasse there was still much political unrest.

After achieving independence from French colonial rule in 1960, the Central African Republic was controlled by a series of military coups. On 20 September 1981 General Anre Kolingba overthrew the authority of President Dacko.

Upon gaining control, Kolingba outlawed labor unions; there were no political parties. Kolingba cemented his power and created a façade of democratic rule, by drafting a constitution, being sworn into presidency in 1986, declaring his membership in the political party Rassemblement Démocratique Centrafricain (RDC), and forming a National Assembly.

In 1988, Kolingba lifted the ban of union activity, permitting workers to organize and strike if third-party mediation attempts between the union and employer had failed. In July 1989, Central African Republic workers held a National Constitutive Congress in Bangui, the country's capitol. The approximately two hundred workers who attended created a national labor coalition: the Union Syndicale des Travailleurs de Centrafrique (USTC). By December 1989, the Ministry of the Interior had recognized sixty trade unions.

In March 1990 students and unemployed civil workers united to strike for economic and government reform. Some dissenters organized to form the Coordinating Committee for a National Congress (CCCN). The Coordinating Committee demanded a national Congress, open to political parties other than Kolingba's Rassemblement Démocratique Centrafricain.

In May 1990 Kolingba publicly rejected the demands for a multi-party National Congress. Between May and August, the government detained supporters of a National Congress. During those months, The Coordinating Committee published open letters to the President demanding a national conference for multi-party democracy.

On 12 September 1990, Kolingba's government arrested twenty-three Coordinating Committee members, who were meeting at the house of Aristide Sokambi. They had gathered to organize a demonstration planned for 20 September. Police also arrested General Timothee Malendoma who expressed sympathy with the Committee.

The next month thousands of teachers and health workers went on strike, demanding a pay raise. Another source states that they also demanded a multi-party national congress. After negotiations with the government were inconclusive, the Union Syndicale des Travailleurs de Centrafrique (USTC) declared a general strike in solidarity with the teachers and health workers on 21 November.

The government refused to recognize the strike, because they claimed that the negotiation had not followed the legal process. The government did not increase the teachers' salaries, and the strike ended on 4 December.

On 22 April 1991, Kolingba stated that the formation of political parties other than Rassemblement Démocratique Centrafricain would be permitted.

On 29 April 1991, the National Labor Federation started a strike. The National Labor Federation was composed of five public trade unions encompassing the following sectors: education, health, rural development, and finance. Because teachers participated in the strike, classes stopped. The Federation demanded that the government provide them with their unpaid salaries from March and April of that year, and rehire five workers who had been suspended during the November strike. Prime Minister Edouard Frank asked the Federation strikers to resume work, but they continued to strike.

On 4 May 1991 hundreds of students coordinated a demonstration in Bangui in solidarity with the civil servants' strike. They held signs saying "Pay our Parents" and "We want a right to education." Police responded to the student protest with tear gas. After this police repression began, students began building barricades to block the major Bangui roads. Some of the demonstrators assaulted passersby and destroyed property. The federation of unions and the Central said that the perpetrators of the violence infiltrated the demonstration with intentions to undermine its purpose.

On 7 May Federation leaders met with Prime Minister Frank and presented their demands. The Federation denied responsibility for the violence that occurred on the May 4th protest. On 8 May the Federation declared that they would return to work on 26 May if the government had by then provided their unpaid salaries.

On 25 May the government provided civil servants with their March pay, and promised that they would provide April pay. On May 30, the Federation declared that the strike would continue because the government refused to provide them with payment for May during the time that they were on strike. On 1 June the Federation announced the continuation of the strike to its members. Some members expressed disappointment with the decision, and described it as a political move by the five union leaders. Around 20,000 civil servants did not resume work.

On 4 June, the private sector called a general strike in Bangui, which halted its economy for forty-eight hours. In this strike the public and private sector unions united in their demands for higher wages and critique of Kolingba.

That day police arrested two leaders of the Teachers Trade Union Federation, Messrs Jackson Mazette and Pierre Ngaga-Mangou. They also arrested Mr Germain Zoungala, the secretary-general of the Trade Union of the Public Works Ministry's Workers. On 5 June Prime Minister Frank again asked the workers to end their strike; Frank stated that, since the public servants' demands had already been met, the worker had political motives for continuing the strike. Some in the private sector continued striking for the full week.

On 17 June students called for a general strike, with the demand of a multi-party national congress meeting to discuss the Central

African Republic's socio-economic issues. Again, Bangui's economy was halted, as most public and private employees stayed home, including public transportation workers and private traders. The government took the federation of five public unions to court, charging them with continuing the strike for political purposes. On 21 June the court adjourned without conclusion.

On June 24-25 economic activity in Bangui again halted, as trade unions called for a general strike. Though students claimed that the strike would continue until the government relented, many private sector workers returned to their jobs after two days. On July 4-5, students and workers continued to demonstrate in Bangui.

Junior Minister for Public Security Augustin Mbanda said that demonstrators had attacked two undercover police who were searching for the trade union leader Theophyle Sonikole. Police used tear gas on demonstrators, and arrested thirty-four trade union leaders.

These leaders announced that the general strike should continue until Kolingba had agreed to hold a national conference to form an interim government and a multi-party election. On 7 July Prime Minister Frank announced that the multi-party government had been incorporated into the Central African Republic constitution. The government also announced that they would dismiss public employees if they did not return to work the following day, 8 July.

On July 25, the Teachers Trade Union Federation called for teachers to strike and prevent classes from beginning on 1 August. The union demanded the release of the arrested trade union members, the removal of security forces from the Labor Exchange, and the full payment of wages from May and June, 1991. Teachers and students demonstrated in Bangui, constructing barricades. They also briefly held a French aid worker hostage, in an effort to gain French support for a national conference.

Police arrested some of the demonstrators, including student union leader Cyrus-Emmanuel Sandy. As the demonstrators calmed, the federation distributed pamphlets calling for another two-day strike the following week. On 31 July, the three union leaders who police arrested on 4 July received suspended sentences of one to one to two years in prison.

On 3 August 3 unions led strikes in the education and health sectors. Two days later, students demonstrated on the streets of Bangui, demanding that Prime Minister Edouard Frank and President Kolingba resign.

Strikes lessened in 1992, as the government began to negotiate with the unionists about arranging a national conference. In September 1992 Kolingba announced that an election would be held the next month.

Following two years of stalling, the Central African Republic government, under pressure from France, held a democratic and fair election in August 1993. Ange-Félix Patassé won the presidential election. On coming to office, Patassé paid twelve months of wages owed to civil servants.

Research Notes

Influences:

Campaigns in nearby countries for democracy, such as Zambia and Zaire, may have influenced the Central African Republic campaign.(1)

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