

# Danish workers strike for electoral reform (Easter Crisis of 1920), 1920

## Timing

Time period notes:

some individual industry strikes continued afterwards with more economic goals

March 30,

1920

to:

April 4,

1920

## Location and Goals

Country:

Denmark

Location City/State/Province:

Mainly Copenhagen

[View Location on Map](#)

Goals:

The main goal was to force the Government to convene the Rigsdag in order to pass electoral reform. Campaigners also called for a clear statement regarding the annexation of Slesvig, higher wages, and negotiations for worker participation in private concerns of companies.

Some groups called for the creation of a Republic and the reinstatement of the Zahle Cabinet, but these were not united goals of the campaign.

## Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 032. Taunting officials
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 013. Deputations
- 106. Industry strike
- 115. Selective strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 013. Deputations
- 106. Industry strike
- 115. Selective strike
- 116. Generalised strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 013. Deputations
- 116. Generalised strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 013. Deputations
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 116. Generalised strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 116. Generalised strike

Segment Length:

1 day

## **Classifications**

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Radical and Socialist Party members
- members of the Trade Union Congress

## **Leaders, partners, allies, elites**

Leaders:

Trade Union Congress leaders, Socialist Party leaders such as Minister Stauning.

Partners:

Northern Slesvig workers.

External allies:

Not Known

Involvement of social elites:

Political leaders and Rigsdag members played a huge role in the campaign by negotiating with the King and Prime Minister Liebe

## **Joining/exiting order of social groups**

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Artisans
- Sailors
- and Dockworkers
- bakers

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- North Slesvig Workers

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length:

1 day

## **Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence**

Opponents:

King Christian X and the Liebe Cabinet

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

Not Known

Repressive Violence:

Not Known

## **Success Outcome**

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

4 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Total points:

7 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

The Campaigners did get the government to convene the Rigsdag so that electoral reform could be passed, there were also calls for the reinstatement of the Zahle Ministry and the formation of a Republic however, neither of which happens. Although these may not have been the main, stated goals, they were sought by certain groups of the campaign. The Rigsdag also made a clear statement on the Slesvig issue, but wage increases and

negotiations for workers were not a part of the final compromise that prevented the general strike.

The resistance stayed strong through the short campaign. Although the Radicals did end up losing a lot of political support before the next election because of the strike campaign, all groups retained their infrastructure.

By the end of the campaign the demands had the support of a wide variety of groups, but there were also many workers against the possibility of the general strike

When King Christian X of Denmark dismissed Prime Minister Zahle and his Radical Party Cabinet in late March 1920, the Socialists and Radicals, who held a political majority at the time, were furious. Although the King still had the right to do this under the Danish constitution, Denmark freely elected parliament members to the Folketing chamber of the Rigsdag (Parliament), who in turn determined the cabinet and no king had interfered with this process since the constitution was created in 1848.

Zahle had planned to hold free elections soon after the end of World War I, once necessary election reforms had been passed by parliament. The Folketing, made up of Radicals, Socialists, Liberals (whose economic policy is similar to what Americans call “conservative”), Syndicalists, and Conservatives, never agreed on these reforms. The conflict between the King and the Zahle cabinet reached a climax after a plebiscite was held in Slesvig, a province that had been taken from Denmark by Germany decades before. The plebiscite was to determine whether Slesvig citizens wanted to remain a part of Germany or reunite with Denmark. North Slesvig voted for Danish rule and Central Slesvig voted to remain with Germany, although many Danish nationalists lived there. King Christian X wanted to nationalize all of Slesvig. Zahle refused to defy the plebiscite by following the King's plan, and so Christian X dismissed Zahle and his cabinet while the parliament was in recess for the Easter holiday.

The king appointed Otto Liebe as the new prime minister to gather a new cabinet, which would serve until the general election in late April, a month away.

Radical Party members immediately called for the reinstatement of the Zahle cabinet and the Socialists claimed the need for a republic in Denmark. The leaders of the parties asked for “a revolution of folded arms.”

The Radicals and Socialists had the trade unions on their side. In the final days of March the Trade Union Congress began discussions of a general strike. On March 30, after an open-air Socialist meeting, citizens took to the streets and marched to the King's palace demanding a republic. After some time, police disbanded the large groups of demonstrators. That morning people had also surrounded the King on his morning ride peacefully and shouted, “Long live the Zahle ministry.”

The following day the Trade Union Congress leaders voted unanimously in favor of a general strike to begin on April 6. Their initial demand had been for the reinstatement of the Zahle Cabinet. However, the main goal was to force the government to convene the Rigsdag in order to pass electoral reforms and make a clear declaration on the fate of Slesvig. They also wanted higher wages and negotiations about worker participation in private matters of business.

The strike was to include all workers except those in waterworks, hospitals, charities, labor relations, and newspapers supporting the strike. The Trade Union Congress also wanted to give political leaders plenty of time to negotiate a compromise with King Christian X. The King had already begun discussions with Socialist and Union leaders.

Certain industries, such as artisans, bakers, sailors, and dockworkers, began to strike on March 31 and April 1. Already there was not enough bread to go around and most trade ships were kept from sailing. Military troops were sent to Copenhagen during these initial strikes, but railway workers refused to work for military transport.

Many workers in private industries refused to strike and there were many union members who were against the general strike as well. Workers in Northern Slesvig had agreed to join in a sympathy strike when the general strike began.

The King and Prime Minister Liebe had announced that general elections would be held April 22 and the Rigsdag would not be dissolved until the day before, leaving time for negotiations of election reforms, but this was not satisfactory for the Union Congress's demands.

On April 3 there was a town council meeting in Copenhagen. The Radical and Socialist members of the council led a procession out of the meeting, leaving the Conservatives and Liberals there. They marched to the King's palace, symbolically reenacting the procession by the town council in 1848 that had led to constitutionalism in Denmark. Demonstrators followed them singing, shouting, and carrying red flags. Further supporters joined the march along the way. At the palace the crowd pushed through the police barricade into the palace square.

The Radical and Socialist politicians went into the palace to speak with the King about their demands while the demonstrators made speeches in the square. The King told the politicians he would consider their demands with Prime Minister Liebe. Socialist leader Stauning passed this on to the crowd and told them to remain prepared for a complete general strike.

Later that day the King also met with the Conservative and Liberal town councillors. The King called party leaders to the palace to make a decision about the Liebe Cabinet and electoral reform. The leaders decided on new elections and to go forward with an electoral reform bill in the Rigsdag.

Early the next morning Prime Minister Liebe announced his willingness to resign. The Rigsdag was convened soon after to pass the electoral reform that would provide additional seats for better representation of the population, among other things. The general strike was cancelled and a new non-political cabinet was formed for the period before the elections scheduled on April 26.

Individual strikes continued for Seamen, journeymen bakers, and dockers. All these groups were holding out for greater industry reform, unrelated to the political demands tied to the original general strike plan.

Although the strike campaign was successful in bringing about electoral reform, the campaign lost a great deal of political support for the Radicals and Socialists. Many citizens had been against the general strike decision and this dissent showed in the elections. There were big wins for the Liberals and huge defeats for the Radicals, who lost half of the seats that they had previously held. Never again in Danish history did a King interfere with the democratic decisions of the people.

## **Research Notes**

Influences:

Revolution of 1848 for constitutionalism in Denmark (1). Danish Resistance to the Nazis (2)

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Additional Notes:

The main tactic of this campaign was the threat of general strike, although the King granted the demands before the general strike was to begin.

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