East German workers strike to protect wages, 1953

- included participation by more than one social class [1]

Timing
Time period notes:
The actual uprising lasted three days, but inspired more action later on.
15 June
1953
to:
17 June
1953

Location and Goals
Country:
Germany
Location City/State/Province:
Berlin
Location Description:
Strike took place at the Potsdamer Platz, an important public square and traffic intersection in the centre of Berlin, Germany
View Location on Map
Goals:
To eradicate newly formed laws that demanded workers increase production by 10% while decreasing their wages.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 098. Quickie walkout (lightning strike) ›The workers had not planned for a strike, but when their demands to return to old norms were addressed, they began an impromptu strike.

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 051. Walk-outs›Employees of VEB from Block 40 decided to join union delegates and march to the Prime Minister, Grotewohl, and the General Secretary of the SED (socialist party) Ulbricht

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 016. Picketing›Workers made signs and marched in the streets
- 117. General strike ›workers called for a general strike against a government claiming to be a worker's government.

Methods in 4th segment:

- 117. General strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches›A mass meeting of 60,000-80,000 demonstrators met to discuss their demands
- 016. Picketing
- 117. General strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 016. Picketing
- 117. General strike
- 182. Stay-in strike›Workers returned to their jobs but did not work

Segment Length:

12 hours

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- inhabitants
- laypeople of East Germany
- workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Not known

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- A group of 200-400 workers

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

- 000
- A strike conducted by the general population of over 300

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

No formal groups pledged to join, as the campaign was very short-lived.

Segment Length:

12 hours

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

The SED (socialist party) in East Germany, the Soviet police, the Communist regime, and the Soviet Union

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Some fought with police in the streets, some crowds beat a few officials and informers to death.

Repressive Violence:

Tanks roamed the streets along with Soviet soldiers, and eventually fired at the demonstrators, killing 21 of them and ending the campaign

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0 points out of 1 point

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Total points:

3 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:

The quick strike grew significantly, but the Soviet shootings quelled the movement and the economic demands were not met.

On 15 June 1953, in East Berlin, construction workers on the Stalinallee Avenue began to voice their issues with the SED's (Socialist Unity Party) new regulations. The SED trade union officials, following mass worker emigration from East Germany, increased worker production requirements to fulfill their desired targets. However, the SED trade union officials announced that workers would be paid at the same rate, thus effectively decreasing the value of each worker.

Workers did not like the new terms, and demanded that the old wage and worker production rates be put back

into effect. Two worker delegates were chosen to take their demands to Grotewohl, the Prime Minister, and Ulbricht, the General Secretary of the SED. When union representatives could not be reached for discussion, workers decided they would not resume work until the issue had been resolved. They called for a general strike for the following day.

Workers arrived to work the next day, and once again agreed to go on general strike. Workers took to the streets with handmade signs demanding that old wage rates be put back into place. The demonstrators grew from 300 to 2,000 people that first day.

Another general strike was called for the following day, and on 17 June, 300,000 workers in 272 towns throughout East Germany also went on strike. Some German police even joined the campaign. The demonstrators were careful not to harm German police because the strikers saw their campaign was directed at Soviet police and troops. The strike was generally nonviolent, and many of the striking workers asked the others with them not to use violence. However, some demonstrators destroyed property, fought police, and in some places, beat and killed government officials and informers. However, these instances were committed by a small portion of participants.

The demonstrators called for a mass meeting and rally that evening. However, before the meeting could take place, Soviet troops with tanks and guns found the crowd and fired into them, killing twenty-one people. The demonstrators, unprepared for this kind of repression, scattered and the movement was repressed. The SED made 20,000 arrests following the strike.

While the strike gained significant traction in only two days, the violent Soviet soldiers were able to stem the movement quickly. The demonstrators did not succeed in their goals, although their movement did point out the potential solidarity among East Germans.

Research Notes

Sources:

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Brant, Stefan, The East German Rising, 17th June 1953. London, Thames and Hudson, 1955

Sharp, Gene, "The Politics of Nonviolent Action" Porter Sargent Publisher, Boston, MA, page 675.

Associated Press dispatch, datelined Berlin, 22 June 1953, quoted in Miller, Nonviolence, p. 352.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
John Pontillo, 24/02/2013
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