



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Egyptian laborers strike for pay, ~1170 BCE

*Time period notes: 29th year of the Reign of Ramses III, however
the length of the campaign is unclear*

1170 BCE

Before A.D.

to: 1170 BCE

Before A.D.

Country: Egypt

Location Description: *Necropolis*

Goals:

To receive rations owed to them by the Egyptian government

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 013. Deputations
- 097. Protest strike
- 162. Sit-in

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Artisans for the Pharaoh

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Unclear - Ammenakht was the scribe whose account describes the strike, and he initially asked for rations to be delivered in the second month, but his account does not seem to indicate that he participated in the strike action.

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

Local government was outwardly supportive, and the Vizier passed the message along to the Pharaoh.

Involvement of social elites:

Local and regional government officials passed grievances up the hierarchy to more powerful government officials that could expedite the food delivery.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Striking Workers

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: Not Known

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Egyptian Government

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:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

growth to encompass the entire labor group at the necropolis

The first labor strike in recorded history took place in the 12th Century, BCE, in Egypt. The strike was recorded on papyrus, discovered in Egypt, and though it is damaged and incomplete, it is the only record of the strike in existence. All records of this strike refer to dates with reference to the then-current Pharaoh, Ramses III. During the 29th year of his reign (roughly 1170 BCE), artisans tasked with building the necropolis (burial chambers) of King Ramses III repeatedly struck, apparently complaining of insufficient rations.

It is unclear exactly why the artisans were not receiving their normal rations, though there is evidence that the shortage of food was largely the result of corruption in the ruling class. The custom was a monthly ration of grain, but implicit in the document is the sense that the ration had frequently been delayed during Ramses III's reign. In the 29th year, the grain did not arrive until the 23rd day of the month, when Ammenakht, an artisan (and probably the scribe that recorded the strike on papyrus), complained to the local government authorities. The rations during the fifth month were more than 4 weeks late, and the sixth month's rations were delivered two weeks into the month.

In the seventh month of the 29th year of Ramses' rule, the workers had had enough. One day, all the workers simply lay down their tools and marched out of the necropolis they were building. According to Ammenakht, their supervisors had no idea where they had gone - they had never seen anything like this before. They marched to their local government officials, and demanded that they be paid their food rations. Though the local elders agreed that they should be paid, they were unable to provide the rations. The next day, the workers marched towards the temple of Ramses II, and were able to speak with the Visier (Mayor), who was finally able to secure a ration payment for the workers (though it was not a full payment). Satisfied, the workers returned to their labor.

There is evidence that the success of this strike compelled workers to continue to use the tactic effectively throughout the reign of Ramses III. As the strikes continued regularly, local government officials began to increase the number of workers they hired to deliver food and supplies to the workers, so that it was obvious to the workers that they were being heard. It is clear that the tactic was so new to all the authority figures in ancient Egypt that they were completely unprepared to deal with it in any way other than to simply attempt to appease the workers. They were very successful in their campaign, one of the first of its kind.

Research Notes

Influences:

Influenced other Egyptian protest strikes in the near future.

Sources:

Edgerton, William. "The Strikes in Ramses III's Twenty-Ninth Year." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*. 10.3 (1951): 137-145.

Romer, John. *Ancient Lives: Daily Life in Egypt of the Pharaohs*. Henry Holt and Co., 1990. 116-123.

Additional Notes:

This campaign is difficult to record in the database because the information is so sparse, and because society was so different 3000 years ago. As such, there is very little information, particularly about participants and supporters.

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

Kelly Schoolmeester 22/03/2010

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