



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Gabon oil workers strike to protest changing labor conditions, 2010-11

12 April

2010

to: 6 April

2011

Country: Gabon

Location City/State/Province: Libreville

Location Description: Gabon oil sector dependents

Goals:

Restrict foreign workers in the oil sector, give executive positions in the oil sector to Gabonese nationals, dissolve minimum service requirement of oil sector workers.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 016. Picketing
- 106. Industry strike

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Members of the National Organization of Oil Employees

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

National Organization of Oil Employees union (ONEP) Secretary General Guy-Roger Aurat Reteno, ONEP spokesperson
Arnauld Engadji

Partners:

Not Known

External allies:

Not Known

Involvement of social elites:

Not Known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- National Organization of Oil Employees

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 2 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Oil Ministry, Department of Labor, Gabonese National 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:

1 point out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

This campaign received a 4 for success, because although the government promised to meet the opposition's demands, they have yet to officially do so. The campaigners were successful in achieving a statement from the government, however unsuccessful in immediate official responses to meet their demands.

Gabon, a nation of 1.5 million people, is the sixth largest oil exporter in Africa. In 2008, the country was producing as many as 250,000 barrels of crude oil a day. Foreign investors included Royal Dutch Shell, Total, Tullow Oil Plc., and Canadian Natural Resources.

In March of 2010, the National Organization of Oil Employees (ONEP) first began threatening a strike over changing labor requirements, but the Oil Ministry quickly came to the negotiation table. Both sides expressed their desire to reach a deal as quickly as possible. However, a month later, when the government had yet to make any concessions to the union, ONEP reissued the threat of a strike.

On Monday, 12 April, ONEP walked away from the fruitless negotiations with the Oil Ministry. The next day Arnauld Engandji, a spokesperson for ONEP, held a press conference where he announced a work stoppage. The workers had two major demands. The first was in response to a previous governmental decree issued on 11 February 2010. The decree said energy should be added to a list of sectors in which employees are required to provide a minimum service in the sector. The other sectors that faced this requirement included healthcare providers and transportation services. The union strongly opposed this decree, saying that it fundamentally undermined an employee's right to strike—a tactic the union used for leverage in collective bargaining.

The other major issue that ONEP identified was the influx of foreign workers into the oil sector. One study showed that 1,893 of the 8,590 workers in the oil sector were from foreign countries, and that Gabonese held only 17% of the executive positions. The majority of foreigners who were entering the oil sector were from other African nations or were expatriates from European countries. Furthermore, Engandji explained, many of these foreign workers were working without permits. Estimates of the number of workers represented by ONEP range from 5,000 to 20,000.

On 13 April union spokesperson Engandji gave a 24-hour warning so that the 600,000 residents of Libreville, the capital of Gabon, could stockpile petroleum products. ONEP planned to suspend fuel services to nearly every oil-dependent sector, including the energy and water company and the Libreville Airport. However, the union spared several major institutions from the effects of the strike, including the hospital and security services.

Workers started the strike on the morning of 14 April and fuel supplies to most of Libreville ceased. Public transportation in the city ground to a halt. Workers refused to take fuel to most of the nation's industries.

In response, Labor Minister Maxime Ngozo Issondou said that the strike should be called off to protect the interests of the people. Issondou said that as soon as ONEP was willing to resume negotiations, the government would be willing to re-launch the commission aimed at resolving the impasse between the union and Oil Ministry as well as institute temporary restrictions on foreigners working in the oil sector. ONEP responded by saying that the government's invitation was not serious and that the government had to address the union's needs through a different channel.

On the morning of 16 April, Christophe Akaga Mba, the Director General of the Gabonese Petroleum Department reported that ONEP's strike had almost shut down the country's total oil production capacity. Mba said that as of the morning of 16 April, production had stopped by 97%. That day the union and the Oil Ministry reached an accord.

Early the next day, 17 April. ONEP suspended the strike, confident in returning to the negotiation table primarily because the

Ministry had agreed to the union's preconditions in writing.

Oil workers returned to their jobs while talks between officials on each side continued for several more months. Finally, in October of 2010, ONEP and the Gabon Oil Ministry reached a formal agreement that was signed by both sides. In total, the government agreed to 25 of the specific demands set forth by ONEP.

The agreement limited the proportion of foreign workers in the oil sector to 10% or less. Furthermore, all executive posts within the sector had to be held by Gabonese individuals. Specific legislation implementing the limits on foreign workers was to be finished by the end of the year. The oil firms would be given two years to adjust to the 10% limit, and 6 months for the "Gabonisation" of the executive positions.

The government agreed to create a special arm of the labor inspectorate to oversee that these changes took place. The accord was signed by Gabon Oil Minister Julien Nkgohe Bekale, Labor Minister Maxime Nozo Issondou, and ONEP Secretary General Guy-Roger Aurat Reteno.

Oil industry workers were hopeful that things would change. However, the government did not follow through with its promises, and exactly one year later ONEP decided that the time for action had come once again. The union began mobilizing workers and prepared for another strike.

On 24 March 2011, the leaders of the ONEP once again began talks with the President and government of Gabon to discuss regulations on the Gabonese oil industry to only hire (or give a preference to hiring) Gabonese citizens. Angry sentiments towards the oil industry of Gabon had remained from the 2010 strike. Because the laws had still not been ratified, ONEP and its members felt the need to discuss matters with the government to speed up the process.

The talks began on 24 March 2011 and lasted a week. On Wednesday, 30 March, the talks collapsed after a week of making no progress. ONEP members began to organize, and on Friday, 1 April, began a 4-day strike against the oil industry. Around four thousand ONEP members participated in the strike. They refused to go to work until their demands were met by the government and President.

The only two export points for Gabonese oil, Gamba and Port-Lopez, were shut down on the second day of the strike because all oil production had been halted by 2 April. Oil revenue accounted for about 60% of the Gabon budget, and between 220,000 and 240,000 barrels of oil are produced per day. The strikers planned to cripple the country in order to get the President to stick to his word.

On Sunday, 3 April, about 300 people demonstrated outside of the headquarters of Total Gabon (one of the oil production companies) and held banners that read "Unlimited General Strike against the abusive employment of foreign workers".

Negotiations concluded on Monday, and that evening, 4 April, union leaders called an end to the strike after reaching an agreement with the government to hire more locals. The government promised to demand that oil companies hire a much larger proportion of Gabonese citizens, and the union leaders decided they were satisfied with this promise.

The union notified the oil company staff of the agreement on Monday night, and the staff were back at work for the oil companies by Tuesday morning, 6 April. The strike cost the government and oil companies 60 billion USD in lost revenue in only four days, proving to the government that, should they not comply with their promises, the union and workers could easily cripple the nation once again.

In October 2011, the law limiting foreign employees to 10% had yet to be ratified, and President Ali Bongo Ondimba urged his government to speed up the ratification process after threats from ONEP that another strike would be held. The strike remained a threat, and no further action was taken by ONEP. The government is still working towards ratifying the law, and while Union members are unhappy that change has not yet occurred, ONEP has declared that they will remain quiet and understand that political processes to pass a law take time.

Research Notes

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