



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Guyanese sugar workers strike 135 days for economic justice, 1977

20 August

1977

to: 5 January

1978

Country: Guyana

Goals:

Payment of USD 85 million in wages from GuySuCo that was withheld because of the 1974 sugar levy.

Secondarily, many strikers wanted the government to resume power-sharing talks with the opposition People's Progressive Party

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention › Announced Intention to Strike
- 100. Farm workers' strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 013. Deputations › Trade Union Council attempted negotiations with GuySuCo
- 100. Farm workers' strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions › Declaration of Support from Caribbean Council of Churches
- 100. Farm workers' strike
- 107. Sympathy strike › NAACIE struck for 2 weeks in solidarity

Methods in 4th segment:

- 100. Farm workers' strike
- 107. Sympathy strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 100. Farm workers' strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 100. Farm workers' strike

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 080. Suppliers' and handlers' boycott › British Dockworkers refused to unload ships carrying Guyanese Sugar

Notes on Methods:

Workers likely picketed as well, since some sources said that opponents held counter-pickets. However, this action is not clear from the sources used.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Sugar Workers in the Guyana Agriculture Workers Union

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Guyana Agriculture Workers Union (GAWU)

Partners:

People's Progressive Party (PPP), National Association of Agricultural, Commercial and Industrial Employees (NAACIE), Guyana Headman's Union

External allies:

Clerical and Commercial Workers Union, University of Guyana Workers Union, Trade Union Council, Private Sugar Cane Farmers, Dockworkers in Great Britain, Oilworkers Union in Trinidad, Caribbean Council of Churches, Guyana Council of Churches,

Involvement of social elites:

Cheddi Jagan (Leader of the PPP and former leader of the colony of British Guiana) supported the strikers.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Cheddi Jagan
- Clerical and Commercial Workers Union
- GAWU
- Guyana Headman's Union
- NAACIE
- PPP
- Private Sugar Cane Farmers

- University of Guyana Workers Union

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Trade Union Council

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Caribbean Council of Churches
- Guyana Council of Churches
- Trade Union Council (Exit)

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Unknown Segment: Dockworkers in Great Britain; Oilworkers Union in Trinidad

Segment Length: *Approximately 3 weeks*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

The government-owned Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) and the People's National Congress-run government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

The government hired unemployed people to replace strikers in the cane fields and used police, soldiers, teachers, and government workers to work in the sugar industry. The government also formed parallel institutions in an attempt to replace the GAWU and the Guyana Council of Churches. Government supporters also held counter-pickets with signs in opposition to the strikers

Campaigner violence:

Not Known

Repressive Violence:

Police arrested strike leaders and Para-military groups beat campaigners.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The strikers did not achieve any of their goals, mainly to receive the USD 85 million they claimed. Although the PNC arguably lost much support after the strike, they did not resume talks with the PPP about a power-sharing agreement. The GAWU survived and formed a coalition with several other unions to counter the PNC-supported Trade Union Council. The strikers gained support from many unions within Guyana and many groups outside of the country.

In 1977, Guyana was in the midst of a long power struggle between the People's Progressive Party (PPP), which had ruled the country until 1964, and the People's National Congress (PNC) led by Prime Minister Forbes Burnham, who had ruled since before the country's independence from Great Britain in 1966. Since 1966 the PPP had been trying to regain governmental power from the PNC. Trade unions in Guyana were often at the forefront of this struggle, and would begin strikes for both political and economic reasons. The Trades Union Council (TUC) was the country's umbrella organization for workers in many different industries and was closely tied to the ruling PNC. However, there were many smaller unions that made up the TUC including several which supported the opposition PPP.

One of these groups that supported the PPP was the Guyana Agriculture Workers Union (GAWU), which represented the workers in the sugar industry, Guyana's main export industry. Since 1974, when the government had instituted a tax on sugar exports, the Guyanese sugar workers represented by the GAWU had been negotiating with the government-owned Guyana Sugar Corporation (GuySuCo) about whether the tax should be taken on the workers' incomes or only on the profits after compensation had been paid to the workers. Because the government had taken the tax before workers had received their compensation, the GAWU claimed that GuySuCo owed the workers a total of USD 85 million.

Meanwhile, the PPP, after boycotting parliament since 1975, had been attempting to form a coalition government with the ruling PNC. However, in the middle of 1977 the PNC rejected this plan and stopped negotiations with the PPP about the formation of a power-sharing government.

Primarily in response to the 1974 sugar export tax, which sugar workers did not want enacted on their wages, and secondarily protesting the PNC's dismissal of negotiations with the PPP, on August 20, 1977 the GAWU sent a letter to GuySuCo and the Prime Minister threatening an indefinite strike if the sugar company did not agree to pay them the USD 85 million they were owed based on the 1974 agreement. GuySuCo did not agree to pay the workers this money and so three days later most of the 21,000 GAWU members went on strike.

Almost immediately Prime Minister Burnham and the PNC-led government declared that the strike was political, rather than economic. The government publicly opposed the strike in state-run newspapers and radio stations. Furthermore, the Guyanese National Assembly enacted the National Security Act, which allowed the government to ban public meetings, instate a curfew, and arrest strike leaders. In addition to enacting these measures, the PNC government redirected soldiers, government workers, and prisoners to the cane fields to replace the striking workers and hired over 6,000 unemployed people to work permanently in the sugar industry in an attempt to break the strike.

In response to the beginning of the workers' strike, the TUC asked the GAWU to suspend its strike for one day so that the TUC could attempt negotiations with the sugar company and the government. Although the workers continued their strike, the GAWU met with several other unions that represented both sugar workers and other Guyanese workers. These unions, which included the National Association of Agricultural, Commercial and Industrial Employees (NAACIE), the Clerical and Commercial Workers Union, the Guyana Headman's Union, and the University of Guyana Workers Union, agreed to support the strikers. They also made a call to the umbrella TUC to begin negotiations so that the strike would end quickly and in the sugar workers' favor.

In late September, as the strike continued, the TUC held its regular congress and set up a committee to determine the TUC's involvement in the strike. Containing both PNC and PPP supporters, this committee authorized the TUC to negotiate on behalf of the strikers and urged the GAWU to end the strike as long as GuySuCo would rehire strikers and release the previously hired strike-breakers.

Although the TUC members attempted to negotiate with both GuySuCo and the Ministry of Labor, the sugar company refused to release the strike-breakers and the Minister of Labor was unresponsive to the TUC's demands for the end of the strike. After writing a letter to the Labor Minister condemning his failure to respond, however, the TUC stopped negotiation attempts. Additionally, the TUC would not let GAWU representatives spread news of the strike on the TUC radio station.

Despite the lack of continued support from the TUC, the GAWU members continued to strike through November. While police arrested strike leaders and the government seized food and goods meant for the strikers, the GAWU gained support both in Guyana and abroad. On November 21, NAACIE workers, who had supported the GAWU from the beginning, began a two-week sympathy strike in solidarity. Trade unions in both Great Britain and Trinidad announced their support for the GAWU. Dockworkers in Great Britain refused to unload goods from ships carrying sugar from Guyana and both the Caribbean Council of Churches and the Guyana Council of Churches announced their support for the strikers and contributed to the strike fund. Private sugar cane farmers in Guyana had supported the strike from the beginning and continued their support despite acts of arson committed in their cane fields by unknown persons.

Countering this support for the strikers from trade unions, churches, and others, the PNC leaders mobilized pro-PNC labor unions, including those of teachers and governmental workers, to both work in the fields as strike-breakers and run counter-pickets against the strike. The PNC leaders also attempted to establish new religious representation to counter the Guyana Council of Church's support for the strike. The government even set-up a new union to represent sugar workers that would be pro-PNC, but this union never gained many members.

The GAWU members continued their strike through December having gained the support of many groups both inside and outside of the country. However, without the continued negotiation support from the TUC and under the economic and repressive pressure from the government, the strikers ended their action. On January 5, 1978, after 135 days, the GAWU called an official end to the strike.

Both the strikers and the government suffered great losses from the strike. Not only did the workers not gain any concessions regarding the money they had claimed that GuySuCo owed them, but also many workers did not get their jobs back because the sugar company retained strike-breakers in permanent positions. The government suffered from the great economic losses that the workers created through their strike. As a result of the strike, the GAWU, the NAACIE, and several other unions formed an opposition coalition within the TUC and continued to resist both the PNC and the TUC's support of the government through later strikes and internal pressure within the TUC.

Research Notes

Sources:

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Additional Notes:

This was the most protracted strike in Guyana to date. Strikes are common in the country, often with more over 200 in a given year. Sugar Workers and other groups have held strikes both for economic reasons and to oppose the government. Often times political lines and union lines are drawn along racial lines.

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

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