



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Hawaiian longshoremen win 177-day strike in Hawai'i, 1949

1 May

1949

to: 23 October

1949

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Hawai'i, Oahu, Maui, Kauai*

Location Description: *Hawai'i was not a state at this time, it was a U.S. territory. Strikes took place in 4 of the 8 islands in Hawai'i.*

Goals:

To earn a 32-cent raise

To make employers volunteer for arbitration (to have a third party determine a fair wage)

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 048. Protest meetings
- 106. Industry strike
- 179. Alternative social institutions › Soup kitchen and food committees

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 106. Industry strike
- 179. Alternative social institutions › Soup kitchen and food committees

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 106. Industry strike
- 179. Alternative social institutions › Soup kitchen and food committees

Methods in 4th segment:

- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 080. Suppliers' and handlers' boycott
- 106. Industry strike
- 179. Alternative social institutions › Soup kitchen and food committees
- 195. Seeking imprisonment

Methods in 5th segment:

- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 106. Industry strike
- 179. Alternative social institutions › Soup kitchen and food committees

Methods in 6th segment:

- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 106. Industry strike
- 179. Alternative social institutions › Soup kitchen and food committees

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Chinese
- Filipinos
- Hawaii Longshoremen
- Hawaiians
- ILWU
- Japanese
- Portuguese

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Jack Hall, Harry Bridges, Louis Goldblatt, International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU)

Partners:

Bob McElrath, Fact-Finding Committee

External allies:

Longshoremen on the west coast of the mainland

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Bob McElrath
- ILWU
- Longshoremen

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- West Coast Longshoremen

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 30 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

The Big Five companies in Hawaii: Alexander & Baldwin, American Factors, Castle & Cooke, C. Brewer, & Theo. Davies

Longshoremen employers, Laurence Thurston, Hawaii Government, Governor Ingram Stainback, Broom Brigade, Hawaii Stevedore Limited

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Broom Brigade picketers and pamphlet distribution

Campaigner violence:

Battered and assaulted scabs and police during a storming of the offices of Hawaii Stevedore Limited

Repressive Violence:

Arrests made during multiple protests

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

5 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The ILWU strikers managed to gain a 21-cent raise through a compromised arbitration that the Hawaiian Government implemented: the Fact-Finding Committee. They did not achieve the 32-cent raise or the impartial third party negotiator but were nonetheless successful with a 21-cent raise.

By 26 January 1949, negotiations between the International Longshoreman's Worker Union (ILWU) and the longshoreman employers had reached a standstill. Leaders Jack Hall, Harry Bridges, and Louis Goldblatt negotiated for pay raises for the Hawaii longshoremen. Workers were aware that longshoremen on the west coast of the U.S., who were employed by the same company and loading/unloading the same cargo, were being paid \$1.82/hour whereas the Hawaii longshoremen were only being paid \$1.40. Employers insisted that wages should be determined by local conditions; thus Hawaiian wages were not equitable to west coast wages.

Employers determined that a 12-cent pay raise was fair, but workers declined the offer. Hall, Bridges, and Goldblatt urged employers to voluntary arbitration. This would require employers to submit the wage dispute to a fair and impartial third party for a wage decision. Employers did not want to involve a third party deeming it unfair and limiting of the power of management and their right to manage.

On 1 May 1949, the workers began a 177-day-long strike. Five thousand longshoremen stopped work and closed off all goods to Hawaii. Though they went on strike, workers agreed to unload military cargo, food, medical supplies, perishables, and mail so that no one could be harmed by the strike. The Big Five companies of Hawaii – Alexander & Baldwin, C. Brewer, Castle & Cooke, American Factors, and Theo. Davies – owned all of the smaller companies these longshoremen worked for. To replace these workers, The Big Five brought poor people from other countries, such as China, Japan, and the Philippines, to work in the strikers' place.

Four days after the strike began, newspaper editor Laurence Thurston, a union buster, began a daily column entitled, "Dear Joe." In the column, he wrote letters to Joseph Stalin asking him what was next in the advancement of communism in Hawaii. Thurston was attempting to show there was an international conspiracy between the union workers and communist Russia. Trade unionist Bob McElrath was essential in debunking fallacies spread by the "Dear Joe" column, the employers, and other opponents. He was a good researcher and exposed employer books and secret meetings. He spread news nightly by a broadcast on the radio, which kept the union informed.

Strikers gathered in Kapoiloni Park on 17 May 1949. These ten thousand strikers called for the end of the strike. They demanded that employers submit the wage debate to arbitration. Still, the employers refused, continuing to insist that arbitration was unfair to the employers' management rights.

On 28 May 1949, twelve striking stevedores were arrested for "upsetting automobiles." The picket line obstructed the vehicles ability to pass to the pier in order to retrieve goods from ships. As a result, stevedores were charged with first malicious injury, which was then highway obstruction because the stevedores had committed no violence.

Several upper class white women began a picket demonstration against the longshoremen in front of the ILWU headquarters on 31 May 1949 and became known as the "Broom Brigade." The women picketed strikers and organized to alleviate the influence of ILWU on workers in order to stop communism from taking root in Hawaii. They viewed the ILWU as a communist group who was trying to infiltrate the government by first gaining support of the workers on the island.

The Governor of Hawaii, Ingram Stainback, appointed a fact-finding committee to provide recommendations for a strike settlement over a seven-day hearing. Goldblatt warned others that the committee would give a settlement that was preapproved

by the employers. The committee recommended a 14-cent wage increase. On 30 June 1949, 1620 strikers voted on the proposal: 149 voted to accept the offer, while 1,467 voted against the proposition. The union rejected the 14-cent proposal.

The Broom Brigade continued spreading rumors that ILWU and other unions were communist and patrons of Russia. They started passing out leaflets listing the names of suspected communists. They used other red-baiting and hysteria tactics to try to end the ILWU's strike.

In July of 1949, industry owners created Hawaii Stevedore Limited (HSL), which hired people to work despite the on-going strike. These workers became known as scabs. HSL hired scabs in order to break the strike and continue work and ship services. On 16 July 1949, police arrested 96 Hawaiians for forming a picket line that would not allow scab workers to begin working on Pier 29.

On Pier 9, workers formed a picket line in order to block trucks carrying cargo unloaded from the ship "Hawaii Citizen". Police arrested 104 protesters at Pier 2 for "disorderly conduct." Pickets were charged with restraining people with force or violence. However, the picketers had committed no acts of violence, so the charge changed to obstructing a public highway.

In late July 200-300 men stormed the offices of the scab organization, Hawaii Stevedore Limited. A violent response followed which led to strikers, scabs, and police inflicting injury upon one another. Twenty-four people in all were injured. Police arrested 34 strikers and charged them with assault and battery.

Due to the spread of anti-Communist propaganda from the daily "Dear Joe" editorials and the Broom Brigade, the government of Hawaii created the Dock Seizure Act on 6 August 1949. The territory seized the docks and took over stevedoring services in order to break the strike.

When the ILWU men lost control of the docks, they named any cargo being loaded out of the territory as "hot." This signified that the cargo was loaded by scabs and should not be unloaded by others. In solidarity with the Hawaiian longshoremen, 6,000 longshoremen in Northwest continental U.S. refused to unload "hot" cargo so as to not support the strikebreaking.

On 15 August 1949, the attorney general was granted a court order that kept ILWU men from picketing at the docks. To protest the court order, two of the strike leaders picketed at the docks in hopes of gaining the attention of the Supreme Court.

By late September, there were more jobless people than ever before, food prices rose by 6%, and 500,000 tons of sugar remained undistributed leaving a \$60 million deficit.

In the beginning of the strike, The Big Five were large enough not to be affected by the strike. However, after four months of striking, four of the Big Five owned stock in companies that had started losing money because of the stall in sugar industry shipment. All were beginning to feel the effects of the strike as missing goods, like embalming fluids and medical bandages, were starting to wear on people's lives.

Union soup kitchens worked to feed struggling strikers and their families. Strikers formed "scrounging committees" and hunting and fishing committees that helped to feed people each day—150 people for two meals a day. Parades every day helped keep morale high.

On 5 October 1949 union leader Harry Bridges announced that he had negotiated a settlement with the employers of the longshoremen off the record. He negotiated a 21-cent raise for workers.

Employers disagreed with the wording and said they only agreed to a 14-cent raise that would be applied immediately but with an additional seven cent raise that would avoid possible further strikes; the additional raise would take effect on 28 February 1950.

Finally, on 23 October 1949 the final terms of the settlement were agreed between industry owners and union strikers.

The settlement angered opponents of the union, such as the Broom Brigade and newspaper editors. The victory for the ILWU was seen as surrender to "union Reds." Red-baiting continued for many years. The House Un-American Activities Committee was sent to Hawaii on 7 October 1949 to investigate all the strikes that had started to occur frequently in the 1940s. This culminated in the arrest of the Hawaii 7, seven prominent leaders in the ILWU and other union reformers, on 28 August 1951 under the Smith Act. The Smith Act allowed for the arrest of anyone who conspired against the American government through teaching to overthrow it.

The government released all seven by 1958.

Research Notes

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