



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Kazakh oil workers strike against three leading oil companies for better pay and increased unionization activities, 2011

May

2011

to: December

2011

Country: Kazakhstan

Location City/State/Province: *Mangystau Region*

Location Description: *Kazakhstan's oil fields are located in the western part of the country in the Mangystau Region. Strikers and protesters gathered in Zhanaozen, Shetpe, and Aktau.*

Goals:

1. To achieve higher wages
2. To have equal pay for workers completing the same tasks, regardless of whether the worker is from Kazakhstan or is a foreigner
3. To gain the ability to freely organize labor unions and carry out union activity without oppression
4. To obtain the release of union lawyer Natalya Sokolova

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 106. Industry strike
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 171. Nonviolent interjection › Quryq villagers blocked the road between the village and the Ersai oil fields in order to prevent authorities from getting supplies form the village.

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 056. Selective social boycott › Sting boycotts President's birthday celebration.
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › Strikers gathered at Zhanaoen square
- 106. Industry strike

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Group characterization:

- especially drivers
- oil workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Oil workers at Ersai Caspian Contractor LLC, KarazhanbasMunai JSC, and OzenMunaiGas

Partners:

Union leaders, Union lawyer Natalya Sokolova

External allies:

Human Rights Watch, Freedom House, Quryq village residents

Involvement of social elites:

British rock musician Sting, British Prime Minister Tony Blair

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Oil workers

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Sting

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Freedom House
- Sting (exit)

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Tony Blair

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Human Rights Watch

Segment Length: 1.167 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Authorities of Ersai Caspian Contractor LLC, an oil service contractor, KarazhanbasMunai JSC, and OzenMunaiGas, the latter two owned by the parent company KazMunaiGas Exploration Production (KMG EP). Also the authoritarian government of President Nursultan Nazarbaev and the local prosecutors and courts who declared the peaceful strikes illegal

Campaigner violence:

The strikes were nonviolent. It is unclear whether the workers used violence at the Zhanaozen massacre due to conflicting reports from activists and the government. Some reports say that they destroyed the sound system that was set up in the square for the Independence Day celebrations happening on the 16 December 2011, the same day as the massacre.

Repressive Violence:

Strikers were violently arrested and imprisoned. In prison, many faced physical abuse and/or torture. At least 12 protesters were shot and killed during their peaceful protest at Zhanaozen square. Also, security guard forces at the Ersai Caspian Contractor LLC locked and guarded the gate into Kurzyk Yard, cutting off workers' access to dormitories, lavatories, and food. The security forces were likely armed. Traffic police near the Ersai Caspian Contractor LLC blocked the road leading into the town of Kurzyk so that strikers were unable to access such resources as food and water in town. The national government likely ordered the police to initiate the blockade, and given the repressive nature of the government, there was likely a threat of violence for strikers who might have otherwise tried to break through the blockade.

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. Their campaign grew from dozens of strikers in May to thousands of strikers by December. They also gained international attention and support from human rights groups.

Oil is a central feature of the economy in Kazakhstan, the largest country in Central Asia. In 2010, Kazakhstan was among the top 20 global oil producers, with the oil sector comprising over 11% of the nation's gross domestic product (GDP). Three of the most prominent oil companies in the country included (1) Ersai Caspian Contractor LLC, an oil service contractor, (2)

KarazhanbasMunai JSC and (3) OzenMunaiGas, both owned by the parent company KazMunaiGas Exploration Production (KMG EP). The oil fields were located in the Mangystau Region of western Kazakhstan, which, as of 2015, had an authoritarian government led by President Nursultan Abishuly Nazarbayev since 1 December 1991. According to such human rights organizations as Human Rights Watch, the government under Nazarbayev's rule committed numerous human rights abuses such as restriction of freedoms of assembly, speech, and religion, and the systematic use of torture.

Oil workers could only voice their grievances through weak unions and individual encounters with management. The company owners declined to hear their proposals, so the workers went on strike. Workers at Ersai Caspian Contractor LLC were the first to strike on 11 May 2011. They demanded a pay raise, the ability to unionize, revised labor contracts, and equal payment for all workers performing the same tasks, regardless of whether or not the worker was a Kazakh native or an immigrant. Ten of these workers began a hunger strike on 23 May 2011, while that same day residents of Quryq, a nearby village, stood in solidarity with the workers by blocking the road between the village and the oil facilities.

KarazhanbasMunai JSC faced protests next, when over 700 workers began a strike on 16 May 2011. They similarly demanded a pay raise and the ability to unionize without employer retaliation. KarazhanbasMunai JSC considered the strike illegal because it did not comply with the company's Labor Code. The company fired eight strikers on 29 May 2011.

Workers at OzenMunaiGas joined the movement on 26 May 2011, when about 250 went on strike, and 10 others went on a hunger strike. Workers issued a 6-point statement, demanding change in the existing wage system, including an end to wage inequality between Kazakh workers who were paid low wages and foreign workers who were paid high wages. They demanded that the oil companies uphold their right to unionize.

Following the initial protest actions, the campaign continued to grow, such that news reports often referred to the workers as oil strikers, rather than identify them by the specific company for which they worked. The following descriptions will thus reference the oil strikers as one group and reference company names when specific victories were achieved and in other cases as appropriate.

In response to the strikes, all three companies fired many of their workers, purportedly for their absence from work. Authorities often targeted workers and beat them. Natalya Sokolova, a union lawyer, organized a demonstration outside police headquarters in Aqtau, and authorities arrested and imprisoned her on 24 May 2011. The strikers considered her imprisonment unlawful and added her release to their demands. On 27 May 2011, authorities at Ersai Caspian Contractor LLC blocked the workers' access to Kuryk Yard, locked the gate, placed a bulldozer inside the yard and increased security guard coverage, effectively cutting off access to the workers' dormitories and bathroom facilities. Traffic police blocked access into the town of Kurzyk located eight kilometers away, forcing strikers to fetch food and water by foot. It is unclear whether the security guards in front of the Kurzyk Yard gate and the police blocking the road were armed. Both blockades continued until 23 or 24 June, when about 20 police officers and the local prosecutor approached the 40 to 50 remaining strikers and threatened to imprison them if they did not end their strike. Fearing arrest and the violence that often accompanied it, the workers at Ersai Caspian Contractor LLC ended their strike.

Meanwhile, at the other two companies owned by KMG EP, thousands of workers had joined the strike. Many gathered in Mangystau to speak with Governor Kyrymbek Kosherbaev on 5 June, but police violently repressed and beat the protesters, arresting 37.

By July, the strikes had already begun to negatively affect the companies. KMG EP produced 3% less crude oil in the first six months of 2011 than it had in the same time period in 2010. The protests had also attracted international attention. Sting, the British rock musician, was scheduled to perform on 6 July for the birthday celebration of President Nazarbayev. Following reports from Amnesty International (AI) of the government's violent repression of peaceful oil strikers, Sting, a longtime supporter of AI, decided not to perform. Company owners still did not concede to the workers' demands.

Thus, the strike continued throughout August and September. On 8 August 2011, Kazakh authorities sentenced Natalya

Sokolova to six years in prison on charges of “inciting social conflict.” International human rights organizations, such as Freedom House, opposed the ruling. Her imprisonment represented a major loss for the strikers.

Repressive violence continued against activists, with unknown assailants killing two in August: 18-year-old Saule Qarabalaeva and Zhaqsylyq Turbaev. On 8 September 2011, authorities arrested another activist, Natalya Azhigaliev, adding to many others charged with “organizing unsanctioned mass gatherings.” KMG EP continued to fire workers, reaching a total of 450 fired workers as of 8 September.

One of the most controversial events of the strike occurred in October when British Prime Minister Tony Blair agreed to advise President Nazarbayev. Though Blair assured the strikers in particular and the international community at large that he was not economically profiting from advising the President, strikers were suspicious of Blair’s intentions and criticized his morals in light of the sustained violent oppression by the President’s regime.

The strikes ended at KarazhanbasMunai JSC and OzenMunaiGas on 16 December 2011. Workers from these two companies had been striking daily in the central square of the city of Zhanaozen, and on 16 December, the government had planned Independence Day celebrations in that location. It is unclear who began the violence (the strikers or the authorities), but soon violence erupted in the square. Police began shooting protesters, and the government reported that at least 12 were killed and dozens wounded. At this point, the remaining workers decided to end their strike. President Nazarbaev declared a state of emergency. In the months following the Zhanaozen massacre, authorities convicted 34 of the striking oil workers on charges of organizing or participating in the protests, and sentenced 13 to prison. None of the workers’ demands were met.

The violence of the Zhanaozen massacre, as it came to be called, inspired many Kazakhs to launch new campaigns protesting against the government. Shortly after the 15 January Parliamentary elections in which President Nazarbayev was granted an extended term in office, Kazakhs peacefully protested the results, which they believed to be the result of election fraud. On 28 January 2012, 1000 activists peacefully gathered in front of the Palace of the Republic to rally against the government’s arrest and killing of the peaceful oil workers during the Zhanaozen massacre. They demanded an independent investigation into the Zhanaozen massacre and the release of citizens whom authorities arrested on January 23 for their alleged involvement in the oil workers strikes at Zhanaozen. Activists continued to hold peaceful protests in February and March, including on the 100 day anniversary of the massacre, in order to demand justice in response to the government’s killing of the oil workers. Since these protests following the Zhanaozen massacre demanded release of imprisoned oil strikers, an end to violent repression, and more transparent election processes following the January elections, rather than increased wages and unionization activities for workers, they have been deemed a separate campaign from the oil strikes.

Research Notes

Influences:

The strike and subsequent Zhanaozen massacre inspired 2012 protests against the repressive Kazakh government and its violent response to the peaceful strikers. (2)

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

Meghan Kelly, 01/11/2015

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