



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Los Angeles Justice for Janitors campaign for economic justice at Century City, 1989-1990

Summer

1989

to: June 25,

1990

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Los Angeles, California*

Location Description: *Century City office complex*

Goals:

Union contracts for all workers who cleaned the buildings of the Century City complex of Los Angeles

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:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 028. Symbolic sounds
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 105. Establishment strike

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 016. Picketing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 178. Guerrilla theatre

Notes on Methods:

Although exact timing is unknown, the actions in segments 1-5 were a combination of the methods listed in "Additional methods"

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Latino and African American janitors
- members of local 399 of the SEIU

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Justice for Janitors campaign by Service Employee's International Union (SEIU) and the Local 399

Partners:

None known

External allies:

None known

Involvement of social elites:

After the June 15 police attack, the President of New York's SEIU Local 32B-32J, Gus Benova, pressured the president of International Service Systems (ISS) (the cleaning contractor for most of the buildings in Century City, headquartered in New York) to recognize the LA union (which resulted in the contract being signed that day).

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Gus Benova
- president of New York's Local 32B-32J

Segment Length: *Approximately 2 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

International Service Systems

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

None known

Campaigner violence:

None known

Repressive Violence:

On June 15, 1990, striking janitors were holding a peaceful demonstration in Century City. During this particular demonstration, the Los Angeles police brutally attacked the demonstrators, which resulted in several serious injuries including the injury of a pregnant demonstrator, causing a miscarriage.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The Justice for Janitors Campaign was able to increase wages by increasing the amount of union contracts signed by companies.

The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) formed the Local 399 shortly after World War II. The Local 399 was a labor union for janitors which had reached its peak in the 1970s, but was struggling in the 1980s. During this time, the Local 399 fought for higher wages for its members, which motivated cleaning contractors to invest in nonunion options. The cleaning industry was extremely competitive at the time and as a result of this emphasis on nonunion cleaners, membership in the Local 399 had fallen from approximately 5,000 members to only 1,800.

Many African Americans worked as janitors, and the majority of the Local 399 was African American. In the 1980s, Latino immigrants began to supply the labor to the janitorial workforce because they were willing to work for nonunion contractors for lower wages and worse conditions. The Local 399 traditionally had good representation of the African American janitors in the workforce; however they were now disconnected from the Latino community that made up the new workforce.

Although the Local 399 was struggling during the 1980s, SEIU was growing. The SEIU increased its national staff from twenty to more than two hundred between 1984 and 1989. The SEIU emphasized training and a militant approach for changes, devising a campaign called Justice for Janitors in Denver, Colorado.

Justice for Janitors arrived in Southern California in 1988. Justice for Janitors represented the small union base that remained in California, but also organized the nonunion buildings. Justice for Janitors' plan involved targeting companies that illegally utilized both union and nonunion operations, hoping to take the labor costs out of competition. The first company that was targeted was Century Cleaning, a small local company with union and nonunion components. The campaigners started their effort by contacting workers, making house calls, signing cards, and identifying leaders.

Justice for Janitors also tried to achieve change through protests that were visible to the public. For example, Justice for Janitors performed street theater at a restaurant that the owner of Century Cleaning frequented. Justice for Janitors also took a group of workers to the golf club where the owner was a member, starting chants and screaming in protest. As a result of such practices, more of Century's contracts went to union firms. There was additional progress when Justice for Janitors targeted American Building Maintenance. By 1989, Local 399 had negotiated a master agreement with the firm.

In the summer of 1989, the Justice for Janitors campaign shifted to Century City, a large office complex employing 400 janitors, of whom 250 were employed by a single cleaning contractor, International Service Systems (ISS). In order to pressure ISS, Justice for Janitors used similar in-your-face tactics as before, creating complaints from tenants of the offices and pressuring ISS

to negotiate.

Despite this pressure, by spring 1990 the union concluded that there was no other option except to strike against ISS. The strike began on May 29, 1990. During the strike, there were daily actions such as chants and drum-banging while storming through the offices of Century City.

On June 15, 1990, striking janitors were holding a peaceful demonstration in Century City. During this particular demonstration, the Los Angeles police brutally attacked the demonstrators, which resulted in several serious injuries including the injury of a pregnant demonstrator which resulted in a miscarriage. This brutal attack by the LAPD was in full view of the media, and as a result was recorded on camera.

The brutal violence used by the police force only inspired the protesters. They continued to fight for economic justice and higher wages. Furthermore, the violent suppression by the Los Angeles Police Department against the demonstrators resulted in widespread outrage against the LAPD. Following the attacks Gus Benova, the President of New York's SEIU Local 32B-32J, pressured the president of ISS to recognize the LA union. Following this, ISS moved to sign a union contract, with a wage increase of \$2 per hour and full family health coverage.

Research Notes

Influences:

This campaign influenced other campaigns in the Justice for Janitors movement, including "University of Miami janitors campaign for economic justice, 2005-2006" and "Houston janitors campaign for economic justice, 2005-2006" (2).

Sources:

Waldinger, Roger et. al. "Helots No More: A Case Study of the Justice for Janitors Campaign in Los Angeles," in *Organizing to Win: New Research on Union Strategies*, 1998, eds. Kate Bronfenbrenner, Rudolph A. Oswald, Sheldon Friedman, Ronald L. Seeber, and Richard W. Hurd. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

"Justice for Janitors: A Look Back and a Look Forward: 21 Years of Organizing Janitors." SEIU. Web. Accessed 11 Aug 2011. <<http://www.seiu.org/a/justice-for-janitors/justice-for-janitors-20-years-of-organizing.php>>

Additional Notes:

Edited by Max Rennebohm (11/08/2011)

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

Gavin Musynske, 04/12/2009

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