



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Mauritanian Workers Strike for Labor Rights, 1968-1974

Time period notes: *The strikes took place in 1968, 1969, and 1971, but the campaign was not finalized until 1974.*

May

1968

to:

1972

Country: Mauritania

Location City/State/Province: *Zouerate, Fderik, and other towns throughout Mauritania*

Location Description: *mining towns*

Goals:

The original strikers demanded a wage increase. The campaign expanded to demand more Mauritanian workers occupy upper management positions in the mining company MIFERMA, and ultimately the nationalization of MIFERMA.

To decrease the pay differential between the salaries of Western Europeans and Africans, by increasing the salaries of Mauritanian workers.

To have an independent form of trade unionism.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions › Teacher and student unions endorsed the Progressive UTM.

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 106. Industry strike
- 107. Sympathy strike › Teachers and students went on strike in solidarity with miners.

Methods in 4th segment:

- 038. Marches › Supporters of imprisoned organizers assembled in the streets of Nouakchott
- 106. Industry strike
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 5th segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 6th segment:

Notes on Methods:

Two of the industry strikes, in May 1968 and September-October 1971, were limited to a single mining town. In these cases, the MIFERMA employees in that town went on strike. In the other instances, "industry strike" refers to what was reported as a "series of strikes." Sources did not describe the specific locations of these actions.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Unionized iron ore miners

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Progressive UTM (Mauritanian Workers' Union)

Partners:

Students

National Union of Mauritanian Teachers

External allies:

Political Democratic Movement

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Progressive UTM

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- National Union of Mauritanian Teachers
- Students

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Political Democratic Movement

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 8 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

MIFERMA (the Paris-based iron ore company)

Mauritanian Government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

President Moktar Ould Daddah, who had sent the troops to the scene, claimed that the soldiers were aiming at the workers' feet, and that the fatalities only happened because workers were crouching to pick up stones.

Repressive Violence:

On 6 June 1968, soldiers killed seven striking workers and wounded 24 others. In May 1971, riot police repressed the protesters assembled to express solidarity with the imprisoned organizers.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

1 point out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The Mauritanian government nationalized MIFERMA and expressed an interest in including more Mauritians in the company's management in 1974. However, this was achieved after the integration of the Parti Populaire Mauritanien (PPM) with the Union of Mauritanian Workers (UTM) in 1972. This integration marked the dissolution of the Progressive UTM. Hence, workers failed to maintain a trade union separate from the PPM's control.

In 1959, French, British, Italian, and German interests established a mining and steel-making consortium- Societe Anonyme des Mines de Fer de Mauritanie (MIFERMA)- with the purpose of extracting and exporting resources from Mauritania. MIFERMA became a dominant force in Mauritania's industrialization. International press celebrated the new iron ore mines as Mauritania's entry into the 20th century.

After achieving independence from French imperialism in 1960, Mauritania became more vulnerable to the neocolonial force of capitalist production. The single ruling party at the time (Parti Populaire Mauritanien (PPM)) seemed to represent the interests of foreign capital over those of the Mauritanian citizens. Industrialization, coupled with a record drought from 1969 to 1974, forced tens of thousands of Mauritians to give up their nomadic or subsistence agricultural lifestyles. This new proletariat moved to mining towns or cities, where they lived in slum conditions without running water or electricity.

MIFERMA upheld the colonial practice of privileging foreigners and oppressing indigenous Mauritians. Europeans occupied 91 percent of the administrative positions in MIFERMA. This discrimination in hiring was accompanied by inequitable wage distribution. The ore miners (usually indigenous Mauritians) earned about 245,000 francs a year, compared with the 4,350,000

francs being earned annually by the French executives.

In this state of collective hardship, Mauritanian miners united across ethnic divisions. In 1968, miners employed by MIFERMA in Zouerate organized a strike, demanding a wage increase. MIFERMA called on the Mauritanian army to repress the resistance. On 6 June, soldiers killed seven striking workers and wounded 24 others. President Moktar Ould Daddah, who had sent the troops to the scene, claimed that the soldiers were aiming at the workers' feet, and that the fatalities only happened because workers were crouching to pick up stones.

In 1968, migrant workers established an organization to represent their interests: the Political Democratic Movement.

In February 1969, the partisan Mauritanian Workers' Union (UTM)- a federation of all trade unions in the country that had recently been dominated by the Parti Populaire Mauritanien (PPM) – held its annual congress. Some union members asked the group to condemn the government repression of the miners' strike. The Mauritanian Workers' Union refused to denounce the violence. A group of workers, who opposed the Party's control over the federation, established a separate "Progressive UTM." The National Union of Mauritanian Teachers and the students union endorsed the Progressive UTM. The Mauritanian government refused to recognize it.

In fall 1969, the Progressive UTM organized a series of strikes. The government initially suspended or dismissed teachers and students from Nouadhibou and Npouakchott who participated in the strikes. On 12 November, the government pardoned these teachers and students. The government ordered army commander Ould Mohamed Salah to eliminate the Progressive UTM. Salah agreed that trade unions should not be allowed to criticize the PPM.

In 1970, the Progressive UTM organized more strikes and formed an alliance with the Political Democratic Movement. In January 1971, police arrested fifteen progressive unionists and jailed them without charges. The fifteen prisoners protested their illegal imprisonment by hunger striking. Supporters, including students, assembled on the streets of Nouakchott, demanding that the government release the prisoners and showing support for the Progressive UTM. Riot police repressed this demonstration. The government released the fifteen prisoners on 10 May. On 18 May, the government tried them in court, and found seven of them guilty of "managing an unauthorized association" and four guilty of "distributing leaflets."

In September and October 1971, the workers and their progressive allies organized another series of strikes. A miners' strike at the MIFERMA iron ore mine prevented production in Fderik for two months. Though workers may have started with aspirations for socialization of the economy, in the 1971 strikes, workers began demanding that the MIFERMA management include Mauritanians.

In 1972, the Parti Populaire Mauritanien joined the Progressive UTM in its demand for "Mauritanianisation" of MIFERMA. Soon after, PPM began advocating for the nationalization of MIFERMA. By 1973, the UTM progressive faction had disappeared, and the trade union was again entirely in the PPM's control. On 28 November 1974, the Mauritanian government nationalized MIFERMA, renaming it Societe Nationale Industrielle et Miniere (SNIM).

Research Notes

Influences:

Student and worker demonstrations in France in 1968

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