Mexican railroad workers strike for wages and union rights, 1958-1959

- (mainly or initiated by) people of color [1]

Timing
June 26, 1958
to:
April 9, 1959

Location and Goals
Country:
Mexico
View Location on Map

Goals:
Wage Increase of 350 pesos ($28) per month, Payment of a housing allowance of 10 pesos per day or construction by management of adequate housing facilities for the workers (as guaranteed by Article 123 of Mexican constitution and reinforced by the Federal Labor Law of the late 1950s), New general elections for the Union, reduction/elimination of subsidies from the United States and loans from private U.S. investors that were keeping costs high and preventing the company’s ability to raise wages,

Methods
Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 097. Protest strike
- 106. Industry strike
- 107. Sympathy strike
- 110. Slowdown strike
- 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials>refusal to accept government-appointed union officials

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 048. Protest meetings
- 131. Refusal to accept appointed officials>refusal to accept government-appointed union officials

Methods in 3rd segment:
Methods in 4th segment:
Methods in 5th segment:
• 005. Declarations of indictment and intention  
• 106. Industry strike  

Methods in 6th segment:  

• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications  
  Vallejo and the STFRM published a full-page advertisement that announced a work stoppage on the 25th  
• 106. Industry strike  
• 107. Sympathy strike  

Segment Length:  
6 weeks  

Classifications  
Classification:  
Change  
Cluster:  
Economic Justice  
Group characterization:  

• Railroad workers and Union  

Leaders, partners, allies, elites  
Leaders:  
Demetrio Vallejo, Sindicato de Trabajadores Ferrocarrileros de la República Mexicana (STFRM)  
Partners:  
Electrician’s Union, Teachers’ Revolutionary Movement, Telegraphers’ Union, Petroleum Workers’ Union  
External allies:  
Not Known  
Involvement of social elites:  
Not Known  

Joining/exiting order of social groups  
Groups in 1st Segment:  

• Sindicato de Trabajadores Ferrocarrileros de la República Mexicana (STFRM)  

Groups in 2nd Segment:  
Groups in 3rd Segment:  
Groups in 4th Segment:  
Groups in 5th Segment:  
Groups in 6th Segment:  

• Ferrocariles Nacionales (National Railway)  
• Ferrocarril Mexicano
• and the Ferrocarril de Veracruz
• the Ferrocarril del Pacífico

Segment Length:
6 weeks

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Los Charros (pro-government, corrupt union officials), The National Government, Railroadmen’s Liberating Movement (February 13th)- César Márquez Gómez & Guillermo, and the National Press

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
Not known

Repressive Violence:
Police/army raids on the protests, use of clubs and tear gas (killing some workers), removing striking workers from their homes at gunpoint, arresting thousands of workers including the leadership (namely Vallejo) and placing them in jails, prisons, and military camps until the strike was broken

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
3 points out of 6 points

Survival:
0 points out of 1 point

Growth:
2 points out of 3 points

Total points:
5 out of 10 points

Notes on outcomes:
Although in the first round of negotiations with the government the campaign was able to achieve some of its big demands such as the pay raise that met with the increasing inflation, the subsidized housing, new general elections for union leadership, the last strikes over Easter week pushed the government into highly repressive tactics which removed the campaign leaders from power (placing them in jail) and negated many of the gains that they had made.

On June 26th, 1958, workers from the Sindicato de Trabajadores Ferrocarrileros de la República Mexicana (STFRM, Union of Railroad Workers of the Mexican Republic) initiated a series of escalating strikes led by Demetrio Vallejo. Vallejo had formed a General Action Committee after participating in a Union wage-price study committee that had determined a proper increase in wages of 350 pesos ($28) per month based on the decrease in real wages due to inflation. When the committee published their numbers and demands on May 18, 1958, government officials at the head of the Union formed their own committee and the following day, their committee published a report recommending a raise of only 200 pesos ($16) per month.

Due to the strong ties that the Union had to the government, this move was expected to easily circumvent any possible strong reactions to the diminished pay raise. On May 19th, Roberto Amorós, general manager of the
railroad company, visited the union headquarters to pick up the report and request a 60-day grace period to review the company’s finances and determine if the raise was doable. The tactic was seen both as an attempt to drag out the negotiations and to keep this larger sector of the workforce calm during the upcoming presidential election.

However, the government and the government-affiliated union members significantly underestimated the support and organizing power of Vallejo. He and the newly formed General Action Committee moved quickly to respond and resist the administrative delay. The workers in Oaxaca garnered the support of the Telegraphers’ Union to help contact railroad workers across the country to organize a response. They were able to reach over 60,000 men from around the country to participate in the paros escalonados (escalating strikes). Before the strike began, government officials for two particular railroad lines quickly reviewed contracts and offered an immediate pay raise of 150 pesos per month.

Vallejo refused to accept the compromise, which failed to meet any of their demands even moderately, and on June 26th, the workers struck for two hours (10:00 A.M. - 12:00 P.M.). The next day when the demands had not been met, the same workers began to strike for four hours each shift. And on the 28th, they expanded the strike to 6 hours, which effectively halted the transportation of goods by rail in Mexico. Petroleum workers, teachers and students held sympathy strikes on the last day. The fact that neither the government nor their men in the leadership of the Union (the charros) were able to utilize the proper power to resume operations made it very obvious that they had lost control over the Union leadership. Therefore, they called in the President, Ruiz Cortines, to intervene. Cortines decreed that he would increase wages by 215 pesos ($17.50) per month for all railroad workers. While many of the newly appointed union officials (the government had replaced the older leadership when they failed to prevent the strikes) praised the President for his generosity in the raise, Vallejo and his supporters expressed their deep dissatisfaction with the President’s gesture, and within days of the decree 20 STFRM locals held a meeting that disowned the new officials and proclaimed their support for Vallejo. Due to the unrest, the government had no choice but to allow for open elections for the union and on August 27th, Demetrio Vallejo was elected secretary general of the union: 59,749 votes for Vallejo to 9 votes for the government candidate.

With these two smaller victories (a slight wage increase and new elections), Vallejo and the Union looked to push their demands farther in the next round of negotiations that began with the renewal of their collective bargaining contract. The “Vallejistas” made several demands for revisions of the contract beginning in mid-November that included a wage increase that was based on a 6-day work week instead of a 7-day work week (which would increase the daily sum by 16.66% instead of 14.8%) that would be implemented retroactively since the President’s decree, and either payment of a housing allowance of 10 pesos per day or the construction of adequate housing facilities for the workers. They also included stipulations that would reduce subsidies from the United States and loans from private U.S. investors that were keeping costs high and limiting the company’s ability to raise wages.

The first two points stopped the negotiations from moving farther, and as the January 18th, 1959 deadline approached for the contract renewal, the Union announced that if they did not reach an agreement by then, they would call a system-wide strike for the 25th of February. The 18th passed by without a solution, and so the union’s executive committee officers filed an formal notification for the intent to strike with the Ministry of Labor. While the Union continued to try to find a mediated solution through the Ministry’s Commission of Conciliation, the national press launched an attack against Vallejo and the Union in order to discredit them. Additionally a group formed called the “Railroadmen’s Liberating Movement,” which tried to divert some of the worker’s support for the Union by accusing Vallejo of favoritism and communism.

Regardless, the strikes of the Ferrocariles Nacionales (National Railway) began on schedule: at noon on the
The railway strike lasted less than a day because by 10:00 A.M. on Thursday the new contract was signed which included the retroactive payment of 16.6% of the 215 pesos, free medical care for workers’ families, and 30 million pesos to be used to construct low-cost rental units for the workers. However, the agreement did not include these same economic protections for the workers on all of the lines, and on March 19th, Vallejo and the STFRM published a full-page advertisement that announced a work stoppage on the 25th by the Ferrocarril Mexicano, the Ferrocarril del Pacifico, and the Ferrocarril de Veracruz. The date of the stoppage was chosen strategically because Easter was on the 29th, which was significant because Holy Week meant that all workers were given a week’s paid vacation. Without the use of the railroad, no one would be able to go anywhere. Vallejo was joined by several local unions who also agreed to strike.

However, the desperation of the government to preserve this week of travel proved to be too much. As the strike began in the early morning of the 25th, the Federal Conciliation Board declared the strikes illegal and the government sent in army troops to guard the rail installations, army telegraphers replaced union telegraphers, and soldiers accompanied by the police broke into the homes of people on strike and forced them to work at gunpoint. By March 28th, Vallejo and other Union leaders were arrested along with several thousand other workers. When the prisons were filled, workers were then sent to military camps. Vallejo was given over 16 years of imprisonment for “sedition” and other supposed crimes. The strike officially ended on April 9th once the government had released enough workers from jail to begin full operation and had replaced Vallejista leaders with pro-government ones. The repression by the government ultimately overcame the campaign of Vallejo and the STFRM, but they were able to win some protections before they were overwhelmed including the pay raise that met with the increasing inflation, the subsidized housing, and new general elections for union leadership.

**Research Notes**

Sources:


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

Alex Frye 24/04/2011

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