Norwegian seamen organize general strike, 1921

Timing
May 8, 1921
to:
June 1921

Location and Goals
Country:
Norway

View Location on Map

Goals:
Resist an imposed employers' wage cut among seamen and domestic transportation workers via general strike, with the hope for reverberations of worker empowerment and resistance to wage cuts across industries.

Methods
Methods in 1st segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 106. Industry strike
  - 117. General strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 117. General strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 117. General strike

Segment Length:
Approximately 5 days

Classifications
Classification:
Defense
Cluster:
Economic Justice
Group characterization:

- Seamen
- industrial workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites
Leaders:
Federation of Labor, Ole O. Lian (Labor Party leader)
Partners:
Norwegian Trade Unions
External allies:
Seafarers International Union
Involvement of social elites:
Not Known

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

- Marine Workers
- Norwegian Federation of Labor
- Norwegian Trade Unions
- Ole O Lian
Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Transportation workers
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:

- General Workers
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Segment Length:
Approximately 5 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence
Opponents:
Employers, Norwegian Government
Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not Known
Campaigner violence:
None known
Repressive Violence:
The police charged the strikers to prevent destruction of a temporary barbed wire fence.

**Success Outcome**
Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
0 points out of 6 points
Survival:
0.5 points out of 1 point
Growth:
3 points out of 3 points
Total points:
3.5 out of 10 points
Notes on outcomes:
The general strike didn't last for long and workers' wages were lowered soon after the end of the strike.
The Labor Party and Trade Unions continued to negotiate with employers over worker wages, but were weakened by the failure of the general strike.
The strike grew from action among seamen and transportation workers to a general strike across Norway with 120,000 participants.

Following a rapid price increase and in turn wage increases (thanks to Union pressures), after the first half of 1920 prices in Norway began to rapidly fall. From 1919-1920, the cost of living rose by 16 percent, and in the subsequent period dropped 8 percent. Following the war, imports rose quickly and amounted to a surplus, marking the beginning of a turbulent global economy throughout the 1920s. Bankruptcies began to increase among businesses, feeling pressured by wage agreements and high interest rates. In early 1920, a total of 60,000 workers in different areas across Norway organized successful strikes, which led to yearlong agreements for wage increases and awards. Employers continued to feel pressured economically, with prices falling more rapidly towards the end of 1920. In March 1921, with the expiration of compulsory arbitration legislation – a contractual agreement between unions and employers to avoid strikes and submit to the authority of a neutral government commission – employers teamed up with labor to oppose its renewal, setting the scene for a major strike.

In early 1921 Norwegian employers proposed a 33 percent wage reduction. In the United States the International Seafarers Union, led by Norwegian expatriate Andrew Furuseth, organized an all-ports strike on May 1 in response to wage cuts of 25 percent. Seven days later, on May 8, influenced by the recent action in the US but organized independently, marine workers across the coast of Norway stopped working in protest of employers' wage decreases. As the strike gained momentum, one week later all remaining transportation workers walked out in solidarity with the seamen.
On May 12, a coalition of Norwegian trade unions, led by Labor Party parliamentarian Ole O. Lian and the Norwegian Federation of Labor, announced that it had no other choice but to launch a general strike. This announcement was circulated across Norway and the world via newspapers and broadcasts, giving workers, employers, and the state time to prepare for the economic disruption. Two weeks later, on May 26, 1921, 120,000 workers began the general strike. Union workers across Norway, save for rail, telegraph, and hospital workers, participated.

In response, the Norwegian government took control of the vacant ships and found workers to operate them, using police protection for the workers who broke the general strike. After the government involved the police, workers began to slowly return to work, until the Federation of Labor and the State Mediator agreed in June 1921 that everyone but the seamen and transportation workers would return to work. Feeling financial strain, the remaining marine and transportation sector workers on strike gradually returned to the workplace until the unions ended the strike across Norway, deeming it unsuccessful.

Losing the strike in 1921 made labor leadership cautious, and induced labor's parliamentary representatives to vote in favor of compulsory arbitration legislation in 1922. The failure of the International Seafarers Union strike in the US after two months added to their discouragement.

Research Notes
Influences:

The workers and Labor Party in Norway were likely influenced by the activities of the Seafarers International Union, who initiated an all-ports strike on April 30, 1921, the first national marine strike in American history, also in response to wage cuts (1).

Sources:


Additional Notes:
Edited by Max Rennebohm (31/05/2011)
Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Blaine O'Neill, 04/10/2010
Back to top