



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Prison officers strike in England and Wales, 2007

August 16,

2007

to: August 30,

2007

Country: England

Country: Wales

Country: United Kingdom

Goals:

The strike was done to protest harsh working conditions, to gain the right to strike, and to settle a pay dispute.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 006. Group or mass petitions

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

- 013. Deputations
- 097. Protest strike
- 104. Professional strike
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Prison officers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

The Prisoner Officers' Association (POA)---the trade union that organized the strike

Bob Rennison---POA branch secretary

Brian Caton---POA general secretary

Colin Moses---POA chairman

Geoff Burrows---POA branch secretary

John Hancock---POA branch secretary

Steve Gough---POA vice-chairman

Partners:

Not Known

External allies:

Not Known

Involvement of social elites:

Not Known

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:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

No known joining order

Segment Length: *Approximately 2 days*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

English and Welsh governments

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

Not Known

Repressive Violence:

Not Known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

1 point out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

1 point out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The campaign failed to achieve any of its goals. The POA had the opportunity to accept a new wage increase, offered by the English government, but turned the wage increase down because it was not content with it. Regarding the right to strike, the English government renewed the original that forbade the POA from going on strike.

The POA was able to maintain a 24-hour walk out despite calls from the government demanding that they return to work. Additionally, the POA continued to survive as an organization after the failed campaign and even expanded to represent workers from other industries.

When surveyed, 90% of prison officers supported the 24-hour strike. Consequently, thousands of prison officers from 131 prisons participated in the strike. The strike grew very little despite this participation within the union.

In 1996, there were 204 reported attacks on prison staff in English prisons. Ten years later, the number of attacks soared to 1,050 attacks. After a 400% increase in attacks, prison officers were more than outraged with their apparently dangerous working conditions.

Working conditions only amplified the resentment that members of the prison union, the Prison Officer Association (POA), were feeling towards their government. In 2007, the English government offered the POA a new 2.5% increase in salary that was to occur in two installments; 1.5% would have been rewarded in April and another 1% would have been rewarded in October. According to the POA, the separation of the increase into two installments actually resulted in an increase of 1.9%, not the 2.5% stated by the government.

As a result of the poor working conditions and the insufficient salary increase, the POA held a ballot to decide whether or not its members would go on strike to promote improved working conditions and salaries. On August 16, internal reports from the POA suggested that 90% of its 28,000 members voted in favor of the union.

The information regarding the union's vote was publicized in several newspapers and many speculated different dates for when the strike would occur. One such newspaper reported that 10,000 workers were planning to go on strike on August 31. In fact, 20,000 prison officers from 129 prisons walked out at 7 a.m. on August 27. The strike saw participation from prisons in England and Wales.

There were over 80,000 prisoners inhabiting the 129 prisons that were impacted by the strike. Without prison staff, these 80,000 prisoners were confined to their cells. Furthermore, newly processed prisoners could not be delivered to the prisons, court hearings had to be postponed, and visitors were told to turn around and leave. A later investigation also revealed that at one particular prison, a Merseyside prison in Liverpool, nurses were forced to remain in the prison while the strike persisted. A source from within the same prison alleged that the nurses were told to "act as wardens."

12 hours into the strike, a court injunction ordered the prison officers to return to work or suffer heavy fines. The call to return to work was largely ignored as most were determined to make the strike last 24 hours. The injunction was made because the prison officers were actually breaking the law by going on strike. Previously, in 1993, the Conservative government had passed a law that prohibited the prison officers from going on strike. The POA was aware of the law, and another goal of the campaign had

been to gain the right to strike. Ironically, in Cardiff, Wales, inmates taunted the prison staff by shouting to them, “you’re breaking the law.”

The POA ordered all its workers to return to work at 7.a.m the next day, exactly 24 hours after the strike had begun. This marked the end of the campaign. English Justice Secretary, Jack Straw, called the strike, “deeply regrettable and wholly unjustifiable.” He attributed the conclusion of the strike to the government’s swift action, but the campaign attributed the conclusion of the strike to the government’s promise of upcoming negotiations. According to POA chairman Colin Moses, “The executive has decided in light of the offer of meaningful discussions on Friday regarding the staging of pay, to lead our members back to work, irrespective of the threat of an injunction.”

The following month would be largely unproductive for the POA’s efforts. On September 1, the government announced that all the prison workers who worked while their coworkers were striking would receive a bonus. The POA considered the action to be an insult. Talks remained unproductive and on September 13, the POA criticized the Labour government for not supporting the right to strike that many unions possess.

On a positive note, the POA did receive some constructive press coverage when former inmate John Cox endorsed the POA’s efforts and told the media that guards always did “a good job under difficult circumstances.”

On January 8, 2008, Jack Straw revealed his plans to propose a new law in May, banning the prison guards from. The law that was broken by the POA was a voluntary agreement that was legally binding. The new law would not be voluntary, but mandatory. The next day, the POA won a small victory when Kenny MacAskill, the Justice Secretary for Scotland, announced that Scotland would not pass a similar law. Another potential victory arose in February when Straw offered the POA a salary increase of 2.2% instead of the 1.9% increase from 2007. In response to the offer, the POA held another ballot and on March 6, it announced that 85% of its members voted against accepting the offer.

After rejecting the government’s offer, the remaining interactions between the POA and the government would accomplish nothing. On May 9, the government officially passed the law banning the prison officers from striking. The ruling solidified the government’s view on the issue and ended any hopes for fruitful discussions. Other than an inadvertent success in Scotland, the campaign was a complete failure. The government dominated its interactions with the POA and when it tried to compromise, the POA rejected the offer.

Research Notes

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Additional Notes:

After the strike concluded, some individuals did express support for the campaign. John Cox, a former inmate, expressed support for the very prison officers that once supervised him. Additionally, MacAskill, the Justice Secretary of Scotland stated that Scotland would not pass a not forbidding their prison officers to strike.

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

Julio Alicea, 05/12/2010

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