



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Saskatchewan coal miners win strike for better working conditions, 1931

8 September

1931

to: 6 October

1931

Country: Canada

Location City/State/Province: *Bienfait, Saskatchewan*

Goals:

The miners wanted set daily working hours, better working conditions, the end of the company store monopoly, and a wage increase.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols › Miners held flags with slogans, "We will not work for starvation wages"
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors › Miners displayed Union Jack flags
- 039. Parades › Miners held a parade from Bienfait to Estevan
- 042. Motorcades
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Coal Miners

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Sam Scarlett, Martin Forkin, and James Sloan

Partners:

Workers Unity League (WUL) and Mine Workers' Union of Canada (MWUC)

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Mine Workers' Union of Canada (MWUC)
- Miners
- Workers Unity League (WUL)

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 5 days*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Mine owners and operators

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Union representatives had informed the strikers to maintain nonviolence, but during the parade from Bienfait to Estevan a few of the strikers were involved in a pushing and shoving match with the police, while other strikers threw rocks at the police.

Repressive Violence:

The police used violence against the strikers in an attempt to break up the motorcade/parade. The police called in fire trucks to spray the strikers, they beat and forcefully removed the strikers, and also shot and killed a few of the strikers.

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

In 1931, many people across Canada were struggling to survive through the Depression. In Bienfait, Saskatchewan, Canada, coal miners were facing the same struggles. The price of coal was lower than it had been in recent years, and mine workers were facing unsafe working conditions and steep wage cuts. Miners were often forced to work 10 hours a day in cramped mine shafts that made it difficult to maneuver around. Water would regularly build up in low lying areas in the mines, forcing miners to wade through water to complete their job. Mine owners often refused to complete regular maintenance on the tunnels in the mines, which lead to several dangerous cave-ins. Many of the coal mines in Saskatchewan also did not have adequate ventilation, which allowed for toxic carbon dioxide to build-up in the mines, making many workers seriously ill. As a new strip mine opened in Saskatchewan, many miners were also facing wage cuts of up to 15 percent.

In July and August of 1931, small groups of mine workers gathered in secret to discuss what should be done about the unsafe working conditions and steep wage cuts they were facing. The miners appealed to the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada (TLC) in August, hoping they would help them establish a union, but their requests were ignored. After several meetings the miners decided to contact the Workers Unity League (WUL), which controlled the Mine Workers' Union of Canada (MWUC). The Workers Unity League sent two men; Martin Forkin and Sam Scarlett to help the workers address the situation and decide what steps should be taken.

After meeting with many of the miners, Sam Scarlett from the WUL and James Sloan from the MWUC each addressed crowds of around 1,000 people, stating that the union had received 100 percent support from the mine workers and their families. The union representatives were careful when choosing local leadership, choosing men who were mainly of British descent, in order to prevent claims from the mine operators that the unrest in the area was caused by foreigners or anti-British groups. The union leaders also built relationships within the local community, knowing that community support would play a major role in the outcome. Finally, the union representatives encouraged nonviolence on the part of the workers and their families in order to preserve public support. The union representatives, with the support of the miners, stated their demands: set daily working hours, safer working conditions, the end of the company store monopoly, and a wage increase.

Although union representatives had been chosen, mine owners and operators were unwilling to work with the union. They refused negotiations and would not recognize the union, stating that the union was created and founded on communism. With no negotiations, miners had run out of options, and decided to go on strike. Finally, on September 8, 1931, coal miners walked off the job and began their strike.

However, mine operators were not going to give up easily and brought in replacement workers to reopen a few of the mines. When word of the mines reopening reached the striking miners, hundreds of men gathered at the mines on September 16, 1931, and began picketing. The replacement workers were soon forced to leave the mine by the picketers, and the mines closed again.

On September 29, 1931, the miners and their families, along with union representatives, held a peaceful parade that started in Bienfait and ended in Estevan, Saskatchewan. The miners had hoped that the parade would make their struggles public and would help them gain more local support. The motorcade started off in the early afternoon and as the miners and their families drove toward Estevan they hung Union Jack flags from their vehicles. Hoping to gain public support, some of the flags and banners had slogans written across them reading, "We will not work for starvation wages" and "Down with the company store." As the motorcade got closer to the center of Estevan it was stopped by over two-dozen police officers. The miners were ordered to end the parade and disperse, but when the miners refused, one police officer tried to pull a striker from his truck. Other strikers noticed the act and began a pushing and shoving match with the police. The police called for a fire truck to come and hose down the crowd, in an attempt to break-up the strikers, even though there were women and children in the crowd. As the trucks arrived the police began arresting the strikers, and although the miners had been informed to maintain nonviolence, a few of them began throwing rocks at the police and the struggle escalated.

A small group of strikers began climbing on a fire truck that had been called in by the police. As the men stood on top of the fire truck the police began shooting, and one man standing on the truck was killed. During the police gunfire, two other male strikers were also killed. By the end of the struggle, the police gunfire had also wounded eight unarmed strikers, four bystanders, and one member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

On September 30, 1931, the day following the parade, police raided the homes of several of the strikers and arrested thirteen people who were charged with rioting. In the following days, more strikers were arrested, as well as a number of the union leaders. The police continued to patrol the town daily and continued to raid homes in an attempt to instill fear in the miners. Down but not discouraged, the strikers refused to return to work and continued to push for set daily working hours, better working conditions, the end of the company store monopoly, and a wage increase.

Although the mine operators refused to recognize the MWUC, the miners and mine operators came to an agreement on October 6, 1931. The mine operators agreed to a set eight-hour working day, a minimum wage of \$4 a day, a reduction in rent of the miners' houses, a reduction in the cost of blasting powder, and the end to the company store monopoly. The miners of Bienfait, Saskatchewan were satisfied with the agreement and ended the strike. Overall, the miners were pleased with the agreement and considered it a victory.

Research Notes

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