



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Swedish workers general strike for economic justice, power shift (Ådalen) 1931

October

1930

to: May

1931

Country: Sweden

Location Description: *Three mills in Adalen and, later, cities around country*

Goals:

Primary: Prevent wage cuts

Secondary: Stop strikebreakers from working

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 105. Establishment strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 105. Establishment strike
- 107. Sympathy strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 105. Establishment strike
- 107. Sympathy strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 105. Establishment strike
- 107. Sympathy strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 037. Singing

- 038. Marches
- 045. Demonstrative funerals
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 052. Silence
- 105. Establishment strike
- 107. Sympathy strike
- 117. General strike

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Mill workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Axel Nordström and other unknown worker leaders

Partners:

Mill workers in two nearby pulp mills in the Adalen valley. The director of the first mill had investments in all three striking mills

External allies:

Workers in cities throughout the country and in other industries in Adalen

Involvement of social elites:

Government banned the use of strikebreakers just before a large protest against them.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Mill workers in two nearby pulp mills

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Workers in other industries in Adalen
- Workers throughout the country

Segment Length: *Approximately 1.5 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Mill management and owners

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

Demonstrators threw rocks at strikebreakers and soldiers. One day they also dragged strikebreakers from the mill, inflicting minor injuries.

Repressive Violence:

Military shot at marchers on May 14, 1931, killing 5 and wounding 5 more peaceful demonstrators

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The campaign achieved its secondary goal of ending the use of strikebreakers. It also prevented further governmental and military intervention into labor conflicts in Sweden. However it is not clear if the strike prevented wage cuts. For that reason a definite score of 3 was given; however, it is possible that the strike was completely successful.

The campaign grew from one mill to three and then to a general strike in the area and in several cities around the Sweden.

The general strike in Ådalen, Sweden, in 1931 was part of a much larger industrial struggle between the Swedish Employers' Federation (SAF) and the Swedish Union Federation (LO), a struggle that had been continuing since the late 19th century, if not longer.

After a failed general strike in 1909, the LO lost a lot of membership and the balance of power shifted in favor of the SAF. Negotiations and cooperation between the two organizations slowed due to decentralization of LO's leadership. During the economic surge of World War I, LO's membership grew rapidly and LO regained power during the 1920s. While SAF tried to lower wages with coordinated lockouts across industries, LO was able to resist by using the resources from a wide base of membership to support the workers affected by each lockout. A settlement after a failed lockout in 1925 effectively put an end to the efficacy of lockouts in Swedish labor conflicts.

The national government was also seeking its own section of power in industrial relations since industrial conflict greatly affected the national economy. The Conservative Party sought the dissolution of labor unions. Liberals, a party that was in favor of free market economy and limited government, wanted restraints against both laborers and employers. The Social Democrats were aligned with LO and promoted workers' rights. The Conservatives and Liberals together held a majority in the national parliament.

In 1928, two important events occurred. The LO and SAF held a Labor Peace Conference in which they decided to create a labor peace council with members from LO, SAF, and the government. They in turn created a smaller council to monitor industrial conflict. Also in 1928, the government created a Labor Court to enforce collective agreements. The court benefited the interests

of the employers.

In addition, economic depression hit Sweden in 1930, further stressing laborer-employer relations and increasing unemployment while employers worked to cut costs.

In the fall of 1930, the management of a sawmill in Lunde in the Ådalen Valley announced wage cuts for all workers. In response the laborers began a strike.

The workers continued their strike through the fall, shutting down the mill. The director of the Lunde mill also had investments in two pulp mills in nearby towns. In January 1931 the laborers in these two mills began a sympathy strike. Meanwhile workers and management held ongoing negotiations.

Axel Nordström, a communist leader, was one of the leaders of the strike campaign and the workers also had ties to LO.

On May 12, when management called in outside strikebreakers to commence work in the three mills, the strike leaders immediately put up fliers against the strikebreakers. These fliers also called for further protests, work stoppages in other industries, mass demonstrations, and a meeting scheduled for the next day.

The county government ordered police to protect the strikebreakers and sent several officers to the meeting. At the meeting Axel Nordström called for demonstrations, but did not condone violence against the strikebreakers. The strikers decided to march and demonstrate at one of the mills where workers were holding a sympathy strike. Once at the mill another leader spoke and a band played the workers' theme song. The demonstrators there decided to get rid of the strikebreakers.

Police asked Nordström to prevent the protesters from hurting the strikebreakers, but he was no longer in control of the situation. Demonstrators pulled strikebreakers from the mill, and inflicted some minor injuries. The strikers then chose to hold another meeting the next day and follow it with a march to the mill in Lunde where the strike had begun. They continued protests that day, throwing stones at the strikebreakers' barracks and knocking out electricity for the city of Lunde.

The county government needed help dealing with the strikers. Sixty national soldiers came to Ådalen that night. Demonstrators threw stones at the soldiers as they arrived. In Lunde the soldiers used smoke grenades and fired warning shots to disperse protesters.

May 14 was a public holiday as 4000 strikers met in a public park. Strike leaders met alone, prior to the mass meeting, to discuss strikebreakers and the military presence. They decided to call for a general strike throughout the region. During the leaders' meeting, workers in the park grew agitated and began the march before the leaders had even arrived. The march was orderly and workers walked in four columns, forming a line a kilometer long. At the forefront they held banners and flags and a band played. This march was determinedly peaceful.

That same day, the provincial government had agreed to place a ban on the strikebreakers, preventing their further work in the mills. However, the government officials failed to deliver this news to the demonstrators who continued their march in protest of the strikebreakers.

The soldiers ordered the strikers to halt near the mill, but marchers continued, claiming their right to demonstrate. The soldiers opened fire, killing five strikers and injuring five more.

Photographs of the incident and mass media quickly spread the news of these events. Both the repressive violence and media coverage were new experiences in Swedish labor conflicts.

The next day workers began a general strike in Ådalen and several cities around the nation. In Stockholm, 80,000 people demonstrated on a military drill ground, protesting the killing of the five strikers near Ådalen.

Twelve thousand people attended the funerals a week later and work stopped throughout the nation for a five-minute period of

silence at noon.

The strikers had successfully achieved their secondary goal of preventing the strikebreakers from working, taking away a strong negotiation tool from the management of the mills. The campaigners stopped the general strike at the end of May. I have been unable to find whether they successfully prevented management from imposing wage cuts.

The strike was an important influence on the greater industrial struggle between LO and SAF and the direction of Swedish governmental policy. The military intervention exemplified the governmental attempts at intervention in industrial conflict. As a result of this failed intervention, the military was banned from taking part in such internal conflicts. National sympathy for the strikers added great political momentum to LO and the Social Democrats. In 1932, the Social Democrats gained majority power in the national government. The Basic Agreement in 1938, facilitated by this new governmental power, ultimately ended any possibility of governmental regulation of industrial conflict and led to joint regulation by LO and SAF. Another important result of the rise to power of the Social Democrats was the creation of the Swedish welfare state, an attempt to lower unemployment and provide the basic needs for which the Ådalen strikers had been fighting.

Research Notes

Influences:

There were many previous workers' strikes in Sweden (1).

Sources:

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Svensson, Jesper. "Adalen 1931: How Could That Happen?" <http://hem.passagen.se/jemisv/adalen/> (Accessed October 4, 2009).

Additional Notes:

Violence and stone throwing against strikebreakers and military was not supported or called for by the leaders of the campaign. Emotions ran high and the stone throwers caused only few and minor injuries.

Most of the information in English about this case focused on the shootings in May and there was very little information about the beginning or the end of the entire 9-month campaign. There did appear to be a lot of information in the Swedish language, including several books and articles that would probably contain more definite and complete information about the campaign.

Possible Swedish language sources include "Adalen 31" by Norman Birger and "Tillväxt och klassarbete" by Anders L. Johansson

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

Max Rennebohm, 03/10/2009

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