



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Swedish Workers Stage General Strike Against Wage Cuts 1909

Time period notes: The depression of 1908 had depressed prices, creating surpluses in good stocks, and leading employers to repeatedly attempt to lower wages are cut back workers' collective bargaining rights.

August

1909

to: September

1909

Country: Sweden

Location Description: *Cities around the country*

Goals:

Negotiate a new collective bargaining agreement on the unions' terms and stop continued lockouts by employers.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 117. General strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 117. General strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 117. General strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 117. General strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 117. General strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 117. General strike

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- industrial workers
- transportation workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO), Transport, the typographer union, and other trade unions around the country.

External allies:

Liberal politicians

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Manufacturing workers
- other workers across the economy
- the LO

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- typographers

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 1 month

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Swedish Employers' Confederation (SAF), Conservative Government

Campaigner violence:

No campaigner violence.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0.5 points out of 1 point

Growth:

1 point out of 3 points

The Swedish General Strike of 1909 occurred near the beginning of a decades-long conflict between the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) and the Swedish Employers Association (SAF). It came after the successful two-day general strike in 1902 for universal suffrage emboldened organized labor. The depression of 1908 had depressed prices, creating surpluses in good stocks, and leading employers to repeatedly attempt to lower wages and cut back workers' collective bargaining rights by threatening lockouts.

Facing labor opposition to reductions in pay and benefits, and upcoming contract negotiations, the major employers' associations, led by the newly-formed SAF, aimed to assert their power in an effort to negotiate the agreements on their terms. The SAF launched a series of lockouts in June and July 1909, beginning a period of intensified conflict between workers and employers. In response, local unions staged a series of strikes in July 1909, which employers responded to with more lockouts.

On August 2nd 1909, LO decided to escalate in hopes of ending the threats of lockouts and to gain an acceptable compromise with the SAF. They called a general strike on August 4th for manufacturing and transportation workers. They hoped to model the strike after the successful two-day strike in 1902. They aimed to deal a quick, devastating blow, forcing the government to intervene and broker a compromise between the unions and the employers.

Despite the LO not consulting local union leadership, rank-and-file members enthusiastically supported the LO strike. At the strike's peak 300,000 out of 500,000 workers obeyed the call and stopped work. Many local unions and workers had more ambitious goals than the LO. They wanted to alter power dynamics between themselves and push for increased wages instead of only resisting wage cuts. This divergence in goals remained a source of tension throughout the strike as enthusiastic local unions became more frustrated with the LO's cautious leadership.

The unions maintained order by asking individual strike committees to choose "special police" from within their ranks to cooperate with the official police and maintain order. The government also prohibited alcohol sales during the strike. These measures, and general cooperation between the workers and the police, maintained order for the duration of the strike.

Contrary to the LO's original goals, the strike lasted for over a month, severely stressing their small treasury. Continuing the strike presented financial challenges for the unions because they had smaller, less readily-accessible financial reserves than the employers did. Thus, the LO did not provide relief to workers during the strike, which compelled some workers to break strike and lowered morale.

The LO strategy aimed to create enough disruption to force the government to mediate the conflict. However, the right-wing government in power at the time was not amenable to labor interests, so the LO hoped to gain support from liberals in government, who could help pressure the government to intervene and broker an acceptable compromise between the SAF and the LO. In an effort to gain this support, the LO aimed to strike a balance between creating enough disruption to force the government to intervene, while not too dramatically disrupting the economy in order to maintain liberal allies. Seeking liberal support, the LO excluded key sectors of the economy from the strike including electricity, water, street sweeping, and animal care workers.

Moreover, the strike did not include the crucial railroad and dock workers. The railroad workers chose not to strike for political and legal reasons, but the dockworkers appeared to not join the strike because of conflict between their union (Transport) and the LO. Since their refusal to accept the December Compromise, negotiated largely by the LO in 1906, the transportation unions had taken a more militant, and occasionally violent, strategy. The LO saw Transport as a threat to labor market stability. Over the

previous years, the SAF took advantage of these disagreements to further divide the LO and Transport. After the LO hesitantly agreed to support the dockworkers in June 2012, the SAF threatened a lockout of over 200,000 workers, causing the LO to rescind its support. The dockworkers never joined the strike in 1909, critically allowing the transport of goods, particularly those for export, to continue. These exceptions prevented the LO from bringing the country's economy to a halt, which greatly weakened their ability to launch a brief, devastating assault as planned.

Despite not including key economic sectors in the strike, the LO was still unable to gain liberal support due to the typographers joining the strike on August 9th. The typographer strike limited the flow of printed material, which upset liberals who viewed it as an attack on free speech. Despite not being affiliated with the LO, the typographers' strike caused resentment among liberals who had previously had been neutral to the LO strike. Criticism by liberals bolstered already-strong opposition to the strike from conservatives and ended hope of liberals mediating the conflict.

Unable to gain liberal support and with their reserve funds running low, the LO ended the general strike on 4 September 1909. After the conclusion of the strike, the employers locked large numbers of workers out. For months, workers engaged in defensive strikes under threats from employers of further wage cuts. As of 1 October, 63,620 workers were still locked out or had been forced into defensive strikes. The last of the lockouts did not end until December 1910, affecting the clothing, cellulose, road and bridge construction, sawmill and textile industries.

While the employers did agree to the principle of collective bargaining, the terms were almost identical to those proposed earlier in 1909 by the SAF, before the strike began. The National Labor Federation suffered a 50 percent decline in membership by 1910 as union members lost their jobs or gave up their membership. The Swedish employers maintained relative control in labor markets throughout most of the decade.

Research Notes

Influences:

1902 general strike for expanded suffrage

Sources:

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