



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Unions and students in Hong Kong and Canton strike-boycott against British imperial rule, 1925-1926

June

1925

to: October

1926

Country: China

Country: Hong Kong

Location City/State/Province: *Hong Kong and Canton (Guangzhou), China*

Goals:

Leaders hoped isolating Hong Kong by denying it both foreign and Chinese contact would deal British imperialism a serious blow. The explicit demands of the Strike Commission included standard issues (an eight-hour workday, the abolition of contract and child labor, freedom of speech and press, the right to organize, and reduction in rent), but also strong local components (that labor unions be allowed to vote for a Chinese member on the Legislative Council and that Chinese be treated as the equal of Europeans).

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 016. Picketing
- 062. Student strike
- 067. "Flight" of workers
- 085. Merchants' "general strike"
- 096. International trade embargo
- 106. Industry strike
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown
- 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance
- 179. Alternative social institutions

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 067. "Flight" of workers
- 085. Merchants' "general strike"

- 096. International trade embargo
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 067. "Flight" of workers
- 085. Merchants' "general strike"
- 096. International trade embargo
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown

Methods in 4th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 067. "Flight" of workers
- 085. Merchants' "general strike"
- 096. International trade embargo
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown

Methods in 5th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 067. "Flight" of workers
- 085. Merchants' "general strike"
- 096. International trade embargo
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown

Methods in 6th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 067. "Flight" of workers
- 085. Merchants' "general strike"
- 096. International trade embargo
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 050. Teach-ins
- 086. Withdrawal of bank deposits
- 192. Alternative economic institutions

Notes on Methods:

Public Speeches (001), Leaflets, pamphlets, and books (009), Literature and speeches advocating resistance (122), Slogans, caricatures, and symbols (007), and Student strike (062) likely continued after the first segment, but these methods were not clear in later segments

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- communist party members
- industrial workers
- students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Kuomintang (KMT), Chinese Communist Party (CCP), the Canton-Hong Kong Strike Committee (under the All-China Labor Federation) and leaders Deng Zhongxia, Yang Yin, Yang Pao'an, Su Zhaozheng, and Huang Ping

Partners:

Hong Kong organizers Huang Su and Chen Yu, Hong Kong Federation of Student Associations, Seamen Union leaders Lin Weimin and Su Chaocheng, and four Cantonese merchant organizations

External allies:

Funds for the boycott-strike came from overseas Chinese, Russian workers, an anonymous British trade union, and Japanese merchants

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Chinese Communist Party (CCP)
- Hong Kong Federation of Student Associations
- Hong Kong organizers Huang Su and Chen Yu
- Kuomintang (KMT)
- Seamen Union leaders
- the Canton-Hong Kong Strike Committee (under the All-China Labor Federation)

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Four Cantonese merchant organizations

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Joining order of other groups not known

Segment Length: *Approximately 2.6 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

British colonial rule of Hong Kong

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

The Strike Committee set up regulations and enforced them with an armed force of more than 2000 pickets in uniform, who prevented strikers from returning to Hong Kong. The strike pickets were organized into units, given military training, and assigned to patrol rivers, shores, and other strategic locations to maintain the boycott. In early February 1926, the strike pickets intensified their aggression against Hong Kong by shooting at Indian troops on the Hong Kong side of the border and at police launches in the Shenzhen River between Hong Kong and China. They also blocked trains to and from China, and prevented villagers from crossing back into Hong Kong.

Repressive Violence:

Not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

In a shooting incident on May 30, 1925, Sikh police under British command opened fire on Chinese protestors in the International Settlement of Shanghai, killing nine demonstrators and wounding many others. News of the incident spread across China, triggering an outburst of nationalism and prompting protests all over, but especially in Shanghai and Canton (Guangzhou) – two cities with concentrated British interests.

Labor and union leaders in Canton came together and called for a general strike in Hong Kong. The 16-month long campaign began as a project of the Kuomintang and the Chinese Communist Party (KMT-CCP) alliance, and was conceived of by Communist leaders as an anti-imperialist platform to expand Communist influence in Canton. Leaders also felt that if they could isolate Hong Kong by denying it both foreign and Chinese contact, British imperialism would suffer a serious blow. The bulk of financial support came from the KMT government in Canton, with other funds coming from overseas Chinese, Russian workers, and an anonymous British trade union. The strike would eventually become a well-organized, effective, massive display of revolutionary nationalism by over 250,000 workers in an effort against British imperialism. As soon as the CCP Canton Region Executive Committee approved of staging a strike, organizers went down to Hong Kong, focusing on it as the most visible example of British imperialism. Deng Zhongxia, Yang Yin, Yang Pao'an, Su Zhaozheng, and Huang Ping emerged as the core leadership.

Communists won local support of the grassroots workers in Hong Kong through the help of local labor leaders, such as activists

Huang Su and Chen Yu. They made speeches, distributed pamphlets to workers, and aroused nationalist fervor across industries. Strike leaders in Canton called on all Chinese to depart from Hong Kong, and offered free passage to Canton by train and steamer. Meanwhile, agitators from Canton distributed Anti-British pamphlets, placards, and literature in Hong Kong to persuade workers to join the strike.

Communists also provided impetus for the students' strike, by organizing the Hong Kong Federation of Student Associations. The large-scale response to the call to strike, which was in some cases spontaneous, was spurred to action more by patriotism and nationalism than because of Communist involvement.

The strike began on June 18, when leftist organizers decided to start the walkout among workers on whom their influence was strongest. The seamen were the first to strike, under the influence of the Seamen Union's leaders Lin Weimin and Su Chaocheng. Tram workers, printers, and other workers quickly followed their example. Soon, major labor unions in Hong Kong jointly declared a general strike, and presented a set of social-political demands to colonial authorities. In the first two weeks more than 50,000 Chinese left Hong Kong in protest.

The strike derived its power from the genuine economic concerns and popular feeling against the privileged status of foreigners. This was made apparent through the demands of the Strike Committee, which included standard issues (an eight-hour workday, the abolition of contract and child labor, freedom of speech and press, the right to organize, and reduction in rent), but also strong local components (that labor unions be allowed to vote for a Chinese member on the Legislative Council and that Chinese be treated as the equal of Europeans).

On June 23, a heated demonstration took place in Shamian, the British and French concessions in Canton. Troops under foreign command massacred more than fifty Chinese protesters, and wounded nearly 120. The incident intensified anti-British sentiment and diffused conservative influences that wanted to limit the length of the strike. It also provoked an anti-British boycott involving the complete break-off of commercial relations with the British, and a total embargo of Hong Kong and Shamian.

More Chinese in Hong Kong became sympathetic to the strike, and within a week 100,000 workers had left for Canton. The great exodus of strikers to Canton severely disrupted the lives and livelihoods of the people in Hong Kong. By July 10, the strike had drawn more than 200,000 workers out of all major services and industries, and all regular trades ground to a halt. By the end of July, 250,000 Chinese had left for Canton.

As the strike-boycott gained momentum, a more formal centralized command surfaced as the 'Canton-Hong Kong Strike Committee,' which was formally an affiliate of the All-China Labor Federation and worked in close collaboration with members of the CCP.

In less than a month, the situation had grown into an effective general strike and boycott of unprecedented scale and direction. As the economy came to a halt, the colony became 'like a ghost town.' The strike left the port dead, internal transportation barely maintained, hospitals under threat of closure, and expatriate families stripped of domestic help. Soaring food prices prompted bank customers to withdraw their deposits in a large-scale bank run that prompted a financial crisis. From there, the Colony's financial fabric unraveled under great strain. By September 18, with banks on the verge of bankruptcy, Chinese Chamber of Commerce had to ask for a trade loan from the British government. Because of the vast number of students who left school and went to Canton, all schools, government, private, and missionary, were severely disrupted. When the new school year began in September, many schools were put in grave financial difficulty due to low retention.

On September 5, the All-China Labor Federation and the Canton-Hong Kong Strike Committee with four Cantonese merchant organizations jointly promulgated new regulations to tighten sanctions against the British. These became the cornerstone of the strike-boycott strategy and accounted for much of the movement's economic success and long duration. Trade traffic along South China routes was put entirely in non-British hands, severely undermining Great Britain's dominant economic position in the delta area.

The responsibilities of the Strike Committee went far beyond the normal sphere of activities of a labor union handling an

industrial strike. They set up regulations and enforced them with an armed force of more than 2,000 pickets in uniform, who prevented strikers from returning to Hong Kong. The strike pickets were organized into units, given military training, and assigned to patrol rivers, shores, and other strategic locations to maintain the boycott. In early February 1926, the strike pickets intensified their aggression against Hong Kong by shooting at Indian troops on the Hong Kong side of the border and at police launches in the Shenzhen River between Hong Kong and China. They also blocked trains to and from China, and prevented villagers from crossing back into Hong Kong.

In response, the colonial government of Hong Kong took emergency measures. They declared a state of emergency, imposed a curfew, dispatched police to guard water supplies, and censored the mail to remove pro-strike material. The government mobilized volunteers to fill empty jobs, drive trams, work at hospitals, and guard the streets. It also hired thugs and former pirates to intimidate those who encouraged the strikers.

Nevertheless, the economic impact of the general strike-boycott had a devastating effect on the Colony's trade. The Colony's total loss in trade with all countries was estimated to be at least US\$300 million during the whole period of the strike-boycott.

However, over time the government realized it could no longer take workers for granted and that it needed to work more closely with leaders of the Chinese community. In May 1926, in a strategic move to show strikers the government's willingness to compromise, Gov. Clementi appointed Chow Shouson as the first Chinese member of the Executive Council.

After the strike began, the majority of CCP organizers and league members left Hong Kong with the strikers for Canton. Strikers were provided with food and lodging. Dormitories and canteens were set up in unused stationary railway coaches, empty houses, and requisitioned opium dens and gambling houses. To maintain tight internal discipline, strikers from particular unions were kept together. The Strike Committee issued weekly bulletin "The Cantonese Labor Way" to boost morale. Political indoctrination and educational activities took place. The strike organizers set up a "worker's college" for political training – offering lessons related to imperialism and labor. Moreover, the strike-boycott gave fresh impetus to the Whampoa development project, related to the old cherished dream of an international port. Using their energy for constructive purposes, strikers built a new road from Canton to Whampoa. The Strike Committee succeeded in obtaining revenue and donations through creative methods: threatening to extend the boycott to Japan, subjecting ships to heavy fines, and auctioning confiscated contraband.

Since most of the strikers who did not go to Canton were forced to seek employment out of sheer financial necessity, the strike in Hong Kong subsided by October 1926. The organizers then focused solely on the boycott against Hong Kong, directed at the British colonial enclave from Canton.

On July 15, 1926, official negotiations between Canton and Hong Kong for a strike-boycott settlement began in Canton. Due to a lack of agreement regarding compensation to the strikers, negotiations were suspended after their fifth session on July 23. The British offer of \$10 million for the development of the Whampoa port was turned down because the condition of the loan prevented any allocation of funds to workers. By mid-September, the Canton regime made plans to end the strike-boycott unilaterally on October 10. The campaigners in Canton terminated the campaign because of the financial burden of supporting the strikers, and to pacify the British, who might have taken steps towards military intervention. Also, unions affiliated with the KMT supported the termination, and CCP wanted to accommodate their wishes in order to maintain the alliance.

After the general strike, the colonial government banned all unions that had been involved in the strike, forbid unions from using funds for political use outside of Hong Kong, and forbid unions in China from forming any branch in Hong Kong. Censorship continued after the strike. In an attempt to provide cultural alternatives to the revolutionary nationalism that had inspired the strike, the colonial government recommended scholars place emphasis on traditional Chinese culture and morality.

The strike failed to change the political status of Chinese in Hong Kong. However, it succeeded in showing the government that its Chinese subjects were to be taken seriously, and the important role that Canton had played as a sanctuary for strikers that returned home demonstrated that Chinese nationalism could not be taken lightly. Finally, the strike hurt Hong Kong's economy enough to eventually convince the Foreign Office of the need to make concessions to China, which it did by surrendering the

concessions at Hankou and Jiujiang in 1927-1928 and Weihaiwei in 1930.

Research Notes

Influences:

The Hong Kong-Canton strike-boycott was influenced by the Seamen's Strike of 1922, when over 30,000 Chinese seamen from Hong Kong and Canton went on strike for higher wages (1).

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Additional Notes:

The Hong Kong-Canton strike was in some senses a large-scale repeat performance of the 1922 Seamen's Strike (just with a larger scale and longer duration). The two shared similarities in their mode of operation, featuring tight internal organization, effective enforcement, asylum in Canton, and support from the KMT. However, the 1925-1926 general strike-boycott used economic means for political ends in a nationalistic attempt against foreign domination under British imperialism.

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

Anjali Cadambi, 26/09/2010

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