



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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United Fruit Company laborers campaign for economic justice, Honduras, 1954

April

1954

to: July 9,

1954

Country: Honduras

Goals:

To increase wages and improve working conditions for laborers.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 105. Establishment strike
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 107. Sympathy strike
- 117. General strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 013. Deputations
- 106. Industry strike
- 107. Sympathy strike
- 117. General strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Notes on Methods:

It is unclear when the general strike (which was begun because of the sympathetic strikes in other areas of the economy)

ended officially, so here it is only marked in segments 1 and 2.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Laborers of the United Fruit Company

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Not Known

Partners:

Not Known

External allies:

Laborers from Standard Fruit, workers in the tobacco, beer, and textile industries, miners, students, teachers, and artisans.

Involvement of social elites:

Not Known.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Laborers from United Fruit Company

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Beer workers
- Mine workers
- Standard Fruit laborers
- Students
- Teachers
- Textile workers
- Tobacco workers
- and artisans

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Standard Fruit laborers (exit)

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

It is unclear when all the external allies left the campaign, but they did not appear to have supported the campaign through July 9

Segment Length: *Approximately 2 weeks*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

United Fruit Company

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

Not Known

Repressive Violence:

Not Known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

4 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The workers succeeded in achieving higher wages and medical care for their families, as well as improved working conditions. The government created progressive labor legislation in response to the strike. Although the workers demanded a wage increase of 72 percent, in the end they received an increase of only 21 percent. The signed contract left loopholes that allowed thousands of layoffs by the company (from a workforce of over 100,000).

Strike groups remained through the entire campaign

The campaign began with a strike at a single port involving laborers of the United Fruit Company, however it spread to involve nearly 100,000 laborers of the United Fruit Company, as well as laborers from the Standard Fruit Company, workers in the tobacco, beer, and textile industries, miners, students, teachers, and artisans

During the 1950s, Honduras was characterized by a large gap between the few rich citizens and the many poor laborers. In 1952, Honduras held its first ever agrarian census. The wealthy landowners, who only consisted of 4.2 percent of the total population, owned an astonishing 56.8 percent of the arable land in Honduras. Meanwhile, the poor farmers of Honduras, who made up 65.1 percent of the population, only owned 15.7 percent of the arable land. To make matters worse, the wealthy landowners who possessed the majority of the land did not use it effectively. Many of the wealthy landowners who owned large tracks of land used it for either cattle ranching or simply maintaining the luxurious lifestyle associated with such wealth. Even the fruit companies that owned land in Honduras kept nearly 75 percent of their holdings in reserve as insurance against plant epidemics, instead of providing fruit and monetary earnings to farmers. These problems led to many disgruntled farmers in Honduras seeking land reform; however this would be difficult because the poorer members of society had virtually no say in public affairs. The General Strike of 1954 is an instance where poor laborers fought for reforms by standing up against the powerful and wealthy.

In the 1920s, the United Fruit Company was established as a powerful organization in Honduras because it was able to successfully take over its opponents, such as the rival Cuyamel Fruit Company, and gain complete domination over the banana market in the United States. After taking over Cuyamel Fruit Company as the result of economic turmoil in 1929, the United Fruit Company had the power to influence government officials and secure its interests. During this time, labor organizations were abolished and labor was increasingly exploited by the company. In addition, the United Fruit Company gained tax-free concessions from the government, fired workers, and shut down plantations. The United Fruit Company also increased its power by expanding into neighboring countries by building railroads and bridges.

Although the United Fruit Company was one of the most powerful and influential organizations in Honduras during this time, in 1954 unhappy workers waged a strike against the company. The strike began in April 1954 when dock workers argued that they should receive double holiday pay as stated by law. By May 5th, there were 25,000 striking workers in the banana industry, nearly 15 percent of Honduras' entire labor force.

On May 7th, the manager of the United Fruit Company, J.F. Aycock declared that he would not negotiate with workers as long as they remained on strike. However, since the strike expanded to the center of operations for Standard Fruit, Standard offered to negotiate with striking workers. Despite this, by the second week of May 11,000 Standard Fruit employees had joined to strike to show their support for their fellow workers at United Fruit Company. In addition, tobacco, beer, textile, and mine workers joined the effort with solidarity strikes at this time. Shortly thereafter, students, teachers, and artisans participated in strikes to show their support.

By May 16th, campaigners presented a petition to J.F. Aycock that outlined the demands of the striking workers. They demanded an increase in wages and cited the Declaration of the Rights of Man to illustrate the unjust violations they suffered. At this point, workers for Coca-Cola in La Ceiba and Puerto Cortes joined the strike.

On May 18th, Standard Fruit opened negotiations with its workers. The company agreed to increase the wages and improve the working conditions of the workers. This is the first time in the history of the Honduras that a private corporation negotiated with protesters to reach a collective agreement. This resulted in the workers of Standard Fruit agreeing to go back to work on the 21st of May. Despite this, on May 21st the United Fruit workers only hardened their position and increased the number of strikers to 100,000. The United Fruit workers tried to create a delegation to further negotiate conditions with the company, but the United Fruit Company refused to negotiate further.

Despite this, by July 9th the strike was ended and the workers returned to the United Fruit Company. The strike was not completely successful in achieving all the worker demands, however it was by no means a failure. The company changed working conditions and the government created progressive labor legislation in response to the strike. Although the workers demanded a wage increase of 72 percent, in the end they received an increase of only 21 percent. Additionally, the United Fruit Company agreed to provide medical care for the workers' families. The strike is not a complete success because the contract that was written by the company left loopholes which allowed for thousands of layoffs in the near future. The strike may have had an empowering effect on the laid off workers, however, because they went on to organize the first peasant unions in Honduras.

Research Notes

Sources:

Bucheli, Marcelo, and Ian Read. "Chronology." United Fruit Historical Society. 2006. United Fruit Historical Society, Web. 13 Oct 2009. <<http://www.unitedfruit.org>>.

McManus, Philip and Gerald Schlabach. *Relentless Persistence: Nonviolent Action in Latin America*. Santa Cruz, CA: New Society Publishers, 1991.

Additional Notes:

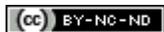
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Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

Gavin Musynske 12/12/2009

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