



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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United States steelworkers strike for a contract and union recognition, 1937

May 26,

1937

to: Early July

1937

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Nationwide*

Location Description: *Steel mills across the United States*

Goals:

A signed contract and union recognition

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 051. Walk-outs
- 106. Industry strike
- 138. Sitdown

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 106. Industry strike
- 138. Sitdown

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 106. Industry strike
- 138. Sitdown

Methods in 4th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 106. Industry strike
- 138. Sitdown

Methods in 5th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 106. Industry strike
- 138. Sitdown

Methods in 6th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 106. Industry strike
- 138. Sitdown

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 110. Slowdown strike

Notes on Methods:

There are not explicit mentions of people using these methods in each segment, but given that the strike was national, and the above methods were those that the strikers used, it seems probable that their use was constant throughout the 6 segments. Specifically, it is unclear when workers did slowdown strikes, so I have not specified a segment for those strikes.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Steelworkers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) head John L. Lewis, Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC) President Philip Murray

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

Not known; President Roosevelt and local politicians often failed to get involved, despite the hopes of the campaigners.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Steel Workers Organizing Committee

Groups in 2nd Segment:

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 each location is not known

Segment Length: *Approximately 1 week*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Little Steel steel companies

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

In one town, the company set up an alternate union that actually had the interests of the company in mind, and circulated a petition against the national union among the workers.

Campaigner violence:

It is possible that some campaigners in the "Memorial Day Massacre" threw rocks. In Monroe, picketers made themselves makeshift weapons, although they did not use them.

Repressive Violence:

Police often used violence to break up pickets and disperse protesters.

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 June of 1936, the national Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) formed the Steel Workers' Organizing Committee (SWOC) to organize an industry that had traditionally been nonunionized. The goal of the organization was to get a signed contract and union recognition for workers at steel plants across the United States. From the outset, the steel industry, opposed to unionization, placed advertisements in newspapers nationwide against the unions to discourage their employees from getting involved.

On May 2, 1937, John L. Lewis, national leader of the CIO, announced the results of a contract they had been negotiating with U.S. Steel that ended the industry's formal hostility to unions and labor contracts. The contract granted a standard pay, an eight-hour workday, and time-and-a-half pay for overtime work. SWOC anticipated Little Steel—a group of companies including Youngstown Sheet & Tube, Republic Steel, Inland Steel, Bethlehem Steel, National Steel, American Rolling Mills, and some smaller companies—to follow suit. However, Little Steel, under the leadership of Tom Girdler, president of Republic Steel, refused to sign the agreement, or any other, or to recognize any union. Although it adopted the same wage and hour provisions

specified in the U.S. Steel contract, it did not meet any of SWOC's other demands, particularly the demand of a formal contract.

At this point, SWOC, under the leadership of President Philip Murray, started a large-scale campaign to organize the steel industry. SWOC sent over 400 organizers to steel plants around the country, particularly large plants in Chicago, Youngstown, and Canton, as well as to mills where there was a history of organization. In so doing, SWOC was able to create a strong support network among these plants. Because so many workers were unhappy with their working conditions, SWOC was often able to organize them easily. However, SWOC was unable to devote as many resources to supporting and organizing workers at steel mills nationwide as they did at those plants they considered to be particularly critical. As a result, workers at many plants were less supportive of SWOC, and more hesitant to devote themselves to SWOC's unionization campaign.

SWOC called a national strike on some of the Little Steel companies starting on May 26. By the 28th, there were 80,000 strikers at steel plants nationwide, 46,000 of who were from Republic Steel. In response to the strikers, many companies closed their plants. The strikers at these plants would then form a picket line in the hopes of preventing the plant from reopening, a tactic that tended to succeed, as other workers would often refuse to cross a picket line. Some plants also had slowdown strikes, although it is unclear which plants, or when in the campaign.

In Johnstown, town residents coalesced under a Citizens' Committee to start a back-to-work campaign after the strike closed the Bethlehem Steel Plant, leaving the town devoid of industry. Throughout the course of June, the citizens placed advertisements in a local newspaper promising law and order and explaining that people had a right to work. Later in June, steel interests placed a large ad saying "WE PROTEST" in a national newspaper. Over a three day period in late June, at least nine Johnstown citizens made speeches on the local radio reiterating the right to work and critiquing the CIO for taking away jobs through closing down the steel plant. On July 15, 200 people from all over the country met in Johnstown in part of an effort to nationalize the anti-labor movement in Johnstown, despite the fact that the strike was almost over at this point.

In other parts of the country companies often responded with violence, turning to the local and state police, the National Guard, company-hired police, and other local organizations to subdue the strikers. At the later-termed "Memorial Day Massacre" on May 30 at a Republic Steel plant in Chicago, police shot and killed ten unarmed strikers and injured ninety others. The strike at this plant had begun four days earlier, although approximately half of the workers did not strike and continued working. The police had prevented strikers from picketing, sometimes with violence, since then. On the 29th, they allowed a peaceful march and picket, but on the 30th, when strikers decided to march from their strategic meeting to the plant, the police stopped them two blocks away. Officers fired guns and tear gas into the crowd, and began attacking the protesters with riot clubs. Although some protesters may have thrown rocks, they were not responsible for any police injuries.

Memorial Day was not the only instance of violence. Over the course of the strikes, the various companies intimidated strikers and used violence to end their protests. In Monroe, Michigan, townspeople attacked SWOC's organizer, and police attacked a picket, as discussed below. Such violence was not atypical, and shows that, in addition to facing hostility from mill operators and law enforcement (often obeying company wishes), picketers also faced hostility, often violent, from the citizens of their towns.

Monroe was an important town as it was one of the mills that received less SWOC support, and also the first town where the CIO failed to receive its demands. Workers at the Newton Steel plant there had met with SWOC organizers secretly in towns near Monroe from November 1936 to April 1937, when SWOC chartered the pro-union group in Monroe. However, only in mid-May did SWOC send a full-time organizer, the African American Leonides McDonald, to Monroe. McDonald met much hostility there, where only 3% of the steelworkers were African American, and the town itself was very homogeneous and hostile to outsiders. Because he was only in Monroe for approximately two weeks before the strike commenced, he did not have time to sufficiently overcome this initial hostility. As a result of both the local hostility and the minimal amount of time he spent there, SWOC did not have a strong support base among Monroe steelworkers. In response to the national strike, authorities at the plant in Monroe set up a company union that was in violation of the national Wagner Act, mandating independent unions. Officials also circulated a petition among the workers at the mill stating their opposition to SWOC in an attempt to nonviolently undermine SWOC's strategy.

On May 28, those workers at the Monroe SWOC meeting voted unanimously to strike and close down the plant, although they represented only a minority of the workers there. The strike quickly shut down the plant, because even those workers not on strike refused to cross a picket line, and because almost all of the workers from one critical department of the plant went on strike, meaning that none of the other departments could operate. However, local law enforcement and the local business community both supported the mill, and the state governor had distanced himself from the labor cause, so the company knew it had a fair chance of breaking the picket and forcing the strikers to return to work. On June 10, the day that the mill was to reopen, a mob of local men attacked organizer McDonald, knocking him unconscious, and threatened to hang him. Later that day, picketers, hearing news of the assault, began to fashion themselves makeshift weapons from materials they found on the street. Police ordered the picketers to disperse to allow for the reentry of workers. When they failed to do so, police directed a gas bomb at the crowd, injuring six picketers. A few days later, SWOC held a rally in response, but by the end of June, the steel plant had returned to full-capacity production, and the picket had ended. This loss hurt SWOC's national momentum, and many Little Steel companies trying to break strikes nationwide employed some of the same tactics that had succeeded in Monroe.

Girdler and the other leaders of Little Steel continued to refuse to recognize the national steelworkers' union. In early July, the union told the workers to return to work, without having won their demands. At this point, the CIO tried shifting its tactics to search for legal remedies. This remedy ultimately succeeded; in 1942, the Supreme Court ordered Little Steel to negotiate with the unions. Furthermore, under the pressure of increased demand for steel and other war products in World War II, the federal government created the National War Labor Board in 1942, which eventually forced Tom Girdler and the Little Steel companies to recognize SWOC at all mills. However, this success was a result of legal maneuverings and government intervention a full five years after the end of the nonviolent campaign, not a result of the strike itself.

Nevertheless, some plants, under independent leadership, continued pushing for recognition and rights later in 1937 and the following years, although they did not have the support of the national organization. One example was at the Inland Steel, in East Chicago. Workers returned to the plant after the strike with no formally recognized union representatives or contract; instead, the poor conditions and low wages continued as before. Unhappy with this state of affairs, the workers started their own organization, taking the task of union organization upon themselves in order to effect greater change than the earlier strike. These workers were able to coordinate a series of strikes, wildcats, shutdowns, slow-downs, and other actions that impaired the function of the plant. The active presence of many union members at the plant made this possible; furthermore, as the workers had no contract, there were no measures explicitly forbidding strikes, and so the workers felt more at liberty to strike and demand what conditions they deemed proper. Within two years, they won an agreement from Inland Steel that the company would pay no less than any of their competitors. Although what happened at this plant was separate from the national campaign, and had different leadership, it was nevertheless directly inspired by that campaign, had the same goals, and employed many of the same methods.

Research Notes

Influences:

This campaign influenced a strike at Inland Steel in East Chicago soon after this strike (2).

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