



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Zanzibar workers general strike in Zanzibar City, Tanzania, 1948

August 20,
1948

to: September 13,
1948

Country: Tanzania

Location City/State/Province: Zanzibar City, Zanzibar Protectorate

Goals:

Wage increase to a monthly wage of Shs 60

Improved conditions for all workers

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 080. Suppliers' and handlers' boycott
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 106. Industry strike
- 117. General strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 067. "Flight" of workers
- 117. General strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 067. "Flight" of workers
- 117. General strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 117. General strike

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Laborers who migrated from the Tanzania mainland to the Zanzibar Protectorate

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Abbas Othman aka Jomo Kenyatta

Partners:

porters

the Hamalis' (cart men) Association

European Servants Union (ESU)

government employees

domestic workers

sanitation workers

teachers

small business owners

External allies:

Herbert Barnabas- a mainlander who acted as link man between strike leaders Resident Glenday

Involvement of social elites:

Not Known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Dockworkers

- European Servants Union (ESU)
- porters
- the Hamalis' (cart men) Association

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Teachers
- domestic workers
- government employees
- sanitation workers
- small business owners

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Herbert Barnabasa- a mainlander who acted as link man between strike leaders Resident Glenday

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 4 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

African Wharfrage Company- a British owned company that held monopoly over cargo-handling in Zanzibar City's ports

British appointed officials of Zanzibar City:

Resident Glenday

District Commissioner Barwani

Zanzibar City's Mudir (local leader) Seyyid Busaidi

Town Magistrate Stiven

Commissioner of Police Bell

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Many of the opponent's actions were prohibitive legislative measures or the forming of committees, but since this exists within the established framework of the political system these cannot be classified as non-violent action.

Campaigner violence:

A crowd of protesters threw stones at policemen in demanding the release of two men unjustly arrested. Leaders of a mob told authorities that the mob would not be violent if immediate demands were met, which means that violence was threatened. A possible use of violence but unclear from the data is the statement in the narrative that the strikers "began diverting food supplies" from the city. If the diversion was a simple consequence of the strike it would not be considered violence, but if it was an intentional effort to heighten the food shortages and it was carried to an extreme, it would be "the threat or use of injurious force" which is the GNAD's definition of violence.

In some cases intimidation tactics were used to gain supporters for the General Strike.

Repressive Violence:

Tear gas and the threat of opening fire was used to disband protesters. In clashes between protesters and police, many protesters were beaten.

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:

Within a year the mediation efforts of the “Labour Conciliation Committee” led to wage increases and better conditions for workers involved in the packing of produce for export, the bakery trade, soap& oil factories, and coconut husking. However, the wage increase did not meet the levels initially demanded by labor organizations, and did not cover all workers.

Workers involved in the campaign voluntarily disbanded the strike and returned to work.

The campaign began as a strike of migrated workers from the Tanzanian mainland, but soon spread to the indigenous population of Zanzibar city

Zanzibar, a former colony of Great Britain, is an island off the coast of Tanzania, located in East Africa. Under British rule the population of Zanzibar was divided between small but influential groups of Arabs, Indians, and Europeans and the two larger, primary groups on the island: those Africans born on Zanzibar itself and those born on the mainland of Tanzania, who later immigrated.

In the 1920s Zanzibar began a major campaign to recruit a labor force from the Tanzania mainland to help with the production of copra. During this time the population of the island swelled by about 2000 people per year. Workers from the mainland were restricted to road gang work, plantation weeding, and cultivation. Upon completing their contracted work many mainlanders remained in Zanzibar, usually becoming workers on the island’s clove plantations.

The international economic decline of the 1930s marked the end of this influx of mainlanders. Throughout the 1930s worker’s conditions on Zanzibar fell in relation to conditions on the mainland. This affected all groups of workers, but particularly the former mainlanders, who in addition to composing the bulk of the manual labor force, were not directly represented in the island’s Legislative Council and were classified as “temporary settlers” no matter the duration of their stay.

In 1934 mainlander’s attempted to organize, creating the African Association for Immigrant Workers; however, this group was largely ineffective. In the 1940s the discrimination against mainlanders only increased. This was in part due to the shifting post World War II environment of nationalism and anti-colonial sentiment, which overshadowed the struggles of the mainlander’s. Also wages had remained static since 1945, despite a large increase in workers’ cost of living.

In 1947 a poor clove harvest sent the island into a severe economic recession. These factors along with the 1947 example of dockworkers in Mombasa and Dar es Salaam striking successfully set the stage for the 1948 General Strike in Zanzibar City. The port of Zanzibar City was controlled by the African Wharfage Company (AWC), a British owned company, which held a monopoly over cargo-handling. The AWC was dependent on two main groups, its porters and cart men, or hamali. Recognizing their significance, the hamali formed a loose association in 1945.

In July of 1948 the AWC began negotiations with representatives from its work force that resulted in a number of benefits for its employees, such as annual wage increases and paid overtime. However, many labor organizations viewed these benefits as overly paternal and were thus suspicious. In late July, three weeks prior to the General Strike, a young man named Abbas Othman was employed as a laborer by the AWC using the name of Jomo Kenyatta. This man would become the leader of the General Strike, and many argue he journeyed to Zanzibar for specifically that purpose.

On 18 August the AWC received an unsigned letter calling for a monthly wage of 66 Shs and improved workers conditions. This letter threatened a strike of AWC employees if the demands were not implemented within two days. Although the demands were not too far from the benefits AWC had recently granted its workers, the organization refused to accept the ultimatum.

On 20 August workers began a strike that would paralyze the city for weeks. The AWC workers who marched the first day of the strike did not meet any major violence. Othman attempted to involve other labor groups, but mostly failed since it was the end of the month and pay day was fast approaching.

Despite the strike's slow start the government took action 25 August, announcing that the use intimidation to spread the strike would be met with force.

On 26 August an Italian cruise liner arrived in Zanzibar in need of water supplies. However, the ship was prevented from taking fresh water onboard by striking dockworkers. AWC responded to the situation by sending a popular dock manager to reason with the strikers, but this attempt failed.

On 28 August strikers issued a new set of demands with a promise for further discussion. The AWC largely ignored these demands and tension rose between strikers and police, particularly as some areas began to experience major food shortages. As a result of this tension, the Resident of Zanzibar Glenday issued a provision under the Peace and Preservation Decree. This provision, issued 31 August, stated that all weapons, very loosely defined, should be delivered to the Central Police Station. This was followed by a ban on all meetings not approved by the Chief of Police, issued 1 September.

Then on 2 September the government sought to end the strike by recruiting fresh labor from the small town of Mkoktoni. Not knowing the recruited labor had all stayed away due to fear, the police arrived at customs the next morning ready to escort them. When they arrived crowds of protestors were waiting for them, some of whom proceeded to throw rocks at the police buses.

The police responded by arresting two men, who were carrying light walking sticks. As word of these arrests spread, the crowd rapidly grew and the police called for reinforcements. The District Commissioner and Mudir of the towns arrived, telling the crowd to choose a spokesperson and then disperse.

This request failed and the town magistrate proceeded to read a Riot Proclamation, which also had no effect. Then a spokesperson from the crowd informed the officials that the mob would not resort to violence if the prisoners were released. Finally, after attempting once more to disperse the crowd with tear gas the Commissioner of Police agreed to release the men.

The triumphant strikers then broke up into smaller groups running through town calling for all Africans to cease work. The strike quickly spread through the town and shop owners, government employees, domestic workers, as well as other groups joined the strike that day.

The next day the protesters began to divert food supplies from the city. They then staged a demonstration, but were dispersed by the police.

On 4 Sept Resident Glenday called for military aid, which arrived that same day from Dar es Salaam. On 6 September Glenday called an emergency meeting of the Legislative Council, creating a "Labour Conciliation Committee" to aid negotiations with the striking workers. Among those that gave presentations to members of the council were the Hamalis' Association and the European Servants Union.

Also on 6 September Glenday passed an Emergency Powers Decree, which proclaimed a state of emergency and gave the government sweeping control over food, movement, labor, services, and weapons.

Later that day patrols arrested nine men on intimidation charges and were not confronted by protesters. Despite this lack of reaction, Glenday experienced firsthand the effects of the strike when he was playing a round of golf later that afternoon and his caddy staged a strike.

As food shortages continued and garbage remained uncollected, various organizations unsuccessfully tried to mediate, including the Arab Association and the Indian National Congress. Also during this time secret negotiations took place between the strike workers and Glenday, facilitated by Herbert Barnabas, who acted as a link and message carrier between the two groups.

On 11 September the AWC employees returned to work, receiving a slightly increased pay rate, overtime and one free meal a day. Allegedly, the workers returned to work at the urging of the strike's leader, Othman, who later that day left the island with the "strike fund" he had raised. Othman was later arrested in Dar es Salaam. By 13 September all strikers were back at work.

The General Strike of 1948 led to many gains for workers. By 1 December 1948 AWC had increased all of their laborers wage rates. Also the mediation attempts of the LCC led to wage increases as well as better conditions for workers involved in the packing of produce for export, the bakery trade, the soap and oil factories, and coconut husking.

In May of 1949 an advisory board created by AWC issued a fixed minimum wage for Hamali. Also in that year government employees were granted a pay raise and a Port Labour Advisory Committee was formed to advise the government on labor conditions for port workers.

Research Notes

Influences:

1947 strikes in Mombasa and Dar es Salaam

Sources:

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Clayton, Anthony. "The 1948 Zanzibar General Strike" (Uppsala, Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Research Report No. 32, (1976)

Harlow, V. *History of East Africa II*. Oxford: 1965. Print.

The Zanzibar Official Gazette 31 Aug, 1st September

The Tanganyika Standard, 25th Sept. 1948

Additional Notes:

There is very little media coverage of this event, and coverage that exists tends to downplay the significance and implications of the strike.

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

Olivia Ensign, 28/03/2010

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