



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Australians general strike for right to unionize, Brisbane, Australia, 1912

January 18,
1912

to: March 6,
1912

Country: Australia

Location City/State/Province: *Brisbane, Queensland*

Goals:

To get the recognition from the Tramways Company for the union members' right to wear union badges and the basic right to join a union

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 013. Deputations
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 097. Protest strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 097. Protest strike
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown
- 191. Alternative transportation systems

- 192. Alternative economic institutions

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown
- 191. Alternative transportation systems
- 192. Alternative economic institutions

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown
- 191. Alternative transportation systems
- 192. Alternative economic institutions

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown
- 191. Alternative transportation systems
- 192. Alternative economic institutions

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 117. General strike
- 191. Alternative transportation systems

Notes on Methods:

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Brisbane Tramway workers
- workers throughout the city
- workers' families

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Trade and Labour Council; Australian Labour Federation; Combined Unions Committee

Partners:

M.L.A. (Australian Labor Party); 43 unions within the Combined Unions Committee

External allies:

Worker (the monthly journal of the Associated Workers of Queensland)

Involvement of social elites:

Not Known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Australian Labour Federation
- Brisbane Tramway workers
- Several other unions
- The Worker Serial

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- 43 unions within the Combined Unions Committee
- Australian Labor Party
- Combined Unions Committee

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 8 days*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Brisbane Tramways company – General Electric Company of the United Kingdom; its director Joseph Stillman Badger, an American citizen; Queensland Government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

Not Known

Repressive Violence:

Police arrested and beat demonstrators during a march in early February. The Tramways company fired striking workers

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

Notes on outcomes:

the original goal was never met. The campaign was a part of the greater Australian Labor Movement in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The general strike did undermine the power of the conservative government, but its dissatisfying organization of finances and food supplies and its messy ending with the employers and government do not allow for higher points.

The Strike Committee Survived throughout the campaign despite repression by police.

The campaign grew from tramway workers to include nearly all the workers in Brisbane

The Brisbane tramways, located in Queensland, Australia, were owned by General Electric Company, a private British company. Joseph Stillman Badger, an American, was its manager. He refused to allow the formation of any industrial union among the company employees. In other parts of Australia, tramway employees in Melbourne and Adelaide faced similar opposition and they were forbidden to wear any sign of membership of the union. The higher authority claimed the wearing of badges by unionists would intimidate the non-badge-wearers. After complaints, Melbourne allowed the wearing of the badge, and Adelaide soon followed. Badger was particularly against the idea of unions and refused to allow his employees from forming any industrial unions. The issue of not only the wearing of badges but also the right to join a union heightened in Brisbane, for

neither Badger nor the workers would give in.

On the 18th of January, 1912, a large crowd of sightseers appeared in Queens Street. The tramway employees donned the union badges at an appointed time. Badger addressed the wearers at the depot, and gave them the choice of removing the badges or not working. Most who were confronted chose the right to wear the badges. The company was left short of trained staff.

That night, an estimated number of 10,000 people appeared in Market Square (now King George Square) to hear speeches from Federal and State Labour members and from the union leaders. Many other large gatherings were held not only at the Square (not clear who held these meetings), but also at various parts of South Brisbane and at Red Hill during the following nights. The police were present at these gatherings, and they were praised for their restraint. However, the praise soon disappeared as reinforcements, especially mounted men, came from the country. The Police Commissioner, Major W.G. Chill, only wanted to employ foot police in the beginning, but found it difficult to clear the roads for traffic. Inspector O'Sullivan persuaded Badger to allow the use mounted force.

On Monday the 22nd, there was a notice in the daily press calling for the workers to report to work without badges, and those who did not show up would be seen as to have vacated their positions. On the same day, J. Moir, a unionist, requested a conference between Badger and the Tramway Union. Badger refused saying he was willing to talk with the employees, but not with unionists.

This rebuff from Badger drew attention from many other organizations—delegates from waterside workers, railway guards, carters, amalgamated engineers, railway employees, butchers, bakers, certified engine drivers, seamen, coal workers, Australian Institute of Marine Engineers, and the Australian Workers Association attended the union meetings. They all agreed that the structure of unionism was being attacked. The possibility of general strike rose to the surface. It had already been discussed in the Worker (the monthly journal of the Associated Workers of Queensland) serial of 1909, and of the general discussion in the Worker of January 20, 1912. On Sunday, 28th of January, another meeting was held at the Trades Hall where 43 unions were represented. By 6:00 p.m., they decided to issue an ultimatum to Badger and the company. This Combined Unions Committee (of the 43 unions) appointed a Strike Committee, with J. Harry, Coyne of M.L.A. (Australian Labor Party) as its president, and J. Moir the secretary.

The next two days were spent on preparation. The unions organized to meet the food requirements. They issued permits to businesses allowed to carry on with restricted union labor. The committee sent requests for financial and other assistance to unions in southern states. The Employers' Federation prepared to close shops. Hotels were also to be shut down.

The government still fully supported the tramway company. Hence, on Tuesday January 30th, 1912, the strike committee declared a general strike. They declared that until the demands of the unionists were met, the strike would continue peacefully. The Strike Committee decided to issue full publicity of the view of the strikers through a daily bulletin.

The Strike Committee became an alternative government within a few days. Brisbane was practically at a standstill on the 31st. The trains didn't run, hotels were closed, and food shops were closing down rapidly. Only the shops with special permits issued by the Committee were opened in order to keep the Australian government running at the minimal margin, and most transport system were shut down. By Saturday, a Citizen's Automobile Corps had been formed to assist governmental works. The strike leaders sought to keep the strikers busy with daily speeches, processions through city streets, sporting contests, and more speeches. The strikers generally wore red ribbons to show solidarity. The strikers formed a Vigilance Committee that recruited 500 Vigilance Officers in order to keep order among the strikers. They also set up an ambulance brigade. The government decided not to continue granting permits for processions and to issue a proclamation prohibiting them.

The police commissioner Patrick Cahill refused to issue a permit for a march on the 2nd of February by the Strike Committee. On Friday the 2nd, an estimated crowd of 15,000 came to Market Square despite the lack of march permit. The police and specials attacked the crowd. A large contingent of foot and mounted police beat and arrested many protesters including many elderly people, women, and children who were walking peacefully. This event was initially called Baton Friday, but later came

to be known as Black Friday. It created bitterness and hatred towards the police that would exist for several decades.

The Strike Committee faced supply and financial issues, especially lack of food, as time went on, because they were not prepared enough. Households struggled to hunt for stocks of food. On February 7th the Council of the Employers' Federation decided to challenge the Strike Committee to take a secret ballot whether the strikers should return to work. The workers were returning to work out of financial needs. After the secret ballot, the workers wanted to return unconditionally.

The tramway employers were determined to break up the strike completely. The strike officially ended when the Employers Federation, supporting the strike, agreed on the 6 March 1912 that there would be no victimization of strikers from Badger and the company. The combined committee did not disband despite the end of the strike. The committee felt that it was its responsibility to stay put until all the strikers were back at work, but the committee then had trouble in trying get the workers who had struck re-employed. The company dismissed the tramway employees who had struck and refused to ever re-hire these workers. In 1922, the Queensland Government acquired the tram system, and reinstated the workers. Until 1980, wearing of union badges on uniforms, the cause of the strike, was forbidden.

This strike, not just for the wearing of the badges on uniforms but also for the right to join a union, ended in a hasty and messy way. Some factors that contributed to the failure include the lack of organization in getting financial support, an overestimation of food supplies, the lack of support from interstate unions, and a lack of a federated union.

Although the outcomes of the general strike do not seem very successful, this was part of the greater Australian Labor Movement that lasted throughout the late 1800s and the 1900s. This campaign showed the power of combined unions that operated as an alternative governmental system for several weeks, undermining the power of the conservative government.

Research Notes

Influences:

Australian Labor Movement (1)(2)

Sources:

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Additional Notes:

Edited by Max Rennebohm (03/04/2011)

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