



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Fijian oil industry workers strike for higher wages and benefits, 1959

December 7,
1959

to: December 15,
1959

Country: Fiji

Location City/State/Province: Suva

Goals:

- A doubling of the minimum wage
- 40 hour workweek
- Sick leave
- 14 days paid vacation annually

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 016. Picketing
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 016. Picketing
- 037. Singing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 106. Industry strike
- 107. Sympathy strike
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 106. Industry strike
- 107. Sympathy strike

- 172. Nonviolent obstruction

Methods in 4th segment:

- 106. Industry strike
- 107. Sympathy strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 106. Industry strike
- 107. Sympathy strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 106. Industry strike
- 107. Sympathy strike

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Fijian and Indian Oil Workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

James Anthony, the secretary of WRWGU, controlled the union and masterminded the strike. He was a young man with a Christian Indian-Irish-Polynesian background. The president of WRWGU in Suva, a chief named Ratu Meli Gonawai, was more moderate and effectively a figurehead.

Partners:

Not Known

External allies:

Many taxi drivers went on strike in solidarity with the oil workers, but it is unclear how much this solidarity strike was influenced by the threat of violence against non-participating drivers.

Involvement of social elites:

The most revered Fijian chief, Ratu George Cakobau, admonished a crowd of violent strikers on December 10. His eminent standing convinced strikers to stop the violence and go home. In the following days, other Fijian chiefs, threatened by the alliance of Fijians and Indians which could upset their traditionally privileged status, sought to end the strike, all the while presenting themselves as sympathetic to the strikers' demands.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Taxi Drivers

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Fijian Chiefs

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 1.5 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Shell Oil Co. and Vacuum Oil Co.

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

Strikers threatened violence against bus and taxi drivers who continued service. On December 9 and 10, stones were thrown at police as well as European civilians. European motorists who ignored demands not to drive were especially targeted for stoning. A total of 17,000 pounds of damage was done to European-owned stores. One European shop-owner who tried to defend his store was critically injured by flying glass.

Repressive Violence:

Police used tear gas and batons to disperse strikers on December 9 and 10. Martial law and a curfew were imposed.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

2 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0 points out of 1 point

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The minimum wage was increased by approximately 50%, but benefits were not increased.

Because James Anthony was absent for a time, the union settled for a lower agreement and the strike did not continue. After the strike, Fijian chiefs created monoethnic unions for Fijians in each industry to prevent the destabilizing alliance of Indians and Fijians.

The strike attracted popular support in the streets, but did not spark a generalized strike of other industries.

In the 1950s, many young Fijians moved from far-flung island villages to Suva, the largest city of this small British colony. In Suva, they found a stagnant economy that was unable to provide work for the influx of residents. For those lucky enough to find employment, the de facto minimum wage was less than the cost of living. The British colonial government was not concerned

about labor unrest, however—racial barriers had always served to dampen dissent. Fiji was populated at this time by a mix of local Fijians, Europeans, and laborers from India and elsewhere in Asia. Indians had staged some small strikes in the past, but had never united with the local Fijians. The Fijians' allegiance was to their traditional chiefs, who, in turn, were allegiant to the British rulers. As young men left their ancestral homes for Suva, however, the ties linking them to their chiefs weakened, and a multiethnic class consciousness began to emerge.

The Wholesale and Retail Workers General Union (WRWGU), formed in 1958, manifested this multiethnic solidarity. Its leaders portrayed the European rulers as the common enemy of all workers in Fiji. The Suva WRWGU president was a chief named Ratu Meli Gonawai, but he was a moderate and essentially a figurehead. True power lay with a young secretary of Indian-Irish-Polynesian background named James Anthony. Anthony had been influenced by an Australian resident of Suva named Kevin Healey, whose father "Big Jim" Healey was a militant leader of the Australian Communist Party. WRWGU had about 1000 members in 1959, 300 of whom worked in the oil industry for Shell Oil Co. or Vacuum Oil Co. WRWGU decided to focus its wage-raising efforts on the oil companies, with the assumption that gains would soon reach other industries as well.

On August 10, Anthony sent letters to Shell and Vacuum seeking to negotiate new pay rates. Prior to receiving these letters, the two companies were unaware of WRWGU's existence. The two companies agreed tentatively to the negotiation process, whereupon the union submitted the following demands on October 10: a raise in the company's minimum wage from 3 pounds 6 pence to 6 pounds, a 40 hour workweek, paid sick leave, and two weeks paid vacation per year. In response, Shell and Vacuum each offered a raise to 3 pounds 10 shillings, with no added benefits. Anthony and WRWGU rejected this response on December 2 in a statement that reaffirmed the union's right to "take such lawful action as it may deem necessary" (Hempenstall 75) to reach its goals. At this point, negotiations were at a standstill. On Monday, December 7, Anthony and Ratu Meli notified the two companies that their workers in Suva and other key oil distribution points were on strike.

The colonial government had made no preparations for such a strike. Anthony, however, mistakenly believed that the union was legally obliged to allot oil to basic services, which included the electrical station, water station, hospital and garbage collectors. Even with these exceptions, serious inconvenience quickly occurred as gasoline supplies for motorists ran out by midday on the first day of the strike. On the strike's second day, when workers locked a gas-seeking clergyman into Shell's depot in Suva, police arrived to break the picket line and free the man. Despite this mild incident, strikers were peaceful and good-natured at this point.

On Tuesday evening, the colonial administration issued a statement denouncing the strikers for not following the proper negotiation process (a mischaracterization), saying that the strike should not have taken place, and promising to use force if the strikers should get out of hand. Representatives from the colonial administration and the oil companies met on Wednesday morning to discuss strategy. They decided to employ non-unionized drivers to distribute gas to several outlets in Suva, which would be protected by policemen. In response to these developments, WRWGU accused the government of "deliberately siding with employers," but still promised that "under no circumstances whatsoever do we intend to break the law—our members have strict instructions on this aspect. We intend to remain peaceful at all costs" (Hempenstall 77). As for the plan to distribute gasoline to all comers, Anthony said, "We'll see whether the public shall get it" (ibid).

Crowds numbering from 50 to several hundred gathered at each station where gasoline was to be distributed. Fijian and Indian drivers were persuaded not to seek gas, leaving only Europeans in line for the pump. At a few stations, operators were intimidated into leaving. At another, fuses were stolen from the operating station, disabling the pumps. Meanwhile, taxi drivers joined the strike in solidarity, and Anthony decided that buses would no longer be classified as an "essential service." Strikers gathered at the bus station and coerced drivers into abandoning their routes. The crowd grew to over 5,000 people as would-be commuters arrived to find the buses stationary. The mood soured and anti-European sentiment grew stronger. Striking Indians and Fijians and their supporters threw rocks at Europeans who tried to get gasoline or negotiate. At 4:00 pm, Anthony sought to address the gathered crowd near the bus station, but the police denied him permission to hold an assembly. After Anthony announced that he could not speak to the crowd, riot police demanded that the people disperse. They refused, and violence between strikers and police ensued. Police threw tear gas grenades, and the crowd answered with barrages of stones. With some time, police with tear gas and batons were able to clear the area. Some people continued dispersed rioting and property

destruction in the city until shortly after midnight. Young men roamed around the city and targeted European shops, causing upwards of 17,000 pounds in damage. The most serious injury occurred when rioters attacked a European shop-owner who refused to abandon his store. The man's throat was cut in the melee, but he survived.

The next day, Thursday, November 10, stone throwing and other violence resumed early in the morning and continued through the day. The colonial administration imposed martial law, set a curfew and brought in extra police to arrest the unruly crowds. Violence likely would have continued, however, if not for the intervention of the Fijian chiefs, who saw that their traditional preferred standing with the British was being threatened by the new class-conscious alliance between Indian and Fijian workers. On Thursday afternoon, the highest chief in all of Fiji, Ratu George Cakobau, addressed an assembly of strikers and their supporters. He said, "I do not want to stop your meeting. I want to speak of the damage you have done. You are not young, and you know right from wrong. But whatever you do, remember the name of Fiji. The reputation of the Fijians is up to you. That is all."

These words had an immense effect, because the Fijian populations still respected the chiefs immensely. The violence ceased immediately and people streamed back to their homes before the 7:00 pm curfew. That night, police patrolled the quiet streets of Suva.

The next day, relative calm remained even though oil industry workers were still on strike. Taxi drivers also remained on strike, and buses only had enough gasoline to operate four hours a day. This state of affairs continued for the next several days.

On Saturday, December 12, the chiefs held two meetings to admonish thousands of Fijians for their roles in the violence and the strike. Two days later, the exhausted James Anthony checked into a doctor, who gave him a sleeping medicine. In Anthony's absence, the more moderate Ratu Meli Gonawai arranged a settlement with the oil companies that increased the minimum wage to four pounds eleven shillings and four pence. This was half of the initial requested increase, and no further benefits were extended. When Anthony rejoined the negotiations on December 15, he initially refused to sign the settlement, but soon did so under duress. Oil workers returned to work the next day.

In the aftermath of the strike, Fijian chiefs worked to create new, monoethnic labor unions that broke the dangerous unity of the Fijian and Indian workers. The anti-European quality of the strike and ensuing rioting sparked much anxious hand-wringing across the declining British Empire. No substantial reforms were made to the oppressive labor system in Fiji.

Research Notes

Influences:

Kevin Healey, the son of militant Australian Communist "Big Jim" Healey, was in Suva in 1959 and influenced the thoughts of James Anthony. (1)

Sources:

Heartfield, James. "'The Dark Races Against the Light?': Official Reaction to the 1959 Fiji Riots." *Journal of Pacific History* Vol. 37(1), June 2002. pp. 75-86

Hempenstall, Peter, and Noel Rutherford. *Protest and Dissent in the Colonial Pacific*. Suva, Fiji: Institute of Pacific Studies of the University of the South Pacific, 1984.

Additional Notes:

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