



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Guatemalan workers at Lunafil win 410-day occupation despite violence. PBI accompanies. 1987-1988

Time period notes: *The strike itself was settled with an agreement signed on July 20, 1988. It was not, however, until Oct 3 that the returning strikers went back to work. In the period between July 20 and Oct 3, the union still had to pressure management to completely fulfill the agreement they'd signed.*

June 9

1987

to: October 3

1988

Country: Guatemala

Location City/State/Province: Amatitlan

Location Description: *Amatitlan is 15 miles from Guatemala City, the capital of Guatemala.*

Goals:

1) To keep the owners from instituting a 7 day work week (owners were trying to add 12 hour mandatory Saturday and Sunday shifts - with no overtime pay)

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 038. Marches
- 106. Industry strike
- 138. Sitdown
- 162. Sit-in
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 182. Stay-in strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 038. Marches
- 106. Industry strike
- 138. Sitdown
- 162. Sit-in
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 182. Stay-in strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 038. Marches
- 106. Industry strike
- 138. Sitdown
- 162. Sit-in
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 182. Stay-in strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 038. Marches
- 106. Industry strike
- 138. Sitdown
- 162. Sit-in
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 182. Stay-in strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 038. Marches
- 097. Protest strike
- 106. Industry strike

- 138. Sitdown
- 162. Sit-in
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 182. Stay-in strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 038. Marches
- 106. Industry strike
- 138. Sitdown
- 162. Sit-in
- 172. Nonviolent obstruction
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 182. Stay-in strike

Classifications

Classification:

Defense

Third-party nonviolent intervention

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Factory Workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Julio Coq, Felix Gonzalez, José Eusebio Gil Zúñiga, Baltazar Tojes, Guillermo Calito, Alberto Quezada, Tomas Jolón Mijangos

Partners:

UNSI TRAGUA (Unión Sindical de Trabajadores de Guatemala) (Guatemalan Workers' Union), CUSG (Confederación de Unidad Sindical de Guatemala)(Trade Union Confederation of Guatemala), CGTG (Central General de Trabajadores de Guatemala)(National Trade Union Center).

External allies:

Peace Brigades International, GLEP (Guatemala Labour Education Project), International Unions including: CAW, AFL/CIO, ACTWU locals and joint boards, ILGWU 23-25, the UE, District 65/UAW, and locals of SEIU, the Teamsters, UAW, RWDSU, and the Paperworkers. Unions from Germany, Spain, France and Belgium also sent messages of solidarity.

Involvement of social elites:

6 members of the US House of Representatives

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- CGTG
- CUSG
- International Unions
- National Unions
- Peace Brigades International (PBI)
- UNSITRAGUA
- Workers of the Lunafil Thread Factory

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

- 6 members of the US House of Representatives
- Capritex textile workers

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 11 weeks

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Factory Owners/Management, shareholders: Eli Garsuze, Ronald Werner

Knoke, Arnaldo Kuestermann, and the majority shareholder Julio

Raul Herrera.

Repressive Violence:

Leaders 'kidnapped' and detained by National Police (June 21, 1987), shots and tear gas fired into factory compound (May 1988), makeshift shelter for union leaders and accompaniers on the sidewalk outside the factory is attacked (March 4, July 5 1988), workers and allies blocking driveway into the factory are attacked with truncheons, tear gas and rubber bullets (May 1988). At that time 2 supporting unionists from the union of the Capritex factory are injured, arrested and imprisoned. In acts of intimidation, the banners are ripped from the fences and walls (Mar 4, April 28, May 14, 1988).

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0.5 points out of 1 point

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The campaigners succeeded in achieving their stated goal. It was, however, a mixed success, as not all of the striking workers

were hired back (the union did, however, win the right to determine which workers would be hired back and which wouldn't, and those who were not hired back were given severance pay). Moreover, while international and national labor solidarity was significant in this struggle, and grew steadily throughout the campaign, the number of workers taking part in the occupation dwindled over 13 months from 91 to 39. Additionally, management isolated the union activists from the other workers on their return to work.

On 9 June 1987 workers of the Sindicato de Trabajadores de Lunafil (Lunafil Thread Factory Workers Union, or SITRALU) were given unwelcome news by management.

The Lunafil factory was located on the main highway in Amatitlan, just 15 miles from Guatemala City (capital of Guatemala). In that factory workers spun cotton grown on Guatemalan plantations into thread. The thread was then shipped to other factories for Guatemalan workers to use in sewing garments for export, the so-called maquiladoras.

Following an upgrade of machinery, management demanded that workers work regular additional twelve-hour shifts on Saturdays and Sundays, with no overtime pay.

Unwilling to go from a 5-day to a 7-day work week, union members decided to go on strike. 91 workers occupied the grounds within the chain-link enclosed factory compound.

The workers believed they were making a courageous move. Recently the work force in a Guatemalan Coca-Cola factory had gone on a prolonged strike, in 1985-86. Eleven striking union members were murdered by government-backed forces called 'death squads.'

On 21 June, in the first week of the Lunafil campaign, two union leaders were arrested while handing out leaflets and imprisoned. Pressure from local and international unions obtained their release.

On 7 July factory manager Leonel Barrios gave the workers an ultimatum. The gates to the factory were being locked. Armed guards from the Ebano Security company would be stationed inside the compound. The workers could leave whenever they wished, but once all the workers had left the compound, the factory would re-open with new workers who would be required to work seven days a week.

Most of the workers remained. Management and guards engaged in threats and intimidation. Several members of the union leadership went outside to organize, while other leaders remained with the workers inside the grounds.

Over the next days, the striking workers adapted to their difficult situation: they constructed temporary shelter, and when the owners cut off the supply of water, arranged for water and food to be brought to the factory and handed over the fence.

The strikers established a small cooking area and cooked enough food for the union members on the outside as well. Family members could only visit them and communicate through the fence, as if the strikers were imprisoned. The workers cooked for their families as well.

To ensure a continued presence outside the compound, the workers built a small, black, plastic-and-wood shelter on the sidewalk. Each night union leaders on the outside would take turns sleeping in the shelter, accompanied by members of Peace Brigades International.

Peace Brigades International (PBI) had begun operating in Guatemala in 1983. PBI is an international nongovernmental organization committed to providing a nonviolent presence in places where local nonviolent activists are threatened and where internationals might serve to deter violence. On the invitation of leaders of SITRALU, PBI provided protective accompaniment to the workers at the Lunafil factory 24 hours per day until the strike ended in July 1988.

Other international allies gave support: the American Federation of Labor/Congress of Labor Organizations (AFL-CIO) and

individual U.S. unions, plus unions from Germany, Spain, France and Belgium.

As the strike lengthened into months, the number of occupiers dwindled. By November 1987 only 39 were left, but these 39 then remained locked into their factory compound, until the end of the 13-month (410 day) strike.

The lengthy strike caused significant stress on families, including, in some cases, the loss of homes. Gender roles were altered: in families where the men had been the breadwinners, women now had to work outside the home. Needing childcare, they would pass the younger children over the fence each morning to their husbands on the 'inside', who cared for them during the day. Fathers cooked meals that they passed through the fence to their families in the evening.

To pass the time, and to earn some money, some of the striking men spun cotton stored in the factory into string on a spinning wheel they had made from an overturned bicycle. The men (all of the striking workers were male) then knotted the string into bags that were sold to raise much-needed money.

Workers continually faced the threat of violence. Overseen by heavily armed guards, the workers also lived with the memories of the previous Coca-Cola workers' deaths. Some of the Coca-Cola workers had been tortured to death.

On several occasions, shots were fired into the compound from vehicles passing on the highway. In May 1988 the makeshift sleeping structure outside the fence was attacked and demolished. Leaders received death threats.

On at least three occasions, semi-trailers arrived at the gates with the intention of entering the factory and taking out the remaining cotton still in storage. Responding rapidly to the situation, union leaders on the outside contacted local media and contacted family members who lived nearby.

Women and children sat on the road outside the fence, blocking the trucks, while the strikers sat inside the chain link gate. On at least two occasions, the combined pressure of the people seated in front of the vehicles, the presence of media, and the presence of international observers, served to deter the truckers from entering the compound. On a third occasion, however, management arranged for police to be present, and with their intimidation the cotton was removed.

After more than a year of occupation an accord was reached. Management agreed to reinstate the 24 union workers still occupying the plant and respect their contract.

However, when the plant reopened, additional workers were hired under different conditions, including membership in the Solidarista association rather than the union. These new workers were given a wage increase along with other benefits such as a cafeteria and a consumer cooperative that sold electrical appliances and other goods. Closed circuit TV cameras keep a close eye on worker interactions on the factory floor. New workers that attend union functions have reportedly been fired; the union has not signed up any new members in the two years since the factory reopened.

Nevertheless, the union workers retained their union and succeeded in their refusal to work a seven-day week without overtime pay.

Research Notes

Influences:

The strikers at the Lunafil thread factory were influenced by the Guatemalan Coca-Cola workers, and their labour campaigns of 1975 to 1985. (1) Additionally, there were strikes similar to that at Lunafil taking place at the InExports, Petrosteel and Confecciones

Transcontinentales (PlayKnitz) factories during roughly the same time period. (1) (2)

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Additional Notes:

This case marks the 1000th case published on the Global Nonviolent Action Database.

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

Karen Ridd 11/06/2014

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