



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Hawaiians strike against the sugar industry in Hawai'i (Hawaii), 1946

1 September

1946

to: 17 November

1946

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: *Hawai'i, Oahu, Maui, Kauai*

Location Description: *Took place in 4 of the 8 islands in Hawai'i prior to USA statehood*

Goals:

To earn 65 cents per hour

To have 40 hour work weeks

To have a union shop

To convert perquisites (priveleges and benefits) to cash

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 106. Industry strike
- 179. Alternative social institutions › Soup kitchen and food committees

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 106. Industry strike
- 179. Alternative social institutions › Soup kitchen and food committees

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 106. Industry strike
- 179. Alternative social institutions › Soup kitchen and food committees

Methods in 4th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 106. Industry strike

- 179. Alternative social institutions › Soup kitchen and food committees

Methods in 5th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 106. Industry strike
- 179. Alternative social institutions › Soup kitchen and food committees

Methods in 6th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 106. Industry strike
- 179. Alternative social institutions › Soup kitchen and food committees

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 039. Parades
- 179. Alternative social institutions › Union police
- 195. Seeking imprisonment

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Chinese
- Filipinos
- Hawaiians
- ILWU
- Japanese
- Portuguese
- Sugar workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Harry Kamoku, Jack Hall, International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU)

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Harry Kamoku
- ILWU
- Jack Hall

Groups in 2nd Segment:**Groups in 3rd Segment:****Groups in 4th Segment:****Groups in 5th Segment:****Groups in 6th Segment:**

Segment Length: 13 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Sugar plantation owners and planters

The "Big Five" companies: Alexander & Baldwin, American Factors, Castle & Cooke, C. Brewer, and Theo. Davies

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Police arrested 88 union members who picketed and acted in other forms of civil disobedience

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

3 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

One of the four goals, perquisites convert to cash was met. A second goal was compromised--31.5 cent wage instead of 61 cent wage from 21 cent wage.

The Great Hawai'i Sugar Strike was launched against the Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association and the "Big Five" companies in 1946. The "Big Five" were made up of a handful of corporate elite companies: Alexander & Baldwin, American Factors, Castle & Cooke, C. Brewer, and Theo. Davies. They exercised complete control over Hawai'i's sugar plantation workers and the

majority of the island's multi-ethnic workforces.

In order to combat these companies and the plantation owners who followed the industry's minimally suitable working conditions, an activist from California, Harry Kamoku organized the first multi-racial union: the Hilo Longshoreman's Association. In 1937, this union joined the California based International Longshoreman's and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU) and created its headquarters in Hawai'i.

Jack Hall, director of the ILWU from 1935-46, recruited people from all racial groups and organizations to compete with the industry's tactic of keeping racial groups separate, which hindered discussion around comparing wages and creating unions between racial groups. ILWU had four goals that would lead to better wages and working conditions: they proposed worker earn 65 cents per hour, have 40-hour workweeks, have a union shop, and have the ability to convert perquisites to cash.

The union shop would require all workers to become a part of a union once hired by the plantation owners. Owners provided free perquisites, such as medical care, housing, fuel, and utilities, to workers and their families. ILWU sought to change these to a paid basis so that sugar planters could not continue to easily control the lives of their workers. The Big Five and the plantation owners did not find these demands to be fair and they refused to negotiate with the ILWU and the workers.

In response to this refusal, the sugar workers began the first industry-wide strike conducted in Hawai'i. Under the leadership of the ILWU, about 26,000 sugar workers and their families, 76,000 people in all, began a 79-day strike on 1 September 1946 that completely shut down 33 of the 34 sugar plantations in the islands. For the safety of the workers during the strike, the ILWU negotiated with plantation owners so that no workers could be evicted from their industry-provided homes. They also ensured the plantation owners that all essential workers would remain on their jobs, such as sanitation and power workers.

The ILWU organized an internal structure in which all strikers would have a strike assignment and all strikers would remain sustained nutritionally through an indefinite period. This included daily coordination of activities for 75,000 people over four islands, like fishing, hunting, and rice collecting. The industry responded by limiting rice supplies and other foods unions used for soup kitchens.

ILWU enforced discipline with a union police that allowed no gambling, destruction of fields and property, or general fooling around that could be used against the campaign. They used parades to boost morale and to spread a message of solidarity. They maintained democratic negotiations with industry.

In order to combat the strengthening solidarity, the government and corporate elite tried to create divisions between strikers and malahinis (newcomers). Plantations owners brought more than 6,000 people from the Philippines in 1946 to fill in for the strikers. The ILWU and workers convinced the Filipinos to join the union.

Hawai'i's law was favorable to management and restricted workers on their right to form groups of assembly in case of conspiracy and riotous conduct that could ensue. The union used two strategies to oppose the repressive laws. The ILWU encouraged workers to become more politically active and support the Democratic Party, which grew and became able to upset the previous Republican domination of Hawaii that had lasted fifty years.

The union's second strategy was to test the constitutionality of territorial law. Many workers risked jail, and police arrested 88 for picketing and other forms of civil disobedience.

The plantation owners and their Republican allies struck back by accusing the union leaders of being Communists. They tried to spread the notion that seeking better treatment for plantation workers was an act of subversion, and that in doing so, Jack Hall was acting under Communist Party orders. Workers were not discouraged by this accusation and continued to fight.

On 17 November 1946, the ILWU negotiated the end of the strike terms with plantation owners and the Big Five: all plantation workers returned to work immediately. By January 1947, ILWU finalized negotiations, disputed strike arrests, and had workers return to their jobs.

Though the industry did not agree to the 65 cent wage, the union shop, or the 40 hour work week, ILWU achieved other aspects of their goals. Industry agreed to increase the wage by 19 cents per hour which was an increase of 20-40%. The average hourly wage became 31.5 cents plantation owners agreed to set fixed charges for perquisites.

Research Notes

Influences:

The Longshoremen and Warehouse Union strikes on the west coast of the mainland. (1)

Sources:

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Additional Notes:

The 1946 sugar strike contributed to ending Hawai'i's feudalistic labor relations with the plantation owners and the Big Five. This gave rise to higher wages, better working conditions, and participatory democracy, both on the plantations and throughout Hawai'i's political and social institutions. The Great Hawai'i Sugar Strike succeeded in increasing pay of workers and getting rid of perquisites. This campaign overcame barriers imposed by racism, limited education, unequal access to legal system and feudal control. It also further set the stage for future working conditions of all Hawaiian workers.

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

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