



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Trinidadians and Tobagonians strike for higher wages and labor justice, 1919-1921

1919

to:

1921

Country: Trinidad and Tobago

Location Description: *Urban factories and docks*

Goals:

Higher wages and fairer labor practices

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 106. Industry strike
- 116. Generalised strike
- 117. General strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 038. Marches
- 100. Farm workers' strike
- 107. Sympathy strike
- 117. General strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 106. Industry strike
- 116. Generalised strike

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

Notes on Methods:

Sources made clear that the TWA continued their actions for higher wages and fairer conditions through 1921, when they shifted their focus to more political goals. However, it was not clear from sources what specific methods the TWA used between early 1920 and 1921.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Urban working class laborers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Trinidad Workingmen's Association (TWA)

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

F.E.M Hercules, a black nationalist

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Electric and Telephone Company Employees
- Railway workers
- Trinidad Lake Asphalt Company employees
- city council employees
- dock workers

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Port of Spain dock workers
- Tobagonians
- coal carriers
- sugar plantation workers

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 6 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

British government; Trinidad white community; Trinidadian and Tobagonian governments

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Dockworkers at the Port of Spain chased their replacements from the docks and attacked docks. The success of their strike actually influenced the spread of striking during the campaign, but it is not known if campaigners used violence outside of this incident

Repressive Violence:

Britain sent troops to the islands in response to the strike campaign, arrested 99 strikers and deported 4.

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

Following the end of World War I, Trinidadians faced unfair labor policies and low wages. They also dealt with inflation and racism. Unhappy Trinidadians formed the Trinidad Workingmen's Association (TWA) in response to the problems they faced. The TWA advocated for the working class in Trinidad and agitated for higher wages.

In the beginning of 1919, the TWA decided to actively pursue higher wages and called on any existing labor organizations to join them in their fight. Dock workers, railway workers, city council employees, and Electric and Telephone Company employees all went on strike within the first few months of 1919. In La Brea, employees of the Trinidad Lake Asphalt Company requested the TWA's aid in negotiations and successfully secured a 33% increase in wages and a reduction in working hours. The TWA's success boosted its membership and two branches of the TWA opened in La Brea and San Fernando. The increasing number of members in the TWA helped the TWA gain momentum for a national campaign for labor justice.

Racial tensions also helped to build momentum for a national campaign for labor justice. Those Trinidadians who served in World War I returned home, feeling disgusted with the racist treatment by the military authorities in Britain. In Britain, whites attacked hundreds of blacks during race riots. Blatant racism in Britain spurred a Trinidadian who lived in London, F.E.M Hercules, to return to Trinidad to encourage Black Nationalism. Two locally read newspapers also promoted the ideology of racial pride. Marcus Garvey's newspaper, Negro World, and Garveyism influenced anti-white sentiments and the idea that black Trinidadians deserved fairer treatment in terms of labor policies and wages. Anti-white sentiments influenced black Trinidadians to attack a group of white British soldiers. This attack threatened the white community and resulted in repression of local newspapers, the arming of the white community, and a force of regular British troops being stationed in Trinidad. However, the repression caused rural Indian workers to take part in the labor unrest.

The movement for fair wages and labor practices continued to gain momentum when the dock workers of the Port of Spain in Trinidad demanded increased wages, overtime pay, and an 8 hour work day. The TWA aided the dockworkers in organizing a strike that was characterized by a high level of collective organization and action among the workers on the waterfront. On December 1, 1919, striking dockworkers chased their replacements from the waterfront, attacked warehouses, and marched through the city, forcing businesses to close. City council employees and coal carriers joined the strike.

The waterfront strike expanded into colony-wide labor unrest. The dockworkers at the Port of Spain won a 25% wage increase. The success of the dockworkers strike prompted another wave of strikes all over Trinidad. Indian rural laborers went on strike on several sugar plantations. By December 1919, virtually the entire colony was on strike. Workers in San Fernando, Chaguanas, Couva, Sangre Grande, and Toco went on strike in solidarity with the dockworkers. Tobagonians responded to the unrest in

Trinidad and estate workers struck and marched in the streets.

Britain responded by deploying troops to Trinidad and Tobago. Britain's presence gave the local governments confidence. The governments of Trinidad and Tobago arrested 99 strikers, convicted and imprisoned 82 of those arrested, and deported 4 leading activists.

The TWA continued to agitate for better labor practices and higher wages until 1921. Strikes continued until the early weeks of 1920. However, the government responded to these strikes and the ones of 1919 with strong repression and the passage of laws against sedition, strikes, and protests, effectively stopping the public actions of the TWA. In 1921, the labor campaign turned into a political campaign. This campaign eventually succeeded in constitutional reform and labor changes. However, the labor campaign itself only succeeded in individual cases and not throughout the entire country of Trinidad and Tobago.

Research Notes

Influences:

The campaign was influenced by Garveyism whose ideology encouraged black nationalism and motivated black Trinidadians to agitate for higher wages and fairer labor practices. (1)

Sources:

Teelucksingh, Jerome. "Trinidad, labor protests." *The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest*. Ness, Immanuel (ed). Blackwell Publishing, 2009. Blackwell Reference Online. 10 March 2011

<http://www.revolutionprotestencyclopedia.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405184649_yr2010_chunk_g97814051846491478>;

Brereton, Bridget. *A History of Modern Trinidad : 1783-1962*. Kingston, Jamaica [etc.: Heinemann, 1981. Print.;

Additional Notes:

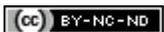
Racial tension played large role in the motivation for this strike campaign for economic justice. Although it was not part of the campaign specifically, racial violence from both sides may have had an influence on the growth of the campaign

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

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[1] <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/category/pcs-tags/mainly-or-initiated-people-color>