



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Turin workers general strike for labor rights, 1920

April

1920

to: September

1920

Country: Italy

Location City/State/Province: Turin

Goals:

"To set in train in Italy a practical exercise in the realization of communist society."

Essentially, the workers wanted socialization of the factories and greater (or complete) worker control of production.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 182. Stay-in strike
- 192. Alternative economic institutions › Shop Stewards Program

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 097. Protest strike
- 117. General strike
- 192. Alternative economic institutions › Shop Stewards Program

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

- 192. Alternative economic institutions › Shop Stewards Program

Methods in 5th segment:

- 110. Slowdown strike
- 192. Alternative economic institutions › Shop Stewards Program

Methods in 6th segment:

- 110. Slowdown strike
- 173. Nonviolent occupation
- 181. Reverse strike
- 192. Alternative economic institutions › Shop Stewards Program

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 015. Group lobbying

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Factory Workers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Shop Stewards, Maurizio Garino, Italian Federation of Metalurgical Workers, Italian Syndicalist Union

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

General Confederation of Labor

Involvement of social elites:

Bureaucrats and elite employers tended to negotiate with each other, and not the common workers - their disconnection from the real demands of the protesters led to a campaign that did not achieve the goals of the participants

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Italian Federation of Metalurgical Workers
- Italian Syndicalist Union
- Shop Stewards

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- General Confederation of Labor

Segment Length: *Approximately 1 month*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Factory owners and employers, Italian government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Lockout (83)

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Military intimidation enforcing lockouts

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

1 point out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The campaigners gained minor improvements in working conditions, but did not achieve complete socialization of the factories.

The campaign grew to include nearly every worker in Turin.

“This is how every worker feels it: with varying degrees of clarity they feel themselves living at a moment that could be decisive for their class, a moment in which all can be staked, everything risked, and perhaps everything lost. Never before has the real kind of participation needed in class action been so apparent as today: the effort needed to master a reality... the straining of every desire; the impatience in every mind... When it might be a matter of risking absolutely everything, then in judgment and deliberation there must be the utmost caution.” – Antonio Gramsci, 3 April 1920

In Turin, as World War I drew to a close, factory workers began to turn their attention to their unsavory working conditions, and the labor union bureaucracy that was not adequately representing their interests. In the fall of 1919, the shop stewards model of labor representation swept through Turin, beginning at a Fiat auto plant, but spreading to most factories in the city within a few months. The shop steward model was intended to resolve the representation issue that bothered so many factory workers. One shop steward would be elected for every 15-20 people, and he would represent the will of those people. If he did not do as they wished, he could be immediately recalled. The collective will of the stewards, called the factory commission, was the body that negotiated directly with factory management.

Soon, factory commissions began to meet in larger groups, and formed powerful democratic bodies of representation. One of their first acts was to begin a program for restructuring the local labor unions, which the factory workers were so unhappy with. At the same time, on October 31, 1919, the stewards adopted the Shop Stewards Program, which dictated that their primary purpose was “to set in train in Italy a practical exercise in the realization of communist society.” The shop stewards were no longer simply the worker’s voice to their employers; they were the leaders of the beginning of a powerful communist social movement.

The national Italian Socialist Party, which should have been the primary supporter of this Communist push by the factory workers, argued against further action by the stewards, despite the Turin chapter’s overwhelming support for the movement.

Ironically, the Socialist Party feared that they would lose their power if they agreed to support a mass movement of workers. Filling the void, then, were anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists, who saw the movement as an opportunity to cause havoc in the Italian governmental structure.

An interesting artifact of the last major labor union agreement meant that the entire shop stewards program went against the rules of the contract signed by the union on behalf of the factory workers. Since the program had begun in the fall, employers had tended to allow the stewards program to continue because they did not feel particularly threatened by the shop stewards. However, as the movement grew in size and strength, the management began to take action. In the spring of 1920, employers began to fire stewards for “performance-related issues,” though they were plainly trying to scare the workers into ending the steward program.

In April of 1920, the stewards began to take more aggressive actions to fight the factory management. Workers at the Fiat plant, those who had begun the wave of stewards, planned and executed a stay-in strike at the auto plant. In response, the employers declared a lockout, leaving more than 80,000 Turin workers without a paycheck. The stewards, after a two-week standoff, decided to give in, and began to negotiate a new agreement with the employers. The employers made it clear that they would not end the lockout unless steward actions were limited to non-work time – effectively enforcing the earlier agreement signed by the labor union.

In response, the wider Turin labor force took up the cause, declaring a massive general strike in support of the workers. More than 500,000 laborers in Turin were involved in this strike. Most public services and many businesses were shut down, as well as all the manufacturing plants.

The employers would not budge, however. They recognized that, without the support of the national Socialist Party, the relatively minor anarcho-syndicalist unions and organizations would not be sufficient to sustain the strike, despite the overwhelming support of the workforce. After nearly a month of striking to no effect, the stewards were forced to sign an agreement limiting their activity to non-work hours.

However, the struggle was not over. Organizing through the summer, workers determined that their next move should be a slow-down strike, so that they were less prone to being locked out of the factories. If they were locked out, they would respond by occupying the factory.

At the Fiat plant, the slow-down strike was an immediate success – only 27 cars were produced per day, though 67 would have been produced at a normal pace. After two weeks, as the slow-down strike got slower and slower, employers finally decided to lock out their employees, not knowing that the employees had planned to occupy the factories if they did so.

In Turin, the stewards rose again to prominence as they began to take charge of the occupation. Workers began to do their jobs at a normal pace again, this time under the supervision of those they had elected. Workers and stewards were elated – they planned to force the complete socialization of factory production, and a radical reorganization of the economy in Turin that would favor the common laborer, not the employer and the bureaucrat.

Unfortunately, the bureaucratic labor union and the national Socialist Party were still the most powerful worker’s rights forces in Italy, despite their inability to act on the behalf of the common laborer. Labor leadership instead worked with factory management to negotiate pay increases, cost of living bonuses, and overtime premiums, instead of providing real control to the workforce. Most of the laborers were persuaded to accept this deal, since they were objectively better off than they were before the strikes, even though they had come nowhere near achieving their real goal of socializing the factories.

Research Notes

Influences:

This campaign influenced similar labor movements throughout Italy (2)

Sources:

Gramsci, Antonio. Turin 1920: Factory Councils and General Strikes

Wetzel, Tom. Italy 1920: When 600,000 Workers Seized Control of their Workplaces.

<http://www.uncanny.net/~wsa/ital1920.html>

Additional Notes:

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