



# Global Nonviolent Action Database

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## Ovambo migrant workers general strike for rights, Namibia, 1971-72

June

1971

to: April

1972

**Country:** Namibia

**Location City/State/Province:** *Ovamboland, Windhoek, Walvis Bay, Grootfontein*

### Goals:

Primary: To end the contract labor system, including demands for the rights to choose jobs, end contracts, and bring families to work locations, a new pass system, and increased wages based on work type, not skin color.

## Methods

### Methods in 1st segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 097. Protest strike

### Methods in 2nd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 013. Deputations

### Methods in 3rd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 013. Deputations

### Methods in 4th segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 013. Deputations
- 048. Protest meetings
- 067. "Flight" of workers
- 068. Sanctuary
- 072. Nonconsumption of boycotted goods
- 116. Generalised strike
- 117. General strike

- 147. Deliberate inefficiency and selective noncooperation by enforcement agents

**Methods in 5th segment:**

- 048. Protest meetings
- 117. General strike

**Methods in 6th segment:**

- 116. Generalised strike

## Classifications

**Classification:**

Change

**Cluster:**

Economic Justice

Human Rights

**Group characterization:**

- Migrant workers from the Ovambo indigenous group

## Leaders, partners, allies, elites

**Leaders:**

No single group of known leaders. Most organization was grassroots from all workers and there was no single group of leaders. Church leaders also played a large role

**Partners:**

Not Known

**External allies:**

International Court of Justice, The United Nations, some police sympathizers, African Lutheran Church Leaders, Dutch Reformed and other churches, United Nations

**Involvement of social elites:**

The Ovamboland government loosely supported the demands of strikers near the end of the campaign.

## Joining/exiting order of social groups

**Groups in 1st Segment:**

- African Lutheran Church Leaders
- Dutch Reformed and other churches

**Groups in 2nd Segment:**

**Groups in 3rd Segment:**

**Groups in 4th Segment:**

- Grootfontein Ovambo workers
- Klein Aub copper mineworkers
- Mineworkers in all major mines
- Rosh Pinah mineworkers
- United Nations
- Walvis Bay Ovambo Workers
- Windhoek Ovambo Workers
- sympathetic police officers
- trash collectors and others

**Groups in 5th Segment:**

- Ovamboland government

**Groups in 6th Segment:**

**Segment Length:** *Approximately 2 months*

## Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**

South African Government and Namibian employers.

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**

Not known

**Campaigner violence:**

Ovambos attacked Angolan troops when they invaded Ovamboland. This was not a direct response to the general strike campaign, however.

**Repressive Violence:**

Police beat, abducted, and killed Ovambo strikers throughout the campaign. Angolan troops also attacked Ovambos in Northern Ovamboland.

## Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**

4 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**

1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**

3 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**

Workers successfully abolished the formal contract labor system. However, the new laws, while granting most of the demands, did not greatly improve working conditions. The important demand for family accompaniment at the workplace was not granted.

The campaign and strike survived despite police repression and even after the incomplete compromise and new laws were announced.

The general strike campaign grew to encompass every major economic center of the country, including rural farming areas

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In 1971 South-West Africa (now Namibia) had been under the rule of South Africa's apartheid government for more than fifty years. Apartheid laws forced indigenous Namibian tribes to live in assigned tribal areas in the northern third of the country and required passes for movement within the country. The Ovambos were the main group of indigenous people, making up close to half the population, and inhabited the area called Ovamboland. The South African government had imposed a contract labor law system on all indigenous people. In order to get work Ovambos and other native Namibians were assigned contracts in mines and municipalities around the country for a year at a time. Workers had to leave family behind to live at the workplace for that period. Employers compensated workers by ranked classes, rather than the type of work. Laborers could not break the contract, but employers could break it at any time.

The Ovamboland People's Congress had sought the abolition of the contract labor system since 1957. Ovamboland People's Organization and the South-West Africa People's Organization later continued this struggle. However, the peak of the resistance was not brought about by any of these organizations. The laborers themselves developed the massive campaign from a growing sense of discontentment with the oppressive contract system.

In June 1971, the International Court of Justice declared that the South African control of Namibia was unlawful. This drew support among indigenous people as they began protests against the South African government within tribal lands. Laborers began strikes in Walvis Bay and Windhoek, Namibia's Capital. Police arrested demonstrators in an attempt to repress the protests.

Later that month leaders of the African Lutheran Church composed letters to the South African Prime Minister condemning the contract labor system and supporting the International Court's decision. The Dutch Reformed Church was on the African Lutheran Church's side as well.

From August to December Church leaders met with the South African Prime Minister and the Commissioner General for Northern Native Territories, Jan De Wet. Negotiations during this time were unsuccessful. At one of these meetings De Wet even stated that the system was voluntary and that, if Ovambos and other native Namibians were against the contract system, they would not ask for the contracts. The truth is that there was no other way for them to earn a living.

On December 10, a newspaper announced the Ovambo workers' plan to strike in Walvis Bay four days later. These laborers sent letters to friends and fellow workers around the country requesting a joint general strike throughout the nation. Ovambo workers in Windhoek held a mass meeting in their compound and decided to strike. On Dec 13, six thousand Ovambo workers stopped work and began a boycott of food from the kitchens of their Windhoek compound. The strike halted all main functions of the city. The government called in white students and non-Ovambo black workers to keep the city running, but there were not enough workers to replace the strikers.

Police arrested many Walvis Bay strikers when the Ovambos began to strike there. There were reports of police beating strikers. Strike sympathizers among the police force were dismissed. The Bantu Commissioner for South-West Africa met with workers in both Walvis Bay and Windhoek, urging workers to return to work. The strikers told him that they would only return to work if the contract system were abolished and expressed that they were no longer participating in this "voluntary" system.

Ovambos in the Klein Aub copper mine struck on Dec. 15. The next day workers at a second mine joined the general strike as the first Ovambos began a migration from their compound in Windhoek back to Ovamboland to "repatriate" themselves. More Walvis Bay workers, hotel workers, and rural farm workers brought the number of strikers to over 10,000.

Strikers had halted work in Windhoek, Walvis Bay, and a growing number of mines, Namibia's main source of economy. By Dec. 19, twelve thousand Ovambos were striking and many continued to migrate back to Ovamboland.

When laborers and hospital workers struck in Grootfontein, private companies tried and failed to negotiate with strikers.

On Dec. 29, the Rosh Pinah mineworkers joined the strike, cutting off supplies for the Iron and Steel Corporation of South Africa. This action spurred executives, industrialists, and mine administrators to meet with the Minister of Bantu Administration.

They announced that they would begin to revise the contract labor system.

By January 3, 1972, all major mines were on strike and 13,000 strikers had repatriated themselves in Ovamboland, while over 20,000 total Ovambos were on strike throughout the nation. The strikers elected a representative committee, which in turn distributed leaflets of their demands to all Ovambos and asked to negotiate with the South African government. Their main goal was to reform the contract labor system and included specific demands for the right to choose jobs, change jobs at any time, and to bring families to work locations. They also sought a new pass system and increased wages based on type of work instead of on ranked classifications.

Although government officials had agreed to reform the contract labor system, demonstrations and strikes continued. On January 12, the South African government sent more police to Namibia to prevent uprisings. The Ovamboland government voted against the contract system and supported the demands of the strikers. Nevertheless, they banned meetings of strikers in the tribal area.

On January 19, the United Nations Council for Namibia declared that the contract labor system violated the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights.

After two days of government-striker negotiations in Grootfontein, Namibia, the South African government officially abolished the contract labor system. The new regulations allowed laborers to apply for jobs at labor bureaucracies in Ovamboland. The workers could choose their jobs and were paid based on the type of work and individual contracts. Both laborers and employers could end the contract at any time. Employers had to provide free medical care. There was no provision for family accompaniment to places of work.

Many workers felt that poor conditions were still present within this new system and so continued to strike. Church leaders spoke out against the new system, just as they had spoken out against the contract labor system. On January 26, the South African government sent troops to Ovamboland to keep order. The next day there was a news blackout within the tribal area. Throughout the whole ordeal police broke up meetings with violence, killing ten Ovambos. Two more Ovambo strikers were killed by fellow tribesmen that were against the strikes and the South African government exiled 20 clergymen from Ovamboland.

On February 4, South Africa declared emergency laws that banned gatherings of more than five people in Ovamboland.

On February 14, twelve strikers were put on trial for breaking contract and starting the general strike. Most charges were dropped when the trial ended in June. The trial revealed many of the horrific conditions in the labor compounds.

Workers continued strikes until April in protest of the unchanged conditions under the new system. During this time the Secretary-General of the U.N. met with Ovambo leaders to hear their stories.

The Ovambo workers in Namibia had successfully ended the labor contract system with their general strike. Many poor working conditions still remained and workers were still separated from their families, but the strikers had greatly increased their rights. The campaign also set a base for the underlying political goal of the strike: further independence from South Africa. This struggle would continue until eighteen years later.

## Research Notes

### **Influences:**

Not known

### **Sources:**

Bauer, Gretchen. Labor and Democracy in Namibia, 1971-1996. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1998. Pp. 18-40

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**Additional Notes:**

The campaign had an underlying political goal, as well, which was further independence from South African Rule. This goal was never explicitly stated.

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

Max Rennebohm 18/10/2009

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