



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Sicily Socialist Fasci unite for workers' rights, Italy, 1893-1894

20 January

1893

to: 8 January

1894

Country: Italy

Location City/State/Province: Sicily

Goals:

The Fasci Siciliani demanded higher wages, lower rents and taxes, and the redistribution of misappropriated common land.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 029. Symbolic reclamations
- 032. Taunting officials
- 183. Nonviolent land seizure
- 184. Defiance of blockades

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions

Methods in 3rd segment:

Methods in 4th segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 099. Peasant strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 6th segment:

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 099. Peasant strike
- 105. Establishment strike
- 192. Alternative economic institutions

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- artisans
- farmers
- industrial workers
- rural and urban working class
- sulfur miners

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Central Committee of nine members: James Montalto of Trapani, Nicola Petrino of Messina, Giuseppe De Felice Giuffrida of Catania, Luigi Leone of Syracuse, Anthony Licata of Girgenti, Augustine Plan of Caltanissetta, Rosario Garibaldi, Bernardino Verro of Corleone, and Gabribaldi Bosco and Nicola Barbato of Palermo.

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

Catholic Church- local churches hosted Fasci meetings and provided a spiritual justification for socialist ideals

Involvement of social elites:

Prime Minister Giolitti pressured land owners to recognize agrarian contracts.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

It is unknown when Catholic congregations became involved.

Segment Length: 2 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Land holders

Italian government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

There is record of ten women entering the grounds of a company armed with sticks to persuade the workers there to join a strike; six of them were arrested.

In Caltavuturo, when the protesting peasants encountered the blockade, some of the protesters threw rocks at the troops.

There is record of arson and violent responses to police repression in late 1893.

Repressive Violence:

In January 1893, during what became known as the Massacre of Caltavuturo, police fired into the crowd, killing thirteen peasants and wounding forty.

In December 1893, Crispi suppressed demonstrations with violence, resulting in 92 deaths.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

1 point out of 6 points

Survival:

0 points out of 1 point

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

In the late 1893, some land owners did recognize the "Patti Corleone." In October 1893, mining workers held Congresses in caves, during which they articulated demands. By striking, they achieved an increase of the minimum age for miners to fourteen years, the reduction of working hours, and a minimum wage. Railway workers in Catania and Palermo achieved similar results.

During the 1860s and 1870s, workers in Sicily supported each other through mutual aid societies, which claimed the right to strike and to lobby for wage increases. This precedent of organized labor, along with a recent history of peasant uprisings against feudal aristocracy and the spread of socialist ideology, set the stage for the Fasci Siciliani movement. A trade war affecting the main components of Sicily's economy (fruit, wine, and sulfur) led the Sicilian elite to institute higher rents and taxes, transferring the economic hardship to the working class. Fasci, meaning "bundle" in Italian, were associations of laborers that advocated for workers' rights constituted Sicily's first social movement.

On May 1, 1891, Giuseppe De Felice Giuffrida formally established the first Fasci Siciliani in Catania. Individual workers could join the Fasci independently of workers associations. Local workers established a second Fasci in Messina. Then on June 29, 1892, the socialist activists Carlo Della Valle and Alfredo Casati organized workers in Palermo, with the aim of creating a unified voice for the working class there. Members elected Rosario Garibaldi Bosco to chair the organization's steering committee. Many mutual aid societies dissolved and united in this organization, and by early September it had about 7,500 members. Bosco believed that unification of Fasci across Sicily could be the seeds of a national socialist movement. By the end of 1892, there were Fasci in all but one of Sicily's regional capitols. Local Fasci sometimes owned building in which they met regularly, operating by their own constitution. These constitutions, such as that in Catania, tended to emphasize the inclusion of workers regardless of their sex or age.

Beyond Sicily's urban areas, rural peasants were also struggling to sustain themselves. Over recent decades, the Italian government privatized the land in Sicily that had previously been available to peasants for agriculture. In this process, Italian

administrators did not compensate the peasants for the seized land and began to charge them rent. Peasants organized to cooperatively pay rent. Declining wheat prices made it more difficult for these peasants to afford the cost of living.

At dawn on January 20, 1893, hundreds of peasants began to work land owned by the city of Caltavuturo, that they believed to be rightfully theirs. When approached by soldiers, the peasants whistled and taunted them. After the soldiers left, the peasants moved to the town hall to pressure the mayor directly. Refused a meeting with the mayor, the peasants walked back toward the city-owned plot of land. City police blocked the road. When the peasants encountered this blockade, some of the protesters threw rocks at the troops. Officials fired into the crowd, killing thirteen peasants and wounding forty. The peasants did not gain access to the 250 hectare plot of land which they demanded. Fasci Palermo responded promptly, expressing their sympathy by providing financial support to the victims' families. After this event, agrarian peasants established a Fasci in Caltavuturo.

Between January and April 1893, Fasci leaders traveled to rural areas to spread socialist ideas, which seemed to gain greater traction following the massacre of Caltavuturo. Subsequently, peasants across the Sicilian countryside united in fasci of their own. During weekly meetings of rural Fasci, farmers and miners discussed current events, their principles and rights, and educated themselves about nonviolent tactics, such as strikes.

By May 1893, there were ninety Fasci across Sicily. To unify these disparate associations, Gabribaldi Bosco organized a regional conference on May 21-22, 1893 in Palermo. About five-hundred working people attended, representing most of Sicily's Fasci. They identified as their central demands: higher wages, lower rents and taxes, and the redistribution of misappropriated common land. Participants in this conference elected a Central Committee of nine members: James Montalto of Trapani, Nicola Petrina of Messina, Giuseppe De Felice Giuffrida of Catania, Luigi Leone of Syracuse, Anthony Licata of Girgenti, Augustine Plan of Caltanissetta, Rosario Garibaldi, Bernardino Verro of Corleone, and Gabribaldi Bosco and Nicola Barbato of Palermo. Participants also decided that the Fasci movement would be formally affiliated with the socialist Party of Italian Workers.

The Fasci in Corleone, founded on April 9, 1893, held a peasants' conference on July 30, 1893. Attendees drafted Italy's first agrarian contract: "Patti Corleone," which they then presented to land owners in an attempt to formalize and improve peasants' rights. In August, peasant agricultural laborers began a strike to demand that land owners recognize "Patti Corleone." Fasci in eastern Sicily disagreed with the terms of the contract and did not participate in the strike. Some land owners did recognize the contract, with pressure from state officials who intervened in September. Others requested that Italian Prime Minister Giolitti close all Sicilian schools to prevent the spread of dissent; he refused. Some peasants continued to strike through November. More and more communities formed Fasci, with 162 in existence in Sicily by October 1893, with thousands of members.

After the peasants' mobilization around "Patti Corleone," Fasci elsewhere initiated strikes and won improved working conditions. In October 1893, mining workers held Congresses in caves, during which they articulated demands. By striking, they achieved an increase of the minimum age for miners to fourteen years, the reduction of working hours, and a minimum wage. Railway workers in Catania and Palermo achieved similar results.

Giolitti was unwilling to arrest the protesters or permit the use of firearms against them. The land-owning elite was frustrated by Giolitti's reluctance to use force. On November 24, 1893, the Giolitti government resigned, and after a two-week interim Francesco Crispi returned to power. Toward the end of Giolitti's time in office, some local authorities began to disregard his ban on the use of firearms against protesters. Though the Fasci had expressed their commitment to non-violence, activism during the latter part of 1893 escalated beyond the control of the Fasci Central Committee. Some Fasci members used violence during demonstrations, destroying property through arson and retaliating with rocks against police repression.

In December, Crispi suppressed demonstrations with violence, resulting in 92 deaths. Fasci leadership disagreed on what approach to take if Crispi attempted to dissolve their organization. Though the majority of members recognized the imbalance of power, advocating for the use of nonviolence, some advocated for an insurrection. On January 3, 1894, expressing fear of the secession of Sicily from Italy, Crispi declared a state of siege, dispatching 40,000 troops to the island. Acting under martial law, he authorized the arrest of the members of the Fasci's Central Committee and ordered the dissolution of all Fasci.

On January 8, 1894, the General Morra Lavrioano established military courts in Palermo, Messina, and Caltanissetta, which charged Fasci members for conspiracy and rioting. About one thousand people were jailed without trial. The administration enforced limitations on freedom of press and freedom of assembly and association, achieving the dissolution of all Fasci.

Research Notes

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Additional Notes:

Nonviolent resistance to the arrests continued after the dissolution of the Fasci.

On May 30, 1894, students, expressing their frustration with the Palermo court, gathered at the Teatro Bellini where they sang labor songs and marched. The next day, students voted to pass a resolution rejecting the court's sentences, and decided to abstain from voting to express their dissent. That day, a crowd congregated outside of the Palermo prison, where authorities held many of the peasant leaders. The following day, in the port of Palermo, a flotilla of small boats surrounded the ship that was carrying many of the movement's leaders to a remote prison. These actions did not prevent the incarceration of the Fasci leaders.

On March 14, 1896, the new Italian administration under Rudini, released the Fasci leaders, but forbade the reinstatement of the Fasci. Though formalized associations did not reform, the demands and education that accompanied this working class movement remained in the Sicilian memory and were a precedent for future social movements.

The Fasci movement was unique in the cooperation that it fostered between rural and urban working class (including farmers, industrial workers, sulfur miners, and artisans), as well as the involvement of women and youth. For example, 1,000 women were members of Fasci Plati Greci. On October 30, 1893, one of these women, Catherine Constance, was arrested for initiating a strike.

The Fasci refused to align itself with institutions that remained loyal to the elite. However, the Catholic Church played an integral role in the spread of the Fasci movement, serving as physical and spiritual bases for the spread of socialist ideals. Sources mentioned involvement of other outside allies without specifying who they were.

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

Laura Rigell, 02/03/2013

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