



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Belgian workers general strike to end plurality voting system, 1902

April 8,

1902

to: April 19,

1902

Country: Belgium

Location Description: *Across the Country*

Goals:

To end the plurality voting system in Belgium

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 106. Industry strike
- 116. Generalised strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 106. Industry strike
- 116. Generalised strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 117. General strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 117. General strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

- 117. General strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 117. General strike

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Group characterization:

- Belgian industrial labor union members

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Emile Vandervelde (A member of parliament and Socialist Party leader); Brussels Federation of the Labour/Conseil General

Partners:

Walloon Socialists (mining union); Heinaut and Liege Metalworkers; Colliers of the John Cockerill Society at Seraing; Wool workers in Verviers; Cotton workers in Ghent; Belgium Worker's Party.

External allies:

Not Known

Involvement of social elites:

Not Known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Emile Vandervelde
- Walloon Socialists

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Brussels Federation of Labor
- Colliers of the John Cockerill Society
- Heinaut and Liege metalworkers

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Belgium Worker's Party
- Cotton workers in Ghent
- Wool workers in Verviers

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 2 days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Belgian Government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not Known

Campaigner violence:

General rioting occurred until the onset of the official general strike. It's unclear to what degree the riots were violent or if they continued during the nonviolent strike.

Repressive Violence:

Leading up to the strike, police attacked groups of youth attempting to protest. During the strike, the civil guards fired at a march of strikers in Louvain, killing six and injuring fourteen, leading to the end of the official strike

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Violence dissipated the strike without any concessions or compromise between the government and the workers. Plural voting wasn't abolished, and women didn't achieve the right to vote in Belgium until 1919, 17 years later.

The party and strike organizations continued throughout the campaign.

The strike expanded from a single group of socialists in Brussels to a coalition of over 300,000 workers across Belgium in 2-3 days' time.

Throughout the 1800's in Belgium, political repression and the prioritization of the interests of wealthy citizens led to a government that didn't reflect the political views of its people. Despite their popularity among the citizenry, Socialists were almost fully excluded from the Parliament. Thus, during the late 1800's and early 1900's, workers leveraged their populist power by conducting approximately twenty general strikes across the country, with goals of accurate representation and fair working condition. The Belgian General Strike of 1893, led by Emile Vandervelde, a Socialist leader, was successful in securing universal suffrage for men. However, it came with the caveat of the plural vote -- certain voters (property owners, wealthy), received multiple votes, reflecting their greater influence and political capital in Belgian society.

In the first elections held after the institution of the compromised universal suffrage, Emile Vandervelde was elected to the

Belgian Parliament. Soon after, he was elected President of the International Socialists Bureau. In 1899, the Belgian Parliament took up legislation that would further erode the universal suffrage by providing increased representation for Catholic neighborhoods. Despite his opposition to the legislation, Vandervelde was outnumbered by a coalition of Liberal representatives, and, in order to maintain political capitol, voted for the bill that he opposed. Vandervelde then appealed to his socialist supporters to take to the streets against the bill. When the workers demonstrated against the legislation the police confronted them, and violence ensued.

As the spring of 1902 began the violence continued, and street demonstrations continued against the legislation. Vandervelde, confident in the growing Socialist coalition in Parliament, argued that true universal suffrage could be achieved through legal motions in the Parliament. He promised that if this didn't prove possible, the party would call an immediate general strike, just as they had done to attain the increase in suffrage in 1893.

On 8 April 1902 Parliament reconvened for a spring term and the workers intensified their demonstrations. The Walloon Socialists, representing the interests of some 120,000 miners, pressed the Belgium Workers Party, Belgium's nationwide socialist party, for an immediate strike, but the Workers Party leadership resisted, concerned about losing control of the situation.

After the Walloons' call, miners immediately began to strike, followed in quick succession by the metalworkers and colliers. Finally, on 13 April the Conseil Général (General Council) of the Belgium Workers Party declared a general strike, stating that the "majority of the working class had already decided to proclaim the general strike." This declaration was followed by the textile workers, the only women involved, joining the strike.

After the official declaration from the party, the violent riots and demonstrations ceased, and the strike became peaceful. With the memory of previous successful strikes, upwards of 300,000 striking demonstrators, roughly half of Belgium's working population, congregated outside of Parliament 13-18 April in support of a new bill introduced by Vandervelde that would create true universal suffrage.

Despite the crowds and support, a majority in Parliament voted against the bill on 18 April 1902.

The Workers Party, buoyed by the size of the demonstrations, vowed to continue their strike until Parliament reconsidered the bill.

That night, the Belgian civil guard fired into the crowd of protestors, injuring fourteen and killing six. Hoping to avoid any further violence, the mourning Conseil Général voted to end the strike. Thus concluded the 1902 general strike.

Belgium next experienced a general strike in 1905, with a goal of wage increase, but it wasn't until 1913 that the Socialist Party returned to the suffrage question again. The successful abolition of unequal suffrage didn't come until 1919.

Research Notes

Influences:

This general strike was one of a series led by Emile Vandervelde and the Brussels Federation of the Labour, beginning in 1893, and extending in the mid 1900s. (1)

The Belgian General Strike for universal suffrage, 1913 (2).

Sources:

Mahaim, Ernest, and Harald Westergaard. "The General Strike in Belgium, April 1902." *The Economic Journal* 12.47 (1902): 421-430.

Martens, Ludo. "Social Democracy Promotes Savage Capitalism." *May Day. Worker's Party of Belgium*. 01 May 1996. Speech.

Polosky, J. L. "A Revolution for Socialist Reforms: The Belgian General Strike for Universal Suffrage." *Journal of Contemporary History* 27.3 (1992): 449-466.

Additional Notes:

Belgian worker's struggle for accurate representation, fair wages and other elements of equity was part of a larger worker's movement that used the general strike as its primary tactic throughout Europe during this time period. See Britain 1926.

Edited by Max Rennebohm (04/04/2011)

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