



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Cubans general strike to overthrow president, 1933

July 27,
1933

to: August 11,
1933

Country: Cuba

Location City/State/Province: *Initially Havana, then all of Cuba*

Goals:

To oust dictator Gerardo Machado y Morales (although the campaign began as a Havana bus drivers strike)

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 106. Industry strike
- 107. Sympathy strike
- 116. Generalised strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 085. Merchants' "general strike"
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown

Methods in 4th segment:

- 065. Stay-at-home
- 085. Merchants' "general strike"
- 104. Professional strike
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown

Methods in 5th segment:

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

- 065. Stay-at-home
- 085. Merchants' "general strike"
- 104. Professional strike
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown

Methods in 6th segment:

- 065. Stay-at-home
- 085. Merchants' "general strike"
- 104. Professional strike
- 117. General strike
- 119. Economic shutdown

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 100. Farm workers' strike

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Labor unions
- Professionals
- farmworkers
- small business people
- students

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Central strike committee composed of labor union leaders and other opposition figures

Partners:

Cuban Confederation of Labor, Communist Party

External allies:

Army (at the end), U.S. State Department (at the end), pro-government political parties (toward the end)

Involvement of social elites:

U.S. Ambassador

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Havana bus drivers

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Intercity drivers

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Cuban Confederation of Labor
- Journalists
- Teachers
- Tobacco workers
- shop and theater owners

Groups in 4th Segment:

- farmworkers
- garage owners
- longshoremen/dockers
- more shopkeepers

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Physicians
- Railway workers
- U.S. Ambassador
- bakers
- cigarmakers
- government employees
- hotel and restaurant workers
- pro-government political parties

Groups in 6th Segment:

- military

Segment Length: *Approximately 2 days 16 hours*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

President Machado

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Groups previously involved in violent resistance to the regime continued in this period to do some violent attacks. However, two sources close to Machado (including the U.S. ambassador) reported that there was very little violence in the period of the campaign.

Repressive Violence:

Locking employees in to prevent them from going out on strike; police try unsuccessfully to round up telegraph operators to force them to go to work; arrests of 100 labor leaders and others supporting the campaign; police firing into a crowd killing 20 and wounding over 100.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

President Machado stepped down on August 11, 1933

The campaign survived long enough to see its goals reached and then voluntarily disbanded.

By August 9, 1933, the general strike campaign had spread to the entire island, including rural sectors of Cuba.

For two years prior to this campaign there was a violent struggle to oust dictator Gerardo Machado: running gun battles, bombings, political assassinations. The leading violent group agreed to a ceasefire in July 1933 to allow for mediation, but smaller groups continued with some attacks.

On July 27 Havana bus drivers went on strike for their own demands, and two days later intercity drivers struck in solidarity. Soldiers fired on demonstrators in Havana on August 1, killing two, and on the same day in Santa Clara, shops and theaters closed. When police attacked a group of striking teachers, more transportation workers went on strike. In Pinar del Rio drivers, tobacco workers, and journalists also went on strike. In the meantime, the sugar workers' union organized demonstrations and hunger marches throughout the country.

In the following days more groups joined the campaign. In Havana, many storekeepers closed and garages refused to sell gas. Typographers and journalists struck and the longshoremen/dockers walked out. The Cuban Communist party not only supported workers' demands but also called for an end to the Machado regime. There were reports of many strikes in the interior of the country, and a central strike committee was organized. The Cuban Confederation of Labor (CNOC) called for a general strike to begin August 5.

The regime responded by arresting more than one hundred labor leaders and other campaign supporters, and tried to round up telegraph operators to force them to go to work. Police fired on a crowd, killing twenty and wounding over one hundred. Leaders of the campaign broadcast appeals to the people to stay off the streets to reduce the chance of escalating repressive violence.

By August 6 more groups joined the strike: railway workers, hotel and restaurant workers, physicians, bakers, cigarmakers.

The campaign escalated when government employees went on strike in Sanitation, Communications, and the Treasury Department. Electric and telephone utilities even locked their employees inside to prevent them from striking.

At that point the U.S. ambassador pressured Machado to leave office; the dictator took to the radio to announce his determination to resist U.S. intervention. Machado also tried to divide the opposition by making a separate deal with labor. Recognizing the severity of the threat to his regime, Machado called a meeting with the CNOC and offered them legal recognition as well as official government support if they ended the strike. CNOC leaders were in favor of the agreement as was

the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Cuba. The workers, however, rejected their leaders' agreement and remained on strike.

Soon after the failed agreement with CNOG, an underground radio station controlled by the ABC, a staunch anti-Machado resistance group, falsely claimed that Machado had resigned and called for a huge public demonstration. Despite frantic retractions by other radio stations, a mob still emerged and began to march on the presidential palace. Police began to fire on the crowd before the marchers could reach the palace, killing twenty protestors.

Nonetheless, seeing the campaign's broad support, the military decided to switch to the side of the people and placed Havana under military control on August 9. Without even the army to support him, Machado resigned on August 11 and left the country.

Research Notes

Influences:

The organizational methods of this general strike influenced the general strike for democracy in Cuba two years later (see "Cubans General Strike to Overthrow President, 1935") (2).

Sources:

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Additional Notes:

This was another case in which nonviolent action was tried after violence failed to oust the dictator, and the nonviolent action succeeded. (See also El Salvador 1944, and Serbia 2000.)

The ouster of Machado created a power vacuum that was eventually filled by an army officer, Batista, who became the effective ruler of Cuba until Castro.

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