



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Ecuadorian workers in Guayaquil engage in general strike for economic rights, 1922

November 6,
1922

to: November 21,
1922

Country: Ecuador

Location City/State/Province: *Guayaquil*

Goals:

To improve working conditions for laborers in Guayaquil (see examples of demands in the narrative) and pressure the national government to put a limit on the international exchange rate of the sucre (Ecuadorian currency)

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 013. Deputations
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 097. Protest strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 039. Parades
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings
- 117. General strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches

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

Methods in 5th segment:

- 013. Deputations

Methods in 6th segment:

Notes on Methods:

There are no tactics for the 6th segment since that is when workers were in negotiation with management and the demands were settled on November 21, 1922

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- All workers in the city of Guayaquil

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Workers of the trolley companies, electric company, and gas and water works, Adolfo Villacres,

Partners:

Dr. J. José Vicente Trujillo, and Dr. Carlos Puig, the printers union

External allies:

railway workers, El universo, La Confederación Obrera del Guaya (COG)

Involvement of social elites:

Not Known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Dr. J. José Vicente Trujillo and Dr. Carlos Puig
- El universo
- Railway workers

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- COG

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 3 days*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Company owners in Guayaquil and the Ecuadorian national government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Through most of the strike the opposition engaged in dialogue and negotiation

Campaigner violence:

A drunken group of workers fired guns in the air

Repressive Violence:

A massacre of over 300 peaceful protesters (though this was not ordered by the opposition)

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0 points out of 1 point

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Despite the massacre and later backlash, the workers did achieve their stated goals

The assembly did not survive past the massacre

The strike expanded to the entire city, and 20,000 people gathered at the final rally

From the late 19th century into the early 20th century, Ecuador's labor movement was slowly growing. However, most workers' organizations consisted of groups of artisans, rather than industrial workers. These mutual aid societies collected dues mainly to pay for funerals of members who passed away and to financially help the family of the deceased. Additionally, some started night schools and reading groups. They also received most of their funding from the government, which helped keep their actions and goals moderate.

Ecuadorian workers had their first congress and a smaller meeting in 1913 in Quito. After the 1913 meeting, they issued a list of demands to which the government responded favorably, affirming the 8-hour workday and assistance to those involved in work-related accidents. However, very few employers acknowledged these measures.

In the coastal city of Guayaquil, working conditions were quite poor. Very few workers in the city were unionized. Though there were 18 strikes in the city from 1889 to 1920, the labor movement within the city had a hard time coming together to improve workers' conditions as a whole. In 1916, trolley, railway, and sanitation workers attempted a strike for the enforcement of the 8-

hour workday, but the strike was quickly broken up by the police.

In 1920, La Confederación Obrera del Guaya (COG), the nation's leading labor federation, organized Ecuador's second national labor conference (Congreso Obrero) in Guayaquil. COG received most of its support from the national government and the city's municipal government, further promoting the relationship between the labor group and the government. Needless to say, the conference proved to be non-confrontational. The list of demands included more government-supported education, a minimum wage law, pay raises, enforcement of the 8-hour workday, one day off a week, and others.

These demands largely reflected the interests of the artisans of the country, but the growing class of industrial workers was dissatisfied with the list of demands. In Guayaquil, many small anti-capitalist groups began to show up, setting themselves against the more moderate labor organizations. Anti-capitalist publications started up such as *Bandera roja* and *El proletario*. Many of these publications were anarcho-sindicalist (an often militant branch of anarchism that focused on the labor movement and envisioned a democratic, self-managed society of workers). In 1922, the Federación de Trabajadores Regional Ecuatoriana (FTRE), Ecuador's largest radical labor federation, was formed. Meanwhile, the COG continued its moderate, reform-oriented agenda.

There were many factors that led to huge worker unrest in Guayaquil in 1922. The area relied almost exclusively on cacao exportation for its export revenue. However, starting in the early 1900's, competition for cacao exportation grew, and during World War I, the demand for cacao fell drastically. Additionally, the sucre (Ecuador's national currency) was losing value so the government allowed banks to start issuing currency. Rather than helping, this led to huge amounts of inflation. By 1922, the price of basic foodstuffs such as flour, rice, and sugar were astronomical, rent rates rose, and employment opportunities fell.

On October 17, 1922, the railway workers of the neighboring city Durán began a strike and created a list of demands that they presented to the United States company that owned and managed the railroad. The General Manager J.C. Dobbie refused to negotiate and brought in strikebreakers, but the workers continued to strike, receiving support from the FTRE, COG, and hundreds of workers in Guayaquil. After a few days, Dobbie agreed to meet their demands.

The workers of Guayaquil took inspiration from this successful show of worker solidarity. From November 6-8, 1922, workers from the trolley companies, electric company, and gas and water works met, largely led by a man named Adolfo Vaillacres, and issued a set of demands on the 8th. Trolley workers were in a particularly bad position, earning barely subsistence wages, working long hours, and being required to watch the trolleys on Sundays (the one day they did not have to work), because any damage was paid for by their wages. The assembly of workers issued 28 demands in total, which were swiftly rejected by company management. In response, the workers struck, shutting down public transportation and much of the city's power. Meanwhile, the military moved soldiers into the city.

The management then agreed to talk with the campaigners, so the workers selected two lawyers, Dr. J. José Vicente Trujillo and Dr. Carlos Puig, to represent them. Newspapers picked up on the story, largely sympathetic to the plight of the workers, and the railway workers from Durán came over to join the assembly. However, from the beginning, the assembly did not have much control over the worker population of the city. Without consulting the assembly, the printers union printed leaflets encouraging all workers (unionized and not unionized) to join the strike. A group of drunken workers also tried to make their way to the power plant to turn off the city's power, but assembly members stopped them. Within the first few days, the assembly grew to 3000 members, and they began holding large outdoor rallies.

Negotiations were going favorably and an agreement was close, but the assembly then raised the issue of the decreasing value of the sucre. Pay raises would become meaningless within a few months due to its decreasing value. Hence, they proposed an artificial control on the exchange rate, a suggestion that *El universo*, one of the daily newspapers, swiftly endorsed. President of Ecuador José Luis Tamayo was then prompted to make his way from Quito to Guayaquil to address the exchange rate issue.

On November 12th, the lawyers came back to the assembly to get the assembly's approval on a settlement in which the management agreed to their demands, but would double trolley fares. At the same time, members of the COG presented a

petition to the assembly calling for a moratorium (limit) on exchange rates. The assembly rejected the settlement, and added the call for a moratorium to their list of demands, in addition to a call for a 7-person governmental committee (4 of whom would be workers) to work on solving the economic crisis. Governor Pareja promised to send this demand on to President Tamayo.

On November 14, the whole city engaged in a general strike. Businesses closed, electricity and gas were turned off, and all transportation stopped. Workers walked the streets, held large rallies downtown, and passed out leaflets calling for the moratorium, an end to tobacco and salt taxes, the turning over of unused farmland to landless peasants, and opposition to the proposed trolley fare raises.

While on his way to Guayaquil, President Tamayo appointed a commission of government officials and workers in Guayaquil to write up a moratorium decree on the 15th. By 1:00pm, they had drawn up a decree and sent it as a telegram to Tamayo for approval. The lawyers read the decree to the assembly and were met with cheers. The assembly sent Governor Pareja a note saying the rally and strike would stop once Tamayo signed the decree into law.

However, the atmosphere in the city was becoming restless. The city had been without electricity for three days, and food essentials were running low. By 1:00pm, 20,000 men, women, and children had gathered downtown for a scheduled 3:00pm rally. Dr. Puig read the settlement and Dr. Tujillo announced that the government had decided to release two labor leaders from jail. The crowd then set off toward the police station in celebration. Members of the military were there and grew increasingly nervous as the crowd approached. One soldier fired his weapon, and the others soldiers joined in. As soon as the crowd began to panic, the soldiers opened fire on the crowd, shooting down anyone they could. Affluent members of the city also joined in from their balconies, firing on workers in the street. By 5pm, the violence had lessened. 15 soldiers were wounded, though none had been killed. The civilian death toll was unclear, but estimated to be over 300 killed in the space of 2 hours. After the massacre, the assembly broke up and the strike subsided. Within a few days, the majority of the city was functioning again.

The next day, November 16th, Tamayo signed the decree, but this success was overshadowed by the massacre. On November 21, 1922, management and workers settled the strike. The workers got their pay raises, shorter hours, and the rest of their demands, though the fare increase was also part of the settlement.

While I have deemed this case largely a success based on the fact that most of the workers' demands were met, it is important to note the backlash that occurred after the settlement. The moratorium ended up being ineffective at keeping the exchange rate constant. Additionally, the military violence gave the police force permission to be more openly repressive to other labor movements throughout the country. The government forced prominent labor leaders into exile, labeled most labor organizations as "Bolshevik" or "anarchist," and claimed that the violence in Guayaquil had been justified.

Research Notes

Influences:

Influenced by the railroad strike in Durán, Ecuador (1).

Notes: I only used one source for this case study due to a incredible scarcity of sources. However, the source used was very comprehensive.

Sources:

Alexander, Robert J. A history of Organized Labor in Peru and Ecuador. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2007.

Pineo, Ronn F. Social and Economic Reform in Ecuador: Life and Work in Guayaquil. University Press of Florida: Gainesville, FL, 1996.

Additional Notes:

Edited by Max Rennebohm (07/05/2010)

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

Hannah Jones, 21/02/2010

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