



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Glaswegian Women Campaign for Rent Control, Scotland, 1915

March

1915

to: November

1915

Country: Scotland

Location City/State/Province: Govan, Glasgow City, UK

Location Description: Protest spread from Govan to the larger Clydeside area

Goals:

To regulate rent pricing and prohibit profiteering with the eventual goal of building Municipal Housing.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › Rent Strike: We Are Not Removing
- 087. Refusal to pay fees, dues, and assessments › Refusal to pay increased rent

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › Rent Strike: We Are Not Removing
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › explanatory cards worn on chest
- 087. Refusal to pay fees, dues, and assessments › Refusal to pay increased rent

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › explanatory cards worn on chest
- 087. Refusal to pay fees, dues, and assessments › Refusal to pay increased rent

Methods in 4th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › explanatory cards worn on chest
- 087. Refusal to pay fees, dues, and assessments › Refusal to pay increased rent

Methods in 5th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › explanatory cards worn on chest
- 087. Refusal to pay fees, dues, and assessments › Refusal to pay increased rent

Methods in 6th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications › explanatory cards worn on chest

- 087. Refusal to pay fees, dues, and assessments › Refusal to pay increased rent
- 097. Protest strike › Striking by industrial workers to protest rent increases

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 028. Symbolic sounds › used a football rattle as noisemaker during protest

Notes on Methods:

Strikers threw flour bombs (paper bags full of flour), wet clothes, and rotting fruit at evictors to make carrying out evictions so unpleasant that they would give up and go away.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- South Govan Women's Housing Association
- Working Class Women

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

John Wheatley, later Mary Barbour, William Reid

Partners:

South Govan Women's Housing Association, Scottish Labour Housing Association, Glasgow Women's Housing Association

External allies:

Independent Labour Party

Involvement of social elites:

not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- disorganized groups of neighbors

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Glasgow Women's Housing Association

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 1.5 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Profiteering Landlords, city legislators

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

none

Campaigner violence:

No campaigner violence

Repressive Violence:

not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

4 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0.5 points out of 1 point

Growth:

2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

Though the strike resulted in the Rent Restriction Act, plans made therein were continually weakened in the following months and years, and the original goal of Municipal Housing was not actually achieved.

Since 1885, housing was a major concern for residents of Glasgow, in particular those who relied on tenement housing for shelter. These residents were primarily men who worked in industrial labor and their families. Glasgow received an influx of roughly 70,000 new residents in the three years leading up to 1915. The city did not respond with enough new housing and in fact built fewer than two thousand tenements to meet this need, which created high demand for a small number of apartments. By this time, Glasgow had become the most overcrowded city in Britain. Many landlords, sensing that there was money to be made from this unfortunate situation, chose to increase the rent on their properties to exorbitant rates, often with little to no notice. Landlords promptly evicted tenants unable to pay these increased rents, and because of the housing shortage, landlords were secure in the notion that their properties would not remain vacant for long and they could charge another person or family the higher rate.

A rent strike began in Govan in March of 1915 when a landlord attempted to evict a woman, whose husband was a soldier, based on a debt which amounted to one pound. However, the landlord's designated evictors were unable to carry out the eviction because hundreds of angry neighbors, led by John Wheatley, an active and prominent member of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), blocked their way into the apartment and voiced their outrage in an effort to keep the woman's housing secure.

Mary Barbour, who led the rent strike to its close, joined the ILP party in 1896, and there learned about nonviolent actions and political protest. Her plan for continuing the organization of neighbors against unfair evictions and rent spikes focused mainly on those people who stayed home all day and had the time for protest: women. Additionally, during wartime men in industrial professions were prohibited from striking, which placed an emphasis on the political action of women. Women were able to organize during the day and discuss strategy so that they could lead large protests and defend their neighbors against evictions. They held meetings wherever they could find space to gather, primarily in participants' homes.

Both eviction agents and tenants developed ways to deceive one another, and on one occasion an eviction agent lied to a female tenant, telling her that her neighbors had paid the increased rental fee. She paid the rent, but Mary Barbour and her legions went to the eviction agent's home and demanded the money back from him. He was intimidated by the sheer number of residents who gathered in and around his home, and he returned the money.

During Barbour's campaign, a single woman who acted as a sentry would ring a bell after seeing an eviction agent in the neighborhood, alerting everyone in the building to come out with their makeshift weapons: flour bombs, rotting food, wet clothes, and other similar objects. In this way, the women deterred eviction agents from entering tenement buildings.

When the residents gathered for protests, Barbour placed special emphasis on looking clean and well-dressed. Barbour wanted to cultivate an image of the working class that the wealthy would find more respectable and civilized, so protesters wore their "Sunday clothes" to gather in public. They also wore cards on their chests proclaiming their grievances and plan of action. One such card said:

Partick Tenants' Strike

Our Husbands, Sons and Brothers are fighting the Prussians of Germany
We are fighting the Prussians of Partick
Only alternative MUNICIPAL HOUSING (via International Socialist Group)

The peak of this campaign occurred in November of 1915, by which point roughly 20,000 households were participating in the rent strike. The turning point came on 17 November, when the city cited 49 strikers for striking. Hordes of striking residents gathered outside the courthouse and demonstrated. They protested the citations served to their fellow strikers in an unrelenting demonstration for the entire day. At the end of that day, the strikers had essentially achieved legitimacy in the eyes of the law, and the city dropped all charges against them.

On 25 November, a bill restricting rent increases was introduced and quickly won parliamentary approval. Though this campaign achieved its goal by introducing legislation that would protect tenants from exorbitant rent increases, the law weakened consistently after 1915.

Research Notes

Sources:

1. Caird, Trish. "Women on the Left: Mary Barbour." International Socialist Group. International Socialist Group, 01 Mar. 2013. Web. 08 Feb. 2015. <http://web.archive.org/web/20150209042213/http://internationalsocialist.org.uk/index.php/2013/03/women-on-the-left-mary-barbour/>
2. Lavalette, Michael, and Gerry Mooney. "Housing and Class Struggles in Post-War Glasgow." *Class Struggle and Social Welfare*. London: Routledge, 2000. N. pag. Print.
3. "Radical Glasgow." *Rent Strikes* : : Glasgow Caledonian University. Glasgow Caledonian University, 9 Jan. 2006. Web. 08 Feb. 2015. http://web.archive.org/web/20150209042944/http://www2.gcu.ac.uk/radical_glasgow/chapters/rent_strikes.html

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