Guam teachers strike for wage increase, 1980-81

19 December 1980
10 March 1981

Country: Guam
Country: United States
Location City/State/Province: Agana
Location Description: Guam is a United States territory located in the western Pacific Ocean

Goals:
A 30% cost-of-living wage increase for public sector workers.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 016. Picketing
- 104. Professional strike
- 107. Sympathy strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 104. Professional strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 016. Picketing
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 104. Professional strike
- 171. Nonviolent interjection » human chain formed around territorial legislature
- 193. Overloading of administrative systems » too many appeals of teachers' firings

Methods in 5th segment:
• 016. Picketing
• 032. Taunting officials › picketing outside the houses of government officials
• 104. Professional strike

Methods in 6th segment:

• 016. Picketing
• 104. Professional strike
• 192. Alternative economic institutions › interest-free loans from the American Federation of Teachers

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Economic Justice
Group characterization:

• other government employees
• public school teachers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Guam Federation of Teachers (GFT)
Partners:
Operating Engineers Local No. 3
External allies:
The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) provided interest-free loans to financially struggling strikers, and provided experts to help with negotiation.
Involvement of social elites:
Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

• Guam Federation of Teachers
• Operating Engineers Local 3

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:
Guam's third union, the small Chamorro Employees Labor Union, disapproved of the GFT's confrontational attitude and distanced itself from the GFT after the latter called for a strike.

Operating Engineers Local 3 leaders supported the strike and were among those arrested at the legislature, but rank-and-file members did not maintain the solidarity strike for long.

**Segment Length:** Approximately 13 days 8 hours

### Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**
Guamanian government, including the territorial legislature, Governor Paul Caldo, and Education Director Katherine Aguon.

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**
Not known

**Campaigner violence:**
Some instances of spitting and fighting on picket lines (unsanctioned by leadership)

**Repressive Violence:**
Not known

### Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**
0 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**
0.5 points out of 1 point

**Growth:**
2 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**
Success: Teachers failed to receive any pay raises or other concessions.

Survival: Although the GFL's infrastructure survived the strike, the strike's divisiveness in Guamanian political discourse significantly weakened the GFL’s ability to organize in the years after the strike.

Growth: The strike grew to include over 900 people, but this still represented only 10% of the public sector workforce.

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In 1980, the government of Guam employed over 9,000 workers, or 27% of all jobs on the island. Approximately half of these public workers were teachers. 2,400 teachers were members of the Guam Federation of Teachers (GFT), the largest union on the island. As teachers’ pay consistently lagged behind the national average salary, the GFT organized a petition drive in 1980 to hold a referendum on whether government employees should receive a 30% cost-of living wage increase. Although the petition failed, Governor Paul Caldo’s government responded to the pressure by passing a $700 wage increase in August. This gesture did not satisfy the GFT, and in December, the territorial legislators destroyed any remaining good will by granting themselves raises ranging from $2,000 to $10,000 annually.

Days later, on December 19, the GFT staged a rally in the capital city of Agana, at which hundreds of teachers voted for a strike if not given a 30% wage increase. Of the island’s other two unions, only the Operating Engineers Local 3 supported the GFT’s efforts; the fledgling Chamorro Employees Labor Union (CHELU) disapproved of the teachers’ aggressive stance and publicly withdrew its support of their demands. On January 7, the GFT held another vote, written this time, on the question of a strike. Though the motion to strike passed, support among union members was far from unanimous—only 75% of the teachers voted,
and only 70% of those supported the strike. In response to the vote, Gov. Caldo sought and quickly received a court injunction to declare the strike illegal.

In defiance of the court order, 758 of 1,464 classroom teachers did not report to work on January 12, but instead formed picket lines outside public schools. In addition to primary and secondary teachers, school bus drivers and university faculty also joined the strike. Some members of the Operating Engineers Local 3 struck in solidarity. It is important to note that there was a significant ethnic divide among GFT members--most of the strikers were from the mainland US or Hawai'i, whereas most Chamorro teachers elected not to cause a disruption.

Education Director Katherine Aguon promptly suspended nearly all of the strikers and fired them soon afterward. As more educators joined the strike, bringing the total to over 900, Aguon hired replacement teachers to keep class in session. Even with replacement teachers, class sizes ballooned in size and declined in quality, as many of the replacements only had high school degrees. Many high school students, especially those with military parents, left the island for more stable schools in Hawaii or the mainland US to preserve their chances of acceptance into universities.

Teachers further disrupted daily business on Guam by appealing their firings. Hundreds of appeals and re-appeals clogged Civil Service hearings. The GFT further escalated the struggle on February 6, when teachers formed a human chain around the legislature building as it was in session. Police arrested sixty-one protestors, many of whom “went limp” and forced the police to carry them away. Among those arrested were GFT Executive Director Marcia Hartsock and Operating Engineers Local 3 President Tommy Long (although rank-and-file members of the Operating Engineers had long since gone back to work, leadership continued to support the GFT).

Following the arrests, Gov. Caldo and GFT President Conrad Stinson opened discussions. Calvo repeated that there was no money available for a pay raise and then cut off negotiations when the GFT started picketing at the homes of government officials. Fifteen University of Guam professors, dressed in caps and gowns, playfully circled the entrance to the governor’s home, and were summarily fired despite having tenure.

As the strike continued into February, striking teachers’ financial stability declined, as they were not receiving paychecks. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) provided assistance in the form of interest-free loans, but some teachers nevertheless decided to return to the classroom. When several hundred teachers tried to return to work on February 19, however, they were told that they had been permanently replaced and needed to fill out application forms if they wished to be considered for re-hire. Less than 100 teachers agreed to fill out a form.

Negotiations between the government and GFT opened again. While the GFT negotiators held firmly to their demands for a 30% increase, government officials were confident that they could outlast the financially struggling teachers. Sure enough, by March 11, the GFT leadership was unable to overrule many of their constituents’ desire to end the strike, and thus ended the strike after 58 days.

Gov. Caldo offered 200 jobs in the Department of Education to fired teachers, who would not necessarily resume their former positions. Many accepted this offer, but another 200 teachers, including university professors, left Guam permanently. The GFT suffered greatly for its defeat—it paid a $35,000 fine to the government for breaking the court injunction against the strike, and its membership was greatly reduced. Public education in Guam remained weakened for years after the strike due to the retention of under-qualified replacement teachers and tension between strikers and non-strikers. Many parents enrolled their children in private schools after the strike, further damaging the political incentive to improve public education.

Research Notes

Sources:


**Additional Notes:**
This campaign is a good example of how ethnic divisions among campaigners can have a detrimental effect. Unity within the GFT and among all Guamanian workers was impeded by perceived cultural differences between the indigenous Chamorro workers and the "statesiders" who initiated the strike. Rogers elaborates further on this dynamic in his book, which was my primary source for this campaign.

**Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:**
William Lawrence, 11/3/2011

A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.

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