



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Fort Leavenworth Prison strike for better prison conditions and reduced sentences, 1919

Time period notes: U.S.A. entered World War I on April 6, 1917.

Conscientious objectors and political 'radicals' and opposition were imprisoned under the Selective Service Act of 1917, the Sedition Act of 1917, and the Espionage Act 1917. Strikes occurred after Germany had surrendered and the armistice had been signed on November 11, 1918.

29 January

1919

to: 31 January

1919

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: Leavenworth, Kansas

Location Description: United States Disciplinary Barracks (also called Fort Leavenworth)

Goals:

There were two strikes that occurred in 1919 at Leavenworth. The two strikes were initiated by different groups of prisoners as the prisoner population had changed, and had differing goals. This case focuses more prominently on the first strike.

The first strike had three goals:

1. Colonel Sedgwick Rice (commandant of Leavenworth prison) present a request to the War Department of the United States government for the immediate release of military prisoners.
2. Immunity from punishment for all men who had led and participated in the strike.
3. The establishment of a permanent grievance committee of elected prisoners (called the General Prisoners' Conference Committee).

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 101. Refusal of impressed labor
- 102. Prisoners' strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 101. Refusal of impressed labor
- 102. Prisoners' strike

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 101. Refusal of impressed labor
- 102. Prisoners' strike

Methods in 4th segment:

- 101. Refusal of impressed labor
- 102. Prisoners' strike

Methods in 5th segment:

- 101. Refusal of impressed labor
- 102. Prisoners' strike

Methods in 6th segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention › Prisoner leaders presented the demands of the prisoners to Colonel Rice.

Notes on Methods:

In Section 6 of the Methods, the demands of the prisoners were presented to Colonel Rice only.

Because the two strikes are being considered as different campaigns, only the methods for the first strike are listed above. During the first labor strike, prisoners formed committees in each wing with elected committee members and leaders of their wing. After winning the first strike, U.S. Disciplinary Barracks established a permanent committee of elected prisoners to deal with grievances (General Prisoners' Conference Committee). After the second strike, the prison officials abolished the General Prisoners Conference Committee.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Conscientious Objectors
- Political opposition opposing WWI
- ex-soldiers imprisoned for military crimes

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

H. Austin Simons (conscientious objector, writer, and prisoner);

Inmate Leaders and those who participated in the General Prisoners' Conference Committee

W. Oral James (conscientious objector and prisoner) the first to speak up about the goals of the strike to Colonel Rice.

Carl Haessler (prisoner, philosophy professor at University of Illinois) a member of the group of inmates that met with

Colonel Rice to deliver the demands of the inmates and communicate during the strike.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- General Prisons Conference Committee

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 10 hours (approximate)

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

United States Disciplinary Barracks at Fort Leavenworth (Fort Leavenworth Prison)

United States Government, Department of War

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Fort Leavenworth Prison officials asked for soldiers from Second Battalion of the 46th Infantry, Fort Riley, Camp Dodge, and Camp Grant Fort to come to Fort Leavenworth to help increase security during the strikes.

Campaigner violence:

The night of the first strike, a fire was lit in a warehouse holding prisoners and supplies. 11 people, 9 inmates and 2 prison officials were hospitalized and \$100,000 worth of damage occurred. The fire was set by 3 prisoners, however it is unclear whether this act was related to the non-violent strikers actions or because of prison tension.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

4 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0 points out of 1 point

Growth:

0 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

All of the demands of the first strike were met. However the second strike was not successful in creating any of the demands by the prisoners. In response to the second strike, the General Prisoners' Conference Committee was abolished, and prison guards increased discipline and security within the prison.

On 6 April 1917 the United States of America entered World War I. The American army was about the sixth the size of Britain's, and President Woodrow Wilson sought to increase the army's numbers to one million through volunteer conscription. After only 73,000 volunteered, he enacted a mandatory draft. On 18 May 1917, the United States Congress passed the Selective

Service Act, forcing men ages twenty-one to thirty years to join the military, increasing the army to 1,500,000 soldiers by 1918. The government also passed the Espionage and Sedition Act in 1917, which made illegal “disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language” towards the United States Constitution, the government, the flag, or the American uniform, and threatened individuals convicted of obstructing the draft with up to \$10,000 fines and 20 years in jail.

The United States Disciplinary Barracks, also known as Fort Leavenworth, was one of the nation’s largest and oldest military prisons. The prison was designed to restore ex-soldiers to the military and did so through the different vocational training within the prison and daily work. Before the Espionage and Sedition Act, the barracks housed approximately 1,600 men. From 1917 to 1918, prisoners increased to 3,600 men which created overcrowded living conditions. The diverse range of prisoners included political activists from diverse backgrounds, ex-soldiers who had committed war-crimes, conscientious objectors (either for political, personal, or religious reasons), and members of workers labor organizations, like Wobblies. Many of the prisoners were serving excessive sentences from military courts, some of which had accrued during their time in prison by breaking military law within the prison walls. There was often variation in sentencing for the same crime.

Once the Allies and the Central Powers signed the armistice on 11 November 1918, ending World War I, soldiers began to return home. On 25 January 1919, Fort Leavenworth prison officials released 113 conscientious objectors. However, the U.S. government continued to hold approximately 400 conscientious objectors in military prisons to serve long sentences.

On 29 January 1919, one “gang” of 150 workers decided to stop their required daily work in the middle of the day, the beginnings of a labor strike. The prisoners as a group were undecided about the specific goals of the strike. That night three prisoners started a fire and burned parts of the quartermaster’s warehouse, causing \$100,000 of damage. It is unclear whether these actions were related to the present strike, as described by eyewitness Winthrop D. Lane, or to prison tension.

Colonel Sedgwick Rice, the commandant in charge of the prison, met with the prisoners and discussed their grievances. The prisoners spoke of their poor living conditions, rotting meat and poor food, and the inequality of their sentences. Many prisoners did not understand why they were given five to twenty-five year sentences when other men who had committed similar offenses were serving much smaller sentences. W. Oral James, a conscientious objector and the first to talk to Colonel Rice, directly requested that their cases be reviewed. In response to the strike, Colonel Rice contacted the leaders of the Second Battalion of the 46th Infantry, approximately 2,000 soldiers, and assumed control over the battalion as reinforcement in case the prisoners decided to take drastic action in revolt or attempt escape.

The next day of 30 January 1919, 2,300 prisoners refused to work, and during the strike leaders of the prisoners, like H. Austin Simons, urged non-violence. The prisoners were sent back to the prison and used the rest of the day to organize. Committees and elected leaders from each wing of the prison drafted a list of demands for the prison authorities. Their demands were as follows: 1. Colonel Rice recommend to the War Department the immediate release of military prisoners; 2. Immunity from punishment for all men who had participated in the strike; 3. Recognition of a permanent grievance committee consisting of prisoners which would connect the prisoner’s to the prison authority and try to improve prisoner grievances (called the General Prisoners Conference Committee or the Prisoners’ Committee.)

On 31 January, the prison guards did not try to make the prisoners go to work and left them in the prison. Colonel Sedgwick Rice agreed to meet with the leaders of the committee and seventeen other prisoners to discuss further negotiation. At this meeting, the prisoners gave Colonel Rice their list of demands.

Colonel Rice agreed to give immunity to prisoners involved in the strike, and to give the prisoner’s request to the War Department. The next day, he left for Washington D.C. to deliver the message in person to the War Department and the Secretary of War. The prisoners voted unanimously to return to work. In response, the War Department appointed a committee called the the Judge Advocate Review Board (also called the Pardoning Board or the Clemency Board) to review the cases and sentencing of the prisoners

With the approval of the government and the Adjutant General, the prison decided to give the prisoners more responsibility in

the prison through the establishment of the General Prisoner's Conference Committee. The Committee was composed of 40 elected prisoners and 35 elected "honor men." "Honor men" were responsible for grievances related to working conditions and improving working conditions, and all other grievances were given to the other 40 members.

The Committee helped to maintain discipline and discussed prisoner grievances with prison officials. Over the next few months, many improvements were made in the prison. Committee members replaced some of the guards within the prison and fights between officers and inmates greatly reduced. They were given charge of discipline in the kitchen, mess hall, and yard. Meals also improved. The meat, poultry, butter, and eggs came from a farm from inside the prison, and were given to the prisoners to eat. Prisoners were allowed to write one letter a day instead of one letter a week, and recreation hours extended. New bathrooms were built and existing ones improved, and a subcommittee designed to improve sanitation was created. Prison officials also gave five members of the Prisoners Committee responsibility over adjudication for fellow prisoners accused of breaking basic prison rules. According to prisoner, conscientious objector, and writer H. Austin Simons, sentences were more moderate and the number of discrepancies lowered.

On 14 June 1919, the assistant commandant of the prison announced that all prisoner cases had been reviewed by the Judge Advocate's Pardoning Board. About sixty percent of the prisoners received a reduced sentence.

Over the next few months, the prison released or relocated (to Fort Douglas and Alcatraz Island) almost all of the conscientious objectors. With the new space in the prison, the military transferred military prisoners, ex-soldiers from American Expeditionary Force in France to Fort Leavenworth Prison from the once the War ended.

In the first week of July, prison guards learned of 21 sticks of dynamite within the prison, that were to be detonated on the 4th of July. An ex-prisoner tipped the guards off, and the event was avoided. 72 prisoners escaped Fort Leavenworth in the beginning of July.

On 21 July 1919, Leavenworth prison officials transferred a prisoner referred to as "Goldie" and another prisoner called "Frankie the Wop" to Alcatraz Prison without explanation. There was talk of another labor strike among the prisoners, but the Prisoners' Committee opposed. The new population of prisoners organized a labor strike on 22 July 1919 with the goals of: 1. Immediate general amnesty for prisoners and a statement of their request be given to President Wilson; 2. Better food conditions; 3. Return of "Goldie" and "Frankie the Wop" to Fort Leavenworth.

The prison officials responded differently to the second strike, and labeled the action a mutiny. The prison officials placed all prisoners, even those who did participate in the strike, in solitary confinement for three days, and fed inmates only bread and water. The prison called in soldiers from Fort Riley, from Camp Dodge, the Second Battalion of the 46th Infantry, and Camp Grant to increase Fort Leavenworth security. Prisoners were released from their cells only for prison officials to search prison cells, and frisk each prisoner. The guards confiscated any belongings that did not originate from the prison. The prison officials placed the inmates back in their cells and kept them on bread and water for another three days. Afterward, the guards released the prisoners for work, and the inmates complied. In response to the strike, prison officials abolished the General Conference Prisoners' Committee. The discipline by the prison guards also increased, and gun platforms were built and armed on top of buildings in the yard.

Research Notes

Influences:

The military prisoners from the American Expeditionary Force from France were transferred to Fort Leavenworth Prison after World War I ended. They had learned of the success of the first strike while in France from European editions of American newspapers, and influenced their decision to strike a second time. The population of the prison had changed dramatically, and many of the conscientious objectors and political radicals had been released or transferred before the second strike occurred.

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