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California Pea Pickers' Strike of 1932

Abstract

[Excerpt] Just before the start of the May 1932 harvest season, growers in the Half Moon Bay area of San Mateo, California, provoked a spontaneous strike among pea pickers when they reduced piece rates from seventy-five to fifty cents a pack. Although the workers were unorganized, the large pay cut represented the breaking point for families just coming out of the slow winter season. The previous year's rate of seventy-five cents a pack had not been enough to tide them over through the winter, especially given the four dollars a month rent they were required to pay the growers for camping out on their land. Unable to feed their families, many of the workers were forced to look to the San Mateo County relief office for charity, only to be told that because they were not permanent residents of the county, they were only eligible to receive two cents per family member per day. A twenty-five-cent pay cut meant that the next winter would be even worse.

Keywords

labor movement, strike, California, pea pickers

Disciplines

Labor History | Labor Relations | Unions

Comments

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California Pea Pickers' Strike of 1932

Kate Bronfenbrenner

Just before the start of the May 1932 harvest season, growers in the Half Moon Bay area of San Mateo, California, provoked a spontaneous strike among pea pickers when they reduced piece rates from seventy-five to fifty cents a pack. Although the workers were unorganized, the large pay cut represented the breaking point for families just coming out of the slow winter season. The previous year's rate of seventy-five cents a pack had not been enough to tide them over through the winter, especially given the four dollars a month rent they were required to pay the growers for camping out on their land. Unable to feed their families, many of the workers were forced to look to the San Mateo County relief office for charity, only to be told that because they were not permanent residents of the county, they were only eligible to receive two cents per family member per day. A twenty-five-cent pay cut meant that the next winter would be even worse.

Fifteen hundred Mexican, Filipino, Puerto Rican, and Italian pea pickers from sixty farms covering a territory of fifteen square miles walked off their jobs to gather in the town of Half Moon Bay to discuss strike plans. Without effective leadership, the mass meeting dissolved after the sheriff and the powerful labor contractors, backed up by armed San Mateo police, threatened them with eviction from the camps and immediate replacement by imported farm laborers. However, the walkout continued as workers went back to their tents rather than returning to the fields.

Within hours the strikers were joined by organizers from the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union (CAWIU). The CAWIU had been established the year before by the American Communist Party's Trade Union Unity League (TUUL) as a successor to the Agricultural Workers' Industrial Union (AWIU) when the union became involved in an unsuccessful strike among Santa Clara County cannery workers. Sixteen of the TUUL's more experienced farmworker organizers were still imprisoned under California's criminal syndicalism laws for organizing activity during the 1930 Imperial Valley Cantaloupe Workers' Strike. Thus the CAWIU, and its forerunner the AWIU, stuck to a relatively passive strategy of sending a small group of organizers into the field whenever they heard reports of spontaneous strikes. Typically, Communist Organizers would assume leadership of the strike and quickly formulate demands including raises, overtime pay, union recognition and protection for union activity, and improvements in living conditions. Again and again, the growers and local authorities would respond with aggressive assaults on the strikers and the union leadership. Mass meetings and picket lines were violently dispersed by police, strikers were arrested and threatened with deportation, and relief supplies were cut off. In a short time, the organizers had no choice but to call off the strike, and send those workers who had not yet been deported back into the fields without any of the union's demands having been met.

The Half Moon Bay Pea Pickers' Strike of 1932 was no exception. The strikers willingly handed over leadership of the strike to the CAWIU organizers because they had no leadership of their own. Demands for restoration of the seventy-five cent piece rate, elimination of the four dollar monthly rental fee, and improvements in camp living conditions, including shower baths and free medical care, were presented to the growers and publicized throughout the county.

The growers lost no time in mounting a counterattack. A call went out to all local law enforcement officials, farmers, merchants, and businessmen to arm themselves and join the battle to crush the strike by force. Hundreds of "concerned citizens," primarily farmers, were deputized. Well-armed deputies once again threatened the strikers with eviction from the employer-owned camps and replacement by imported scab labor. It quickly became clear to the organizers and the workers that the growers were willing to use extensive force to ensure that their pea crop would be picked—by scabs if necessary.

Confronted with the well-armed deputies and fully cognizant of the strike's inadequate organization and preparation, the CAWIU called off the strike only twenty-four hours after it had begun. For the second time in its brief history, the CAWIU had failed miserably in its efforts to convert a spontaneous strike into a lasting organization of agricultural workers. Once again the union was an organization in name only, with neither members nor strike victories to claim for its own.

Yet the Half Moon Bay strike served as an important turning point for the CAWIU. In response to harsh criticism voiced by national Communist Party leaders regarding the haphazard organizing strategies that they had used among agricultural workers, local organizers themselves began to re-evaluate their strategy. But perhaps most important of all, Sam Darcy, one of the Communist's most astute and committed organizers, was sent out to take control of all organizing in District 13, which included California, Nevada, and Arizona. Under Darcy's leadership, delegates to the District 13 annual Communist Party convention in July 1932, used the Half Moon Bay debacle to engage in a serious bout of self-criticism. Discarding their failed policy of attempting to exploit spontaneous strikes, organizers concurred that the only way they were going to build a lasting organization among agricultural workers was through careful selection of organizing targets; the development of a leadership representative of the agricultural work force in terms of race, nationality, sex, and age with a focus on concrete demands including wages, working conditions, and union recognition; and, most important of all, the painstaking and diligent building of a mass organizational movement before any economic action was to be taken.

The fortunes of the CAWIU did not take a dramatic turn for the better following the 1932 convention. But the metamorphosis in union strategy and tactics that followed the collapse of the Pea Pickers' Strike set the stage for the dramatic farmworker struggles of 1933 and 1934.

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