

«THE ETHIOPIAN REVOLUTION» (1974)

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Abstract: *Workers were one of the most important actors during the 1974 Ethiopian revolution. The Confederation of Ethiopian Labor Unions (CELU), which represented the country’s organized workers, had already begun to resist state authorities before the revolution broke out. The revolution was used by the CELU as a welcome opportunity to petition the state and make its demands heard.*

Key words: *counterparts, resolution, demonstrations, economic, political.*

Introduction

The region now called Ethiopia has been the home of diverse linguistic groups since time immemorial. These were the Semitic languages of the northern and central highlands, notably Amharic and Tigrean, the Cushitic languages of the lowlands and of the south-western, central and south-eastern highlands, notably Oromo, Afar and Somali the Sidama languages of the central and southern highlands and, the Nilotic languages of the periphery areas along the Sudanese frontier.

The outbreak of the 1974 revolution provoked Ethiopian workers to go on a general strike led by the CELU, which added to the intensity of the revolution. On February 18, 1974, teachers went on strike for higher wages and in protest of the education reform. On the same day, taxi drivers also went on strike against a 50% increase in the price of gasoline. The teachers and drivers were also supported by students, unemployed youth and some segments of the urban population, who were disappointed with the economic crisis that prevailed in the country.

Material and Methods

This widespread demonstration paralyzed the economic and administrative structure of the capital. Police forces were too hesitant to quell the mass uprising. Consequently, the emperor announced in his televised address that his government reduced the gasoline price from 50% to 25% on February 23, 1974. The cab drivers' strike undoubtedly played a significant role in forcing the government to change its decision in response to the public discontent, probably for the first time in the country’s history. The strike forced Prime Minister Aklilu Habtewold and his cabinet to resign in February 27, 1974. Although the CELU did not play a significant role in coordinating the strike, it bluntly denounced the subsequent police repression and the government’s undemocratic actions against the demonstrators. CELU held General Council meeting from 23 February to 1 March, 1974 and discussed the situation of the

country in general and the position of the government toward workers’ demands in particular. At the end of the meeting, the General Council adopted a resolution that included a list of sixteen demands. Representing the Ethiopian workers, seventeen executive members of the General Council, led by the deputy president, Alem Abdi, signed the resolution and presented it to the Ministry of National Community Development and Prime Minister Lij Endalkachew Makonnen, who came to power on 28 February, 1974. In addition, the CELU warned the government with a general strike if these demands were not adequately met within 48 hours.

They hoped that the general strike would ultimately improve the socio-economic conditions of the workers and strengthen their bargaining power. The sixteen lists of demands focused on minimum wages, salary scale, salary adjustments, exemption from income tax on workers' retirement funds, pension systems, amending regulations on layoffs without adequate cause or justification, strikes, and labor publications. The list also included some of the demands of the civilian left: free education, price control, temporary employment, job opportunities and priority and the formation of new unions.

Results

However, among the sixteen lists of demands, some of the demands such as price control, sector review, employment opportunities and priorities for Ethiopians and free education are purely radical political agendas. The government, especially the Prime Minister, hesitated to solve the problem with the pretext that most of the demands require the decision of the Council of Ministers, but the cabinet was not yet formed. Most importantly, the Prime Minister belittled CELU’s determination to conduct a general strike. As a result, his government failed to take the CELU’s threat for a general strike seriously and respond appropriately. Nevertheless, he worked hard to place the Ground Forces, Territorial Army and Police under a single command to control the precarious security situation in the country.

The threatening letter was sent to the prime minister while CELU’s president, Beyene Solomon was in Europe to attend the World Peace Conference and the International Labor Organization meeting. Upon his return, the government ordered the president to call off the general strike. But Beyene did not try to convince the members of the General Council to cancel the general strike; instead, he worked with them to make it happen. The Prime Minister together with some other ministers gave a series of policy decisions on the sixteen lists of demands and strongly urged members of the confederation to abide by these decisions and call off the strike. In their statement, the Council of Ministers specifically referred to each demand and said that either decision would be made on each item within three to six months or that draft legislation would be submitted to the Parliament in cases where legal provisions were needed. Endalkachew’s lastminute attempt to negotiate was rejected by the confederation, and some 100,000 determined workers participated in the first general strike, which took place from March 7-10, 1974. The general strike showed the extent

to which workers were radicalized. The workers took the opportunity to demonstrate their militant and radical attitude toward the government. The CELU also voiced purely political goals on behalf of teachers, students and the general public. However, Seleshi, Ottaway, and Lefort argued that CELU was not ready for radical reforms, but rather was working hard to fulfill its own corporate interests and advocate the formation of more unions in semi government owned and government owned industrial enterprises. Seleshi further pointed out that the general strike was only to improve the socioeconomic and material conditions of the workers and did not target radical political issues. He described the political questions raised in the general strike as simply general issues.

Ottaway and Lefort also argued that the CELU was not attracted to radical reform, but aimed to fulfill its corporate interests and increase its bargaining power. Ottaway further emphasized that «...the CELU leadership was clearly not yet interested in launching a revolutionary labor movement». Rather, the CELU leadership sought in the general strike to redress its specific grievances primarily wage increases to adjust for inflation and government recognition of workers’ right to strike and organize. The CELU president also noted that the strike had no political objectives. In contrast to the aforementioned arguments, however, general strike strengthened the militancy of the workers and led them to advocate very radical ideas in their demonstrations. For example, they demanded the removal of the managers of several industrial companies, free education, price controls, freedom of expression and strike.

Discussion

These were all radical issues raised by the workers, and some of them were also put forward by other civilian left groups. In fact, the general strike in itself can be considered as a radical step that was strongly influenced by the tides of the revolution, because the CELU had never held a general strike before. Likewise, Patrick Gilkes noted that the general strike increased the workers’ militancy and intensified radicalism in Ethiopia. He further noted that «...such a radicalization of the industrial proletariat is of considerable importance considering the class divisions of the Ethiopian state and introduce a new dimension into the political possibilities». Kiflu, an insider, argued that «...the role of the Ethiopian workers at this stage of the movement became more pronounced when the Ethiopian working class, led by its more radical wing of labor leaders, staged a four-day strike». Bahru also argued that the CELU’s four-day general strike testified to its transformation from a state of extreme inertia or lethargy into a militant organization. Markakis and Nega further noted that even the radical socio-economic and political reforms of the Derg regime were all demanded by the radical popular movement.

Conclusion

However, the government refused to abide by the agreement reached earlier at the end of the general strike. Thus, the CELU held General Council meeting from July 6-10, 1974, and passed a resolution. The General Council agreed that the government

was still indifferent to the workers’ problems and that the promises were only on paper. At the end of the meeting, the General Council wrote a letter to the Prime Minister’s office expressing its dissatisfaction with the government’s very slow response to the workers’ demands. In its letter, the General Council stressed that if the government did not solve the problems by the end of August, it would submit the matter to the General Council, which will meet in early September, to take further strict decisions, including a general strike.

Acknowledgement

This, the 1974 revolution and the general strike marked not only the zenith of the workers’ organized actions in defense of their rights, but also showed how much they were influenced and radicalized by the ideologies of other civilian left groups. The general strike strengthened workers’ unity for collective action and helped CELU increase the number of affiliated unions. It also forced the government to accept the workers’ demands, even if they were not fully implemented. Thus, in March 10, 1974, an agreement was reached between the government and the leaders of the confederation at the Jubilee Palace. Emperor Haile Selassie I approved the agreement (Ethiopian Herald, March 12, 1974).

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