

STRIKES IN THE NORWEGIAN CANNING INDUSTRY 1901-1925

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This paper examines the background to the various strikes in the Norwegian canning industry from the perspective of both workers/unions and management. Stavanger, as the centre of gravity for the industry and the seat of the Cannery Owners' Association, receives most attention, but other centres (Bergen, Trondheim) and some provincial hubs (Haugesund) are also mentioned.

The main grievances of the workforce, as often, were long hours and low wages (not least compared to similar industries), piece-work rates, minimal holidays (summer was the sprat-canning season), dangerous and malodorous working conditions, and the lack of a secret ballot system.

The gradual formation of unions for tinsmiths, male and female cannery workers, and the rise and fall of their memberships, are considered.

The main content of the paper treats the various strikes with regard to the demands and tactics of the workforce, the response of management, newspaper coverage at the time, and the gains (if any) achieved. There were strikes in 1901, 1912, 1917, 1918, 1920, 1921 and 1925.

In summary, the issues were as follows:

1901: Management demand for increased working hours

Piece-work rates

Women solderers to be permitted?

1912: Workers' demand for reduced working hours plus increased hourly rate

1917: Trondheim: piece-work rates, increased hourly rate

«Unfair» sackings, increased wages.

1917: Stavanger: Reduced hours, increased wages.

1917: Stavanger: fishermen's strike. Demanding increased price for fish.

1918: Stavanger: refusal to undertake piece-work. Increased hourly rate

1920: Stavanger: Tariff agreement ran out. Strike action also included Bergen, Trondheim and Haugesund. Reduced hours, increased wages.

1921: Stavanger: Cannery owners unable to pay wages, suggested reduction in wages. Unacceptable. Other unions came out in sympathy.

1925: 10% increase in wages achieved.

Timeline of gains/losses:

Year	Working hours before	Working hours after	Hourly rate (men)	Hourly rate (women)	Piece-work
1901	56	58	+ 5 øre	+ 5 øre	
1912	58	54.5		15 øre	
1917	(Requested 48)	(Offered 54)			
1918	53.6	48	+ 15 øre	+ 15 øre	+ 10%
1920	48	46.5	Kr.1.65	85 øre (min.)	
(1921)			(Offered 1.40)	(Offered 70 øre)	
1925			+ 10%	+ 10%	

A concluding paragraph points out the underlying local and international economic situation, with, locally, intense competition for international markets, and, internationally, the turbulent economic conditions following the First World War, and, not least, the increasing momentum for women's rights. There was no «win-win» solution, and the strike of 1925 was by no means the end of the story.

As an appendix, a translation of poem by the modern Norwegian poet Gunnar Roalkvam is included, on the case of Nils Asgautsen, a cooper employed at one of the canneries, who exercised his right to march in the 1911 1st. May (workers') parade, and was sacked for so doing.

The paper is illustrated with pictures of union banners, paragraphs from cannery Regulations, statistical tables and quotations from the local newspapers.