

Mercenaries as Laborers: A Mutiny, Labor Conflict, and Strike in Polybius's Truceless War?

In 241 BCE Carthage's army mutinied against its employer. Unpaid, anxious, and fatigued from over twenty years of warfare in the First Punic War, the army instigated a conflict known variously as the Truceless War, the Mercenary War, and the Libyan War (Polyb. 1.65-88). The latter two titles point to the multi-ethnic character of the army, composed of Libyans, mercenaries of many ethnicities, native Carthaginians, and allied-subject peoples. Historically, analyses of the war have seen it as either a Libyan rebellion or the mercenaries' greedy attempt to extort their Carthaginian employers. However, I argue that the Truceless War was first and foremost a labor conflict, not entirely different from a strike and collective bargaining action by employees against employer.

Certainly the Truceless War was a labor conflict, and one of considerable complexity. To start, the conflict began with a general walkout of the army, a loose blockade (I draw similarities to a picket line here), and a series of negotiations over pay and provisions (Polyb.1.65-70). As (Hoyos, 2019, pp. 51-62) shows, these pay negotiations were clearly complex and reminiscent of what we might see from the collective bargaining of traditional workers. Complexity of the situation was further exacerbated as the bargaining featured multiple different groups, each with different goals and motives: the Libyans, who wanted better treatment and better terms of service, the mercenaries—Iberians, Celts, Italians, and Balearics—who wanted backpay and (I argue) job security, the *μικέλλενες*, or mixed-Hellenes, who wanted both payment and security, and others still (Polyb.1.67.7). Each group was composed of smaller groups, all tied to each other through the process of collective bargaining with the Carthaginian state, until the breakout of

violence in late 241 BCE. In almost all senses, this was a complex collective bargaining action. And, for those hoping to sign back on with the Carthaginians, it was little different from a strike.

Historically, there has been academic hesitation to see soldiers (such as those in the Truceless War) as laborers capable of striking or bargaining. Connections which can easily be drawn between ancient militaries and labor movements have not been drawn. Only a few analyses even exist which treat soldiers as laborers themselves, with most works on labor and militaries concentrating on early modern armies and navies (Field and Freeman, 2011). In the case of the Truceless War, no author has framed the conflict as one chiefly over labor rights. Hoyos (2019), the most complete work on the Truceless War, comes close to such an analysis, giving a strong analysis of the motivations of the Carthaginian mutineers, but still lacks any designation of the conflict as a labor conflict.

Such a designation is backed by modern analyses on militaries and labor. Lammers (1969) notes that strikes and early modern mutinies often have the same goals and methods, with the majority of both advocating for better working conditions over secession or overthrow. I argue that this extends to the mutinous Carthaginian army as well, which (at first) sought workplace advantages rather than secession or overthrow. I further argue that, in the case of the army in the Truceless War, any distinction between laborers and soldiers is arbitrary; as Levy (2007) shows, the largest difference between soldiers and civilian laborers is that soldiers are often paid in symbolic rewards in addition to material rewards. Yet Polybius shows that the mutineers sought entirely material rewards for service, bringing them even closer to their civilian counterparts. And, it is clear that strikes, labor struggles, and collective bargaining can be a violent process, such as the process seen in the Truceless War. Indeed, Gourevitch (2018) asserts that most strikes, by their very nature, need to use coercive tactics and violate basic liberties in

order to succeed. A strike with the threat of violence, such as that of the mutinous army in the lead up to the Truceless War, would not be out of place in a handbook of famous strikes.

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