

9.4 Egyptian Workers Go on Strike

Sources: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deir_el-Medina; <https://deirelmedinaktpl.weebly.com/the-workers-strike.html>; J. Romer (1984). *Ancient Lives: The Story of the Pharaohs' Tombmakers*.

Background: Deir el-Medina is an ancient Egyptian village that was home to the artisans working on the tombs in the Valley of the Kings along the Nile River in roughly 1500-1000 BC. The settlement was known as *Set maat* or the Place of Truth. The workers were known as the Servants in the Place of Truth. At its peak, the community contained around sixty-eight houses. Walls were made of mudbrick, built on top of stone foundations. Surviving texts record the events of daily life rather than major historical incidents.



Personal letters reveal much about the social relations and family life of the villagers. The settlement was home to a mixed population of Egyptians, Nubians and Asiatics. They were employed as stone-cutters, plasterers, water-carriers, and laborers. The workers and their families were not slaves but free citizens with recourse to the justice system. We believe a large proportion of the community, including women, had basic literacy. During the reign of Ramesses IX (1129-1111 BC) the Deir el-Medina laborers, employed at the Egyptian Royal Necropolis, angered by delays in supplies including food, conducted the first recorded labor action or strike in history. Labor conflicts at Deir el-Medina, however, date back to the reign of Ramesses III (c. 1170 BC). They are mentioned in surviving papyrus documents showing a letter to the vizier, a high-ranking Egyptian official, complaining about lack of wheat rations. Village leaders tried to convince the workers to return to work but they refused until their grievances were addressed.

A. Report by Scribe Neferhotep: “We are impoverished. All the supplies for us that are from the treasury, the granary, and the storehouse have allowed to be exhausted. The stone [of the Palace of Beauty] is not light. One and a half hundredweight of grain [about 168lbs] has been taken away from us...[i.e. is missing from the ration] ... make for us a means of keeping alive ... we are dying, we do not live at all.”

B. Report by Scribe Amennakhte: “Payments were ultimately delayed due to poor conditions and later that same year, men of the two gangs stopped work and marched together to one of the royal mortuary temples [Tuthmosis III].”

Instructions: Write a 500-word newspaper-style account reporting about the events at Deir el-Medina.