Three cheers for data! Interviews with Beverly Silver and Sjaak van der Velden

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ABSTRACT

As labor historians try to move from nationally centered to global understandings of the development of workers' movements and labor protest, one problem they have to deal with is the question of how to gather and assess data that has a global reach. The questions this provokes have to do with not only compatibility and representativeness, but also with the basic accuracy of the kinds of data we have traditionally used to measure labor conflict. The two interviews below (both conducted over e-mail during the fall of 2012) address different aspects of the problem of accurate, global-level data on labor conflict. Both Sjaak van der Velden and Beverly Silver have worked extensively with large data projects that aim to offer new tools for researchers researching labor conflict locally and globally. As their own projects – which they also discuss here – demonstrate, both the way in which data are gathered and the ability to manipulate data on a large scale can have a major impact on our interpretation of the patterns of labor and class conflict.

KEYWORDS

Global history, Gathering and assessing data, Measuring labour conflict, Large data projects

As labour historians try to move from nationally-centred to global understandings of the development of workers' movements and labour protest, one problem they have to deal with is the question of how to gather and assess data that has a global reach. The questions this provokes have to do with not only compatibility and representativeness, but also with the basic accuracy of the kinds of data we have traditionally used to measure labour conflict.

The two interviews below (both conducted over e-mail during the fall of 2012) address different aspects of the problem of accurate, global-level data on labour conflict. Both Sjaak van der Velden and Beverly Silver have worked extensively with large data projects that aim to offer new tools for researchers researching labour conflict locally and globally. As their own projects – which they also discuss here – demonstrate, both the way in which data are gathered and the ability to manipulate data on a large scale can have a major impact on our interpretation of the patterns of labour and class conflict.

About the interviewees

Sjaak van der Velden's dissertation work was based on the massive amount of data he gathered on strikes in the Netherlands, and subsequently he has endeavoured to encourage the collection of similarly detailed data for other countries as well. Van der Velden is currently the coordinator of the Labour Conflicts project, based at the International Institute of Social History (IISH).

The Labour Conflicts project aims to gather a moderated list of data files on strikes, lockouts and other labour conflicts. Currently there are data collections on the website for time periods of varying lengths for France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom, Russia, Ghana, and Argentina.

Beverly Silver was involved in the creation of a large-scale database on global labour conflict now known as the World Labour Group database, constructed at the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems, and Civilizations at SUNY-Binghamton. The database, which is constructed from the reporting of labour conflict in *The Times* of London and *The New York Times,* covers labour conflict in 168 countries between 1870 and 1996.

Silver draws on the World Labour Group database in her critically acclaimed book, *Forces of Labour: Workers' Movements and Globalization Since 1870* (University of Cambridge Press, 2003). Silver is currently a professor of Sociology at Johns Hopkins University.

Interview with Sjaak van der Velden

VH: Can you explain the basic motivation behind the project – why is this type of data important and what problem does it aim to solve?

SV: Strikes are in my opinion still the most open and common sign of existing contradictions between capital and labour. If you want to understand the development of capitalist society you cannot ignore the existence or absence of labour conflicts.

However, doing strike research is often a time consuming affair because official statistics and ILO data derived from these are only published on an aggregate level (although there are of course a few exceptions to this general rule – for instance, Canada and Brazil). The focus on the aggregate level has its roots in two different concerns: the first, ideological, and the second, budgetary. The International Labour Organization (ILO) decided in the late 1920s to begin to focus on the economic consequences of strikes and lockouts: that is, what is the cost of strikes. That's an ideological decision – what is important about labour conflict is its impact on the economy. In any case, the side effect is that there is little call for more than aggregate data. On the other hand, national statistical bureaus had for budgetary reasons already stopped publishing micro-level data on labour conflict, and welcomed the ILO's decision to focus on the aggregate. As a consequence, now many countries publish only data that combines strikes and lockouts and barely note any other conflict.

Combining strike and lockout data obscures the picture. Strikes and lockouts are weaponry used by opposing sides in the social struggle, so we should always separate the two. And of course other forms of labour conflicts (absenteeism, theft, demonstrations etc.) also indicate the state of affairs. During fascism, it was almost lethal to go on strikes, for instance, but perhaps workers used other means to express their discontent.

So there's the level of accurately representing what is going on in a particular situation. Further, though, global comparative data may reveal broader patterns or indicate intriguing correlations. This requires compatible and accurate data, however. For example, I wrote an article together with Wessel Visser from South Africa in which we showed that despite the big difference between the Netherlands and South Africa – especially during the apartheid years – the strike history showed more similarities than expected. We of course used aggregate data, but maybe the use of microdata might give an explanation for this phenomenon. It looks as if there is a global trend in the struggle between capital and labour that has its national peculiarities.

VH: If I understand correctly, your work on Dutch strikes is something of a model for the Labour Conflicts project. In that work you go beyond official statistics and use reports in newspapers, books, and pamphlets as well as in trade union and chamber of commerce reports to create a kind of a shadow record of labour conflict in the Netherlands between 1830 and 1995. Can you elaborate on how microdata of this type help address the problems with official strike data?

SV: That's correct. My database was regarded at the IISH as a good example of data collection that covers a long period of time. In my database I try to distinguish between strikes, lockouts and other forms.

The analysis of the different forms of conflict may change received wisdom. I discovered, for example, that although the literature on the union movement commonly depicts the years 1904–1910 as an era of working-class aggression, that is not actually true. No, these were years when aggressive *employers* locked out more workers than were on strike. Official statistics used by most labour historians do not distinguish between strikes and lockouts (although the original publications in those years did) so all they see is a growth in conflict activity. But it was the employers who took the initiative.

There are a few other reasons, too, why microdata can shed new light on strike activity. Only microdata can help correct the errors in official data and make these suitable for comparison. Official data collections are often incompatible because definitions vary. This is so despite the existence of official guidelines designed by the ILO.

And there are holes in the data. ILO data starts only in 1927 and for many countries the data is spotty. You will not find data on strikes during the Hitler regime, but German researchers have written about strikes during fascism. The same is true for the DDR [East Germany] during the pre-1989 era.

In a similar vein, the United States since the early 1980s has excluded from official statistics all strikes with fewer than 1,000 participants. This gives a very biased picture of labour conflicts in that country. The statistics still cover most of the days not worked, but investigation of labour conflicts is about more than lost days. A small strike can have an enormous social impact that does not register in the official statistics. It all has to do with the aim of most official statistical bureaus to get a picture of the economic consequences of strikes and lockouts.

In the ideal case, we would have access to microdata on many labour conflicts from a number of countries, and then we might be able to redefine these according to one standard definition.

Finally, microdata can help discover why workers go on strike. Aggregate data can only give general pointers (e.g. metal workers are more strike prone than workers in retail trade), but with microdata we may perhaps gain a more fine-grained understanding of workers' behaviour. But this has to be proven. Maria Bergman from Sweden and I have tried to do something like this, and our piece will be published in a report of the meeting I called when we started the Labour Conflicts project.

VH: Since we also have an interview with Beverly Silver here, would you mind commenting on the somewhat different approach that the World Labour Research Working Group (WLG) that she's been associated with takes to gathering comparative labour unrest data? Did you know of Silver's work when the IISH project was started and did it influence your thoughts on collecting data at all?

SV: Yes, I knew the project. I think there are some problems with it. First of all, there is the question of definition. In our database, there are strict criteria for labour conflicts, whereas the WLG definition implicitly depends on the definitions used by the journalists of two newspapers, *The New York Times* and *The Times* of London.

The other problem is that relying on one British and one U.S. newspaper will inevitably bypass much information. First, these newspapers look at the world from a Western perspective, and second, newspapers are looking for big news. When the tsunami struck Asia a few years ago it was understandable that this news was regarded as more important than news about some strikes or demonstrations in e.g. Peru. It is also understandable that in the midst of the New Economy hype during the nineties, newspapers didn't pay much attention to strikes and lockouts. After all, these were regarded as a thing of the past, soon about to disappear.

So, despite the great effort undertaken by the Working Group, their database tells us more about the view of the two newspapers towards the importance of labour conflicts than about what actually happened.

VH: Incidentally, have you checked how the WLG data for the Netherlands compares with yours?

SV: No, at the time I didn't have access to this data, only to the results as they were published in the Review of the Fernand Braudel Center. But I suspect that statistically it would be pointless because the Netherlands is a very small country that will probably not show up often in the two *Times*.

VH: OK, so let's move on to the details of the Labour Conflicts project. Tell me a little about the basics.

SV: The project started in 2008 as part of a wider project: Global Labour History. Because the bigger project was intended to act as collaboratory, and most researchers on strikes seemed not to be interested in collaboration, the Strikes project continued separately. Despite the current crisis the study of strikes is still not very popular among mainstream historians.

In the Global Labour History project, the main goal is to change the focus of labour history in the direction of global history. It is an offspring of the ideas presented by Marcel van der Linden and Jan Lucassen about Global Labour History.

The entire project was funded externally and the ultimate goal is to collect comparable data on labour history. At first the idea was to collect time series but this soon proved to be too difficult. So the focus changed to a few sample years like 1500, 1750 and 1950. An international group of researchers under the guidance of Prof. Karin Hofmeester met several times and collected that data.

The Labour Conflicts project was also originally envisioned as collaboratory, but the researchers I contacted were more interested in sharing data than in collaborating. So they just sent me their data. Then I suggested to the management of the Global Labour History project that we could change the aim of the labour conflicts group a little: we could make it a repository where researchers can store their data.

VH: Do you have plans to create a master database that would incorporate the individual collections now linked to from the site?

SV: Originally this was the idea. But suppliers of data were mostly not in a position to use the format in a Microsoft Access environment I built. So, now data comes in various ways and gets put on the website as it is.

When we started the project, I called a meeting in Amsterdam in 2008, and it attracted participants from Russia, Ghana and Brazil, among others (a report will be published online this year by the IISH). The discussions and comments were pretty fruitful, but other than that, the meeting didn't really get the project much further.

The problem is that we are looking for microdata on a time series scale. There aren't that many researchers working with such data. They either use aggregate data or just descriptions of a limited number of strikes. The Russian project on our website is one of the few exceptions to this.

So I've just kept on collecting data myself (e.g. on Germany, together with Heiner Dribbusch) and asking people to send data. This last has to be repeated every now and then, because people forget...

It's basically a matter of better this than nothing. The ideal situation would be that all data were part of one database. Maybe in the future when we have demonstrated that it is possible to collect a substantial amount of data from different countries and all parts of the globe, we can apply for additional funding to rework that data into a coherent database.

VH: Do you know of any research so far that has made substantial comparative use of the data coordinated by the project?

SV: Unfortunately I don't know of such use of the data. This is understandable because it is too scarce and dispersed. Some researchers have used individual data collections from the repository, however.

VH: What is the current status of the project?

SV: Right now I am working on the project at a very slow pace on a freelance basis - I was originally employed for about a year and a half on a part-time basis, but now we basically have run out of funding. The limited resources we have are mostly devoted to keeping the website alive until we can regenerate the project. At the IISH we intend to apply for new funds to get the project off the ground again, but it's a matter of priorities. These are hard times financially, also for the IISH.

Meanwhile, the website is up and people are welcome to take a look at it and make use of the data that is now there. And of course, on behalf of the IISH I would be pleased to see more researchers send their data to the repository.

Interview with Beverly Silver

VH: Can you talk briefly about the aims that the World Labour Group (WLG) database project had/has?

BS: When the World Labour Group (WLG) first formed back in the 1980s, it was already common to hear people claim that there was a worldwide crisis of labour movements. But while labour movements at that time were clearly on the defensive in the United States, this was not the case everywhere in the world. At that time, there were strong and effective mass labour movements in countries that had been industrializing rapidly in the previous decade, ranging from Brazil and South Africa to Poland and South Korea. In other words, we could observe a geographically uneven pattern of labour movement strength/weakness corresponding to the geographically uneven nature of industrialization/deindustrialization.

These observations brought us to one of the key hypotheses that was to animate the WLG project – that is, "where capital goes, labour-capital conflict follows shortly." This hypothesis contrasts sharply with the dominant "race-to-the-bottom" narrative that sees globalization as producing a relentless downward spiral in the power of labour worldwide.

But it was not possible for us to "test" this hypothesis (or the alternative hypothesis) with the existing data compilations on labour unrest. Among other things, official strike statistics for periods longer than a decade or two existed for only a handful of wealthy countries. So our research group set about creating a database on labour unrest throughout the world from 1870-1990 based upon reports from the leading newspapers of the two world hegemonic powers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – *The New York Times* and *The Times* (London). We wrote down every international report of labour unrest from the Indexes of the two newspaper sources. The result was a database with 91,947 reports of labour unrest around the world including the type of unrest (e.g., strike, demonstration, riot, factory occupation), the location (country, industry) and date.

This data provided the empirical basis for the analysis of the relationship between labour movements and capital mobility in *Forces of Labor*. Working with the World Labour Group data, I was able to show that capital relocation did not produce a simple race-to-the-bottom for labour worldwide. To be sure, when faced with strong labour movements, capitalists have followed a recurrent strategy of relocating production to new sites in search of cheap and disciplined labour. But strong and effective labour movements emerged in each new site of production within less than a generation. We could see this clearly for the leading global industry of the twentieth century (automobiles) and for the leading global industry of the nineteenth century (textiles), the focus of chapters 2 and 3, respectively.

From the analysis of the historical pattern we were also able to make a strong prediction (which has proven in many respects to be accurate) – that by the first decade of the twenty-first century we would see strong new labour movements emerging in the sites that manufacturing capital had been moving to massively in the 1990s – most notably China.

In sum, one of the main overall organizing hypotheses of the World Labour Group project was: "where capital goes, labour-capital conflict follows". Here, our focus was on the interrelationship between *world-economic transformations* and labour movement dynamics. But something funny happened once we collected the newspaper data for the entire 1870-1990 period. When we graphed the data as a time series of total number of reports of labour unrest in the world, something we hadn't been particularly looking for when we went into the data collection project jumped out at us. The two highest peaks in the times series of world labour unrest – by far – were the years immediately following the First World War and the Second World War. We had not been thinking about the relationship between geopolitical dynamics and world labour unrest when we initiated the data collection project, but investigating this relationship – in particular the

relationship between the world-scale patterning of labour unrest and world hegemonic cycles (of which world wars are a particularly morbid manifestation) – became central to the World Labour Group project (and the main focus of chapter 4 of *Forces of Labor*).

VH: Is the WLG database freely available to any researcher, and if so, where and how can it be accessed?

BS: An Excel file with the number of reports of labour unrest per year from 1870-1996 for each country is freely available. Requests should be sent to wlg@jhu.edu.

VH: Can you respond to the critique that relying on two Western newspapers does not provide an accurate picture of world labour unrest?

BS: I think the question about the reliability of the two Western newspapers – *The New York Times* and *The Times* (London) – needs to be answered in two parts. First is the question of the reliability of *any* newspaper or combination of newspapers for creating indicators of labour unrest. A separate question is the reliability of these two newspapers in particular. Let me deal with these in turn.

One important thing to point out is that we never expected these two newspapers (or any combination of newspaper sources) to provide a complete census or count of all labour unrest events in the world. Newspapers only report on a small fraction of the labour unrest that occurs. Rather than using the image of a counting machine we should use the image of a thermometer to think about the utility of labour unrest databases created from newspapers, including the WLG database – that is, as a tool for understanding when/where the "temperature" of labour unrest is relatively high/low relative to other times and places. Thus, times/places with a relatively high number of newspaper reports of labour unrest in the database should be times/places where the labour movement is relatively "hot".

But what do we mean by "hot"? This brings me to another point about the difference between databases of labour unrest created from newspaper reports and official government-collected strikes series. Government-collected strike statistics generally include all strikes (aim at a complete census of all events). Newspapers, in contrast, tend to be biased against reporting routine events (such as routinized and institutionalized strike activity). They are more likely to see as "news" events that are non-normative, involving actions (e.g., illegal strikes, particularly violent strikes) or actors (e.g., groups that have been previously quiescent) or outcomes (e.g., significant disruption to "business as usual").

If you are working from a theoretical perspective that assumes that most important social change happens as a result of non-normative waves of social conflict (rather than during periods of routinized and institutionalized social conflict) then the bias of the newspapers in favour of the latter actually make them a better source for identifying times/places of transformative waves of labour unrest than official strike statistics.

The second part of the question is the reliability of the two newspapers used to create the World Labour Group database – *The New York Times* and *The Times* (London). Our goal was to get a picture of labour unrest worldwide from the late-nineteenth century to the present. Adding up country-level sources would have been unfeasible from the time-input point of view. It also raises methodological problems related to how to weight the different sources in creating a single indicator. Instead we chose to rely on the leading newspapers of the two world hegemonic powers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – the United Kingdom and the United States. The two sources had both the capacity and the motivation to report on significant events of labour unrest worldwide. (It is important to note that we only included their international reports; we excluded reports of labour unrest in the United States from the *New York Times* data collection and we excluded reports of labour unrest in the United Kingdom from *The Times* data collection.)

The simplest answer to the question about the reliability of a database from these two sources is that "the proof of the pudding is in the eating". We conducted seven country reliability tests (for Italy, China, South Africa, Argentina, Egypt, the United States and Germany). Here we compared the peaks/troughs in labour unrest identified by the World Labour Group database with the peaks/troughs identified by official and unofficial long-run data series (if they existed for the country) as well as with the peaks/troughs identifiable from the secondary literature on labour movements for those countries. We found that the World Labour Group database did an excellent job of identifying the peaks/troughs of labour unrest for each of these countries. (We published the results as a special issue of the Fernand Braudel Center's journal, *Review* (volume XVIII, number 1, Winter 1995).

Moreover, we found that the range of countries for which we have a significant number of reports of labour unrest largely confirmed our expectation that we could get a global picture from these two sources. Not surprisingly there were some gaps—for example, we don't get a satisfactory picture of labour unrest in French colonial and post-colonial Africa. Adding the international reports from a major French newspaper might help remedy this blind spot in the current WLG database.

In the meantime, with the WLG database, *as with all data sources no matter what there origin,* we need to always keep in minds its limitations and biases, and not jump to any conclusions that cannot be sustained given the current state of the data collection. Such a cautionary approach to using data is not something that is required just when using newspapers as a source of data. It is required no matter what the data. It is no less important when using official government collected statistics on strikes – which have a whole set of problems of their own. Researchers tend to take government collected statistics at face value, but awareness of their strengths and weaknesses and an assessment of what is actually being measured is as important when working with these as with new databases created from newspaper sources.

VH: What do you see as the main benefit of databases like the WLG? What makes them worth the substantial investment of time and resources?

BS: Many important questions about the impact of globalization on labour (and vice-versa) cannot be asked, much less answered without a database that captures the whole. In order to get a picture of the whole, it was necessary to produce a new database rather than rely on existing compilations.

Creating new databases is indeed a huge investment of time and resources. But there are also huge drawbacks to relying on existing compilations. Long-run official strike statistics exist only for a handful of countries, most of which are wealthy western countries. This has led researchers interested in long-term patterns of strike activity to focus only on a handful of countries for which data exists. Sometimes researchers will attempt to generalize to all cases (or to the world) from this handful of cases. But, doing this is not an easily defensible move. If we work from the premise that historical capitalism is a singular process that results in uneven local level outcomes across time-space, then generalizing from a few cases is bound to mislead us. The dependency theory insight that development and underdevelopment are two sides of the same coin (and therefore one cannot generalize from the experience of Britain or Western Europe to the rest of the world in trying to understand and explain "modernization"), can be applied to thinking about labour movement outcomes across time and space. Rather than thinking of each local or national labour movement as a discrete case, independent from all other cases, local labour movements should be understood as being linked to each other through the dynamics of global capitalism. So, the reasons to invest in new long-term world-scale databases on labour and other forms of social unrest are compelling, notwithstanding the huge investment in time and resources needed to produce them.

VH: A reviewer of *Forces of Labor* noted the absence of struggles in the sphere of consumption from the data. Did you consider the question of e.g. labour boycotts or other forms of consumer-based protest that can be construed as labour unrest?

BS: The World Labour Group database is limited to reports of protests where workers themselves are the protagonists. Historically, workers have organized consumer boycotts (the grape boycott organized by US farmworkers in the 1970s is one obvious example) and such worker organized boycotts are included in the World Labour Group database. I have not drilled down into the data to find out how many of the total mentions of labour unrest would fall in this category. I am sure there are many reports of this type, but it would be a tiny percentage of the total (which I am also guessing is "reliable" in terms of the overall impact of worker-initiated consumer boycotts in bringing about major turning points in labour-capital relations).

Because our goal was to identify the role that workers *as protagonists* play in bringing about social-economic and political change at the local and global level, if the reported boycott campaign appears to have originated as solidarity from consumers (with workers cast in the role of powerless victims who can only be helped by activism from outside the working class), then these boycotts were not included in the World Labour Group database. Of course, there is a whole interesting array of questions on cross-class

alliances with labour movements that could be made more central to the project. Indeed, we have recurrently considered expanding the database in ways that capture the importance of cross-class alliances in bringing about significant social change (e.g., links between workers and nationalist movements, workers and student movements). To do so we would not want to blur the analytical distinction between labour unrest and other forms of unrest (including solidarity with workers); but we would need to expand the data collection to include protest non-labour actors and then analyse the relationships among these different actors. This, needless to say, would involve another major (and analytically complex) data collection project that we have toyed with undertaking, but have not yet done.

VH: What about the argument that a broad-scope vision such as that in _Forces of Labor_ - or indeed, implicitly in the WLG database - unduly obscures the impact of local-level developments and/or local agency? Do you consider that to be a problem?

BS: Virtually all the labour unrest events in the WLG database are local (e.g., strikes and occupations in factories, demonstrations and riots in specific neighbourhoods or cities). In its totality, the database captures the long-term world-scale patterning of local level agency. So I don't think the project is obscuring or devaluing the importance of local agency. Indeed, a key argument in _Forces of Labor_ is that actions by workers at the local level have been critical in shaping the global, including the patterning of international capital mobility, the rise and decline of leading industries on a world-scale, and the social content of world hegemonies. Labour unrest is shaped by _and shapes_ world-economic and political processes.

What is true is that you get very little in the way of details, depth or context from newspaper reports. So the compilation and cleaning of the newspaper database – although it is in itself a major research task – is only a fraction of the work needed in order to analyse the interrelationships between local labour unrest and the historical transformation of global capitalism. The WLG database gives us a time-space patterning of labour unrest by city/country and industry from the late-nineteenth century to the present. From the WLG database we have been able to identify a number of interesting patterns to explain—patterns that one would not have been able to see from data collections that were shorter in time span or narrower in geographical scope. So, for example, we were able to see the shift over time in the epicentre of labour unrest in the mass production automobile industry from the United States (1930s and 1940s) to Western Europe (1960s and 1970s) to Brazil, South Africa and South Korea (late 1970s and 1980s)—and as we update the database to the present, we are starting to clearly see at least one (and perhaps two) new epicentres of labour unrest among mass production automobile workers – that is, China and India. Likewise, we were able to see a clear difference in the overall patterning of labour unrest during the decades of crisis of British world hegemony versus the period of stable US world hegemony – and as we update the database to the present (a period of crisis of US world hegemony) we are beginning to

see the re-emergence of labour unrest dynamics that are reminiscent of the late-nineteenth and early-twenty-first centuries.

But in order to explain the patterns observed we need a wealth of additional empirical and theoretical inputs. On the empirical side, we need to stand on more fine grained materials gathered from local labour histories for the times/places identified as epicentres of labour unrest in our database; we need to stand on national level histories on the relationship between war, revolution, nationalism/internationalism, the rise/decline of the welfare state and labour unrest, and on histories of individual business enterprises and leading global industries that emerge from our database as key sites of labour unrest. I already mentioned automobiles and textiles, but the importance of transportation jumps out as well from the WLG data as does the importance of the "education industry" more recently. And of course, none of this "data" speaks for itself. To make sense of it we need theories about the how local agency and the global processes shape each other; about how the economic and political dynamics of global capitalism are both shaped by and shape workers and workers' movements.

VH: Do you see any recent developments as clarifying or modifying your thoughts (as expressed in *Forces of Labor*) on the present state of the labour movement or the potential of particular sectors to emerge as key in labour struggles?

BS: The ongoing major wave of labour unrest in China over the past several years is in line with the expectations expressed in *Forces of Labor* – that is, where capital goes, labour-capital conflict follows shortly. While manufacturing capital, including automobile capital, had flowed in torrents to China, in part attracted by relatively cheap and disciplined labour in the 1990s, over the past decade labour unrest has been mushrooming among what had been widely assumed to be an exhaustible supply of easily exploitable labour. The spate of strikes that hit the Chinese automobile industry in the summer of 2010 in many ways looked like a continuation of the "Detroit (1930s) to Ulsan (1980s)" story told in *Forces of Labor*. The new title would have to be "from Detroit (1930s) to Guanzhou (2010s). Moreover, the recent spate of strikes reported among autoworkers in India may turn out to be another instance supporting our key thesis linking capital mobility and waves of labour unrest.

While the WLG findings about the relationship between world-economic transformation (especially capital mobility) and labour unrest have received the most attention from readers of *Forces of Labor*, I think that the geopolitical part of the analysis (chapter 4) is at least as important for understanding where labour movements might be headed in the future. After all, there is now widespread agreement that we are in a period of deep crisis of US world hegemony. With the WLG data we were able to study how labour movement outcomes were deeply enmeshed in the unfolding world hegemonic crisis of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century—the crisis of British world hegemony. There is every reason to believe that the geopolitical dimension will be central to labour movement outcomes in the current period as well.

From the WLG database, we teased out two different patterns of world-labour unrest in the period of crisis/breakdown of British world hegemony (late-nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century) and the high period of US hegemony (the second half of the twentieth century). Both periods had approximately the same number of reports of labour unrest per year on average. Yet, in the period of hegemony the total world reports were spread out relatively evenly across time (i.e., labour unrest waves did not occur simultaneously in most countries at the same time). By contrast, in the period of crisis/breakdown of hegemony, there was a tendency for labour unrest to cluster in time, creating massive world-wide explosions – most notably, but not only, after the First and Second World Wars.

The fact that labour and other forms of social unrest have been escalating simultaneously across multiple continents since 2008, encompassing both core and peripheral countries, at the same time that there is widespread talk of a crisis/breakdown of US world hegemony, raises a whole set of interesting questions about the present that a comparison with the past crisis/breakdown of world hegemony can help us illuminate.

VH: Do you know of any plans to expand the WLG database in any form, or to create similar databases on related topics? In particular, are there plans to bring the WLG up to the present?

BS: I am now working on updating the WLG database with a group of PhD students at Johns Hopkins, this time relying on the full text digital newspaper archives rather than the printed newspaper Indexes. The original WLG database collection ends in 1996. By the late 1990s, the number of reports of world labour unrest found in the newspaper Indexes each year had reached a nadir; at the same time the printed newspaper Index had become longer and longer over the years. Coders had to comb through hundreds of pages to find just a few reports of labour unrest. It was a bit like looking for a needle in a haystack. From time to time over the past decade I would run a pilot study to determine whether it was feasible to restart the data collection project; but rather than reach into the haystack (whether in print or digital form) to find a few needles, I would always decide to wait for a more propitious moment. The more propitious moment arrived in the summer of 2010.

In May 2010 I was on a flight from Seoul to Beijing where I picked up a copy of *The Financial Times* (London). Virtually the entire front page of the paper was filled with reports of labour unrest around the world – major strikes in major automobile factories in China, general strikes in South Africa, food riots and cost-of-living demonstrations in Tunisia, and mass demonstrations against austerity in Greece and Spain. The needle in the haystack problem was no longer.

To be sure, I always worked from the premise that the late 1990s lull in reported labour unrest was not permanent. Indeed, a central theoretical premise of the WLG project is that the world's working classes and workers' movements are recurrently made, unmade and remade as an outcome of both the "creative" and "destructive" sides of historical capitalism. The underlying argument in *Forces of Labor* was that we should

have our eyes open for the emergence of new sites, protagonists and forms of labour unrest as new working classes and workers' movements are "made", and as established working classes (and social contracts) are "unmade".

The 2010 intuition about 'the propitious moment' seems validated: evidence in support of the hypothesis that we are in the midst of a new period of upsurge of labour and social unrest worldwide has mounted in the past two years. By expanding and updating the WLG database we will be able to investigate systematically the varied protagonists of this new wave of struggles. One important part of it, we expect, will correspond to the making of new industrial working classes and to our hypothesis that "where capital goes, labour unrest follows shortly". Another important part, we expect, will be linked to the related unmaking of established working classes and abandonment of previously won social compacts, including those around the welfare state. But part of the dynamic that we will observe going forward might very well be tied to how labour unrest intertwines with geopolitical dynamics, especially the crisis of US power on a world-scale. As such, we will be on the outlook for similarities and differences between the current worldwide resurgence of labour unrest and previous periods of crisis/breakdown of world hegemony. Are we on the cusp of a new period of in which major waves of labour unrest (rooted in both the creative and destructives sides of capitalist development) cluster in time, creating world-scale explosions of labour unrest and fundamental anti-systemic challenges.