

Was there a “Great Labour Unrest” in the Netherlands?¹

Sjaak van der Velden²

ABSTRACT

2011 witnessed the beginning of the commemoration of the Great Labour Unrest that shook the United Kingdom one hundred years ago. The Unrest was a big event in British history and British historiography. It is common knowledge among labour historians that before, during and after World War I the struggle between labour and capital was intense in many countries. The British Unrest was part of that era but what about the Netherlands? Across the North Sea strike activity also rose in 1911-1914. But as a result of Dutch peculiarities it was much higher during the first years of the century. In line with international developments strike activity in the Netherlands rose to unprecedented heights immediately after the war. After describing the Dutch strike movement of 1900-1920 I conclude that there was no Great Labour Unrest in the Netherlands during the years coined such in the United Kingdom.

KEYWORDS

Netherlands, “Great Labour Unrest”, Strikes and war

Introduction

In early 2011, I was invited to the international conference “Revisiting the ‘Great Labour Unrest’ (1911-14)” that took place in Paris on September 15-16. In commemoration of the great strike wave in Great Britain that was part of what is now known as the “Great Labour Unrest,” the organizers invited a number of researchers to come to Paris. The topic I was asked to deal with was if there was also a comparable strike movement in the

¹ This article was originally presented as a paper at the International Conference “Revisiting the ‘Great Labour Unrest’ 1911-1914”, Paris, September 15-16, 2011.

² <<http://www.iisg.nl/staff/svv.php>>; sjaakvdvelden@gmail.com

Netherlands. A colleague from South Africa also shed light on this question, asking if the big strikes in his country in 1913-1914 were also part of a global labour revolt.

It is known from international historiography³ that the years preceding and following the First World War were a period of intense class struggle culminating in several revolutions. What about the Netherlands? In 1918, there had even been an attempt at revolution by the leader of the social-democratic party and there were riots, strikes and demonstrations during and after the war in which the Netherlands remained neutral. Yet what about the period which is in the UK labelled as the “Great Labour Unrest”? In my presentation in Paris, I strictly compared the Netherlands to the events in the UK. In this contribution, I will broaden the scope a little further to the post-war years, but the original purpose of this research will still be visible. Was there truly a “Great Labour Unrest” in the Netherlands?

1. Dutch historiography on the period 1911-1914

In the UK, the Great Labour Unrest of 1911-1914 is a well-known phenomenon among labour historians, although it is not undisputed. Cole named a chapter of his famous book on the history of the British working class movement “The great unrest”, but Pelling seemed a little patronizing when he wrote about the “so-called ‘labour unrest’ of the period”.⁴ In Dutch historiography, however, there is no mention of a Great Labour Unrest during this period. The literature shows no sign of awareness that 1911-1914 was an era that deserves a specific labelling.

In 1926, when the socialist and poet Henriette Roland-Holst published volume 2 of her still informative work *Capital and labour in the Netherlands* she gave a thorough description of the Dutch labour movement during the pre-war years.⁵ She mentioned the yearly demonstrations since 1911 to win the right to vote, the growth of the social-democratic party that was even offered a post in the new government of 1913 and the 1911 seamen’s strike. Despite these events, Roland Holst did not give a specific label to these years. Others

³ SILVER, Beverly J., ARRIGHI, Giovanni and DUBOFSKY, Melvyn, eds. “Labor Unrest in the World-Economy, 1870-1990”. *Review of the Fernand Braudel Center*. vol. XVIII, no. 1, winter 1995; KELLY, J. (1997) ‘Long waves in industrial relations: mobilization and counter-mobilization in historical perspective’, *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* no. 4, 1997. pp. 3-35; KELLY, J. *Rethinking Industrial Relations: mobilization, collectivism and long waves*. Routledge: London, 1998.

⁴ COLE, G.D.H. *A short history of the British working-class movement 1789-1947*. London, George Allen & Unwin: 1948. pp. 317-327; PELLING, Henry. *A history of British Trade Unionism*. London: Penguin, 1971. p. 139.

⁵ ROLAND HOLST-VAN DE SCHALK, Henriette. *Kapitaal en arbeid in Nederland*. Volume 2. Rotterdam: Busse Uitgeversmaatschappij, 1932.

such as the non-academic writer of the history of the social-democratic party (Sociaal-Democratische Arbeiderspartij, Social-Democratic Workers' Party, SDAP), W.H. Vliegen, who was in 1894 also one of the founders of that party, solely mentioned numerous strikes.⁶ When in 1956 the Dutch social-democratic or “modern” union federation celebrated its 50th anniversary, they asked an academic who was sympathetic to social democracy, Fr. De Jong, to write the official history. He also mentioned a number of big strikes that took place in the years 1911-14, but just like the other two he did not specifically label this period as one of great unrest.⁷ The successor of De Jong's book was published in 1975 by two left-wing historians, Ger Harmsen and Bob Reinalda.⁸ Their different position from De Jong's was expressed in the title of the book. While De Jong titled his book “Om de plaats van de arbeid” (On Labour's Position), Harmsen and Reinalda made it clear that the labour movement in their opinion should not just aim at giving labour a better position in capitalist society. The movement should instead work “Voor de bevrijding van de arbeid” (For the Liberation of Labour) from capitalism. Although we might expect from them a search for periods of intensification of the class struggle, we also look in vain for a Great Labour Unrest period in their book. The year 1913, however, is coined “a year of intense class struggle”.⁹ In 2004, I published a popular book based on my thesis on strikes in the Netherlands and did not refer to anything like a Great Labour Unrest.¹⁰ Of course, I did notice the growth of strike activity as my predecessors had.

Despite the fact that Dutch labour historians have not given the years 1911-1914 a specific name, the period is described as one with an intensification of efforts by labour to win economic and political demands. In short, in Dutch historiography (and I also consulted more general historical works and the contemporary newspapers that have recently been published on the internet at <http://kranten.kb.nl/>) researchers do not mention a “Great Labour Unrest”. There was however an intensification of the strike movement and struggle for political improvements for the working class. This indicates that there is good reason to investigate

⁶ VLIEGEN, W.H. *Die onze kracht ontwaken deed. Geschiedenis der sociaaldemocratische arbeiderspartij in Nederland gedurende de eerste 25 jaren van haar bestaan*. Volume 2. Amsterdam: Ontwikkeling, 1926. p.485.

⁷ DE JONG EDZ, Fr. *Om de plaats van de arbeid. Een geschiedkundig overzicht van ontstaan en ontwikkeling van het Nederlands Verbond van Vakverenigingen*. Amsterdam: De Arbeiderspers, 1956.

⁸ HARMSSEN, Ger and REINALDA, Bob. *Voor de bevrijding van de arbeid. Beknopte geschiedenis van de Nederlandse vakbeweging*. Nijmegen: Socialistische Uitgeverij Nijmegen, 1975.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁰ VAN DER VELDEN, Sjaak. *Stakingen in Nederland. Arbeidersstrijd 1830-1995*. Amsterdam: Stichting Beheer IISG, 2000. (Second edition published online in 2008 at www.onvoltooidverleden.nl/index.php?id=312); *Werknemers in actie. Twee eeuwen stakingen, bedrijfsbezettingen en andere acties in Nederland*. Amsterdam: Aksant, 2004.

whether we may (promoted by the centennial of the Great Labour Unrest in the UK) from hindsight label the strike movement of the early 1910's as a "Great Labour Unrest".

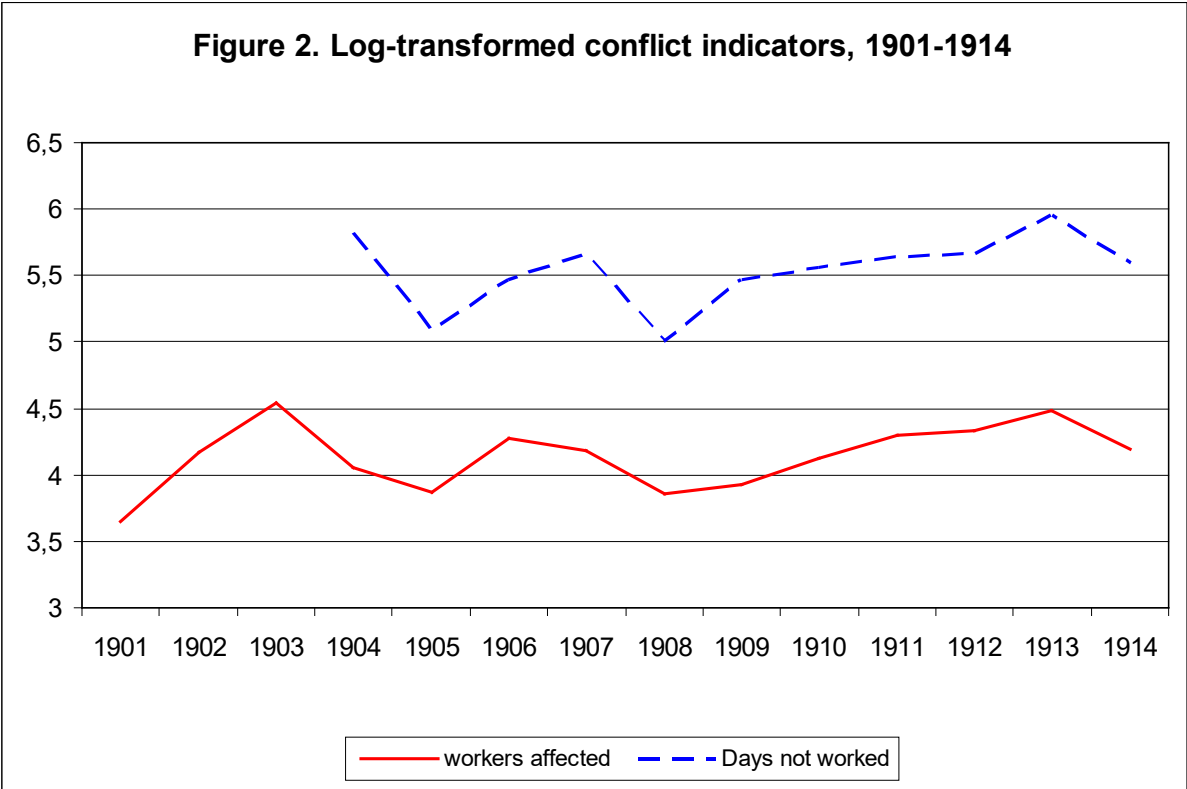
2. The Dutch strike movement, 1911-1914

If we want to know whether the Netherlands witnessed a Great Labour Unrest during 1911-1914 we simply need data on labour conflicts. The Dutch *Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek* (CBS, Statistics Netherlands) offers such data on its website (<http://statline.cbs.nl>). The line drawn with this data as shown in Figure 1 can lead to only one simple conclusion. Yes, the number of conflicts grew at a fast rate during the years under study. 1911, 1912 and 1913 even saw the highest numbers of conflicts of the twentieth century so far (and even more than the nineteenth century even though this is not visible in the figure from Netherlands Statistics). If we omit the last five months of 1914, because in that period the unions declared a truce and stopped all strikes because of the outbreak of the war, the average strikes per month was at roughly the same level as during 1913 (33.1 and 33.3 respectively). The conclusion is evident: this really was a time that labour unrest in the Netherlands grew to an unprecedented level. There was a Great Labour Unrest. It appears that the discussion is closed.



Source: Statistics Netherlands

However, since according to International Labor Organizations’ publications from 1935 onwards it has been widely agreed to use the number of days not worked per 1,000 workers as an indicator to compare strike activity over time,¹¹ we may come to a different conclusion if we look at this number instead of the frequency of the conflicts. And showing the number of workers affected by the conflicts might also present a different picture. In Figure 2, both indicators are shown after log-transforming them because otherwise the visibility of the number of affected workers, which is by its very nature much smaller than the number of days not worked, would be too low.



Source: Statistics Netherlands; Statistics Netherlands only started calculating days not worked in 1904.

¹¹ DRIBBUSCH, Heiner and VANDAELE, Kurt. “Comprehending divergence in strike activity. Employers’ offensives, government interventions and union responses”. In: VAN DER VELDEN, Sjaak et. al., eds. *Strikes around the world. Case-studies of 15 countries*. Amsterdam: Aksant, 2007.

Adding the two strike indicators from Figure 2 to our view of the period makes the picture more complicated. The picture still shows an almost continuous growth of strike activity since 1909, but the growth in comparison to 1903-04 is not as extreme as it was in Figure 1 where only the number of conflicts was considered. The number of affected workers for 1904 (34,500) was never exceeded during the period immediately preceding the Great War.

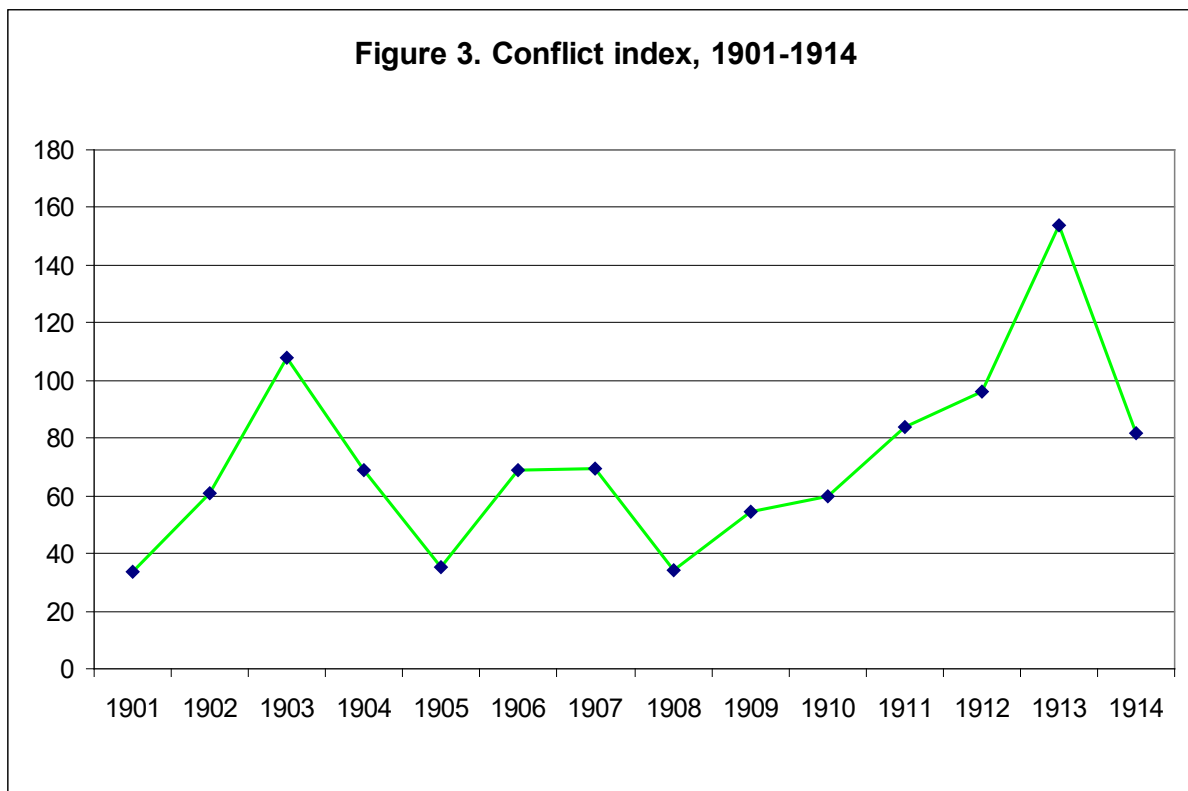
It is difficult to interpret more than one data set at the same time. Making comparisons over time and place is also difficult using more than one data source. To overcome these problems, researchers have tried to combine the three indicators of labour conflict activity into one number. In 1966, P. Galambos and E.W. Evans published their effort in the *Bulletin of the Oxford University Institute of Economics and Statistics*.¹² Others, including myself, have built on their work.¹³ A problem with indices is that they strengthen the need for qualitative support of the interpretation. The index does not tell whether a fall or rise comes from a change in the number of conflicts or from a change in the number of days lost or the number of workers affected. When we keep this limitation in mind, an index may be a useful means to get a condensed view of developments. Using the data published by Statistics Netherlands, an index can be calculated as follows:

$$I_1 = (C_t / C_{avg} + SL_t / SL_{avg} + DL_t / DL_{avg}) \times 100/3 \quad ^{14}$$

¹² GALAMBOS, P. & EVANS, E.W. Evans. "Work-stoppages in the United Kingdom, 1951-1964: a quantitative study". *Bulletin of the Oxford University Institute of Economics & Statistics*. vol. 28, 1966. pp. 33-55.

¹³ VAN DER VELDEN, Sjaak. "Strikes in global labor history. The Dutch case". *Review. A journal of the Fernand Braudel Center*. vol. 26, no. 4. pp. 381-405.

¹⁴ C= Number of conflicts, SL = Strikers and locked out workers, DL = Days lost, t= actual year, avg= Average of all years under research.



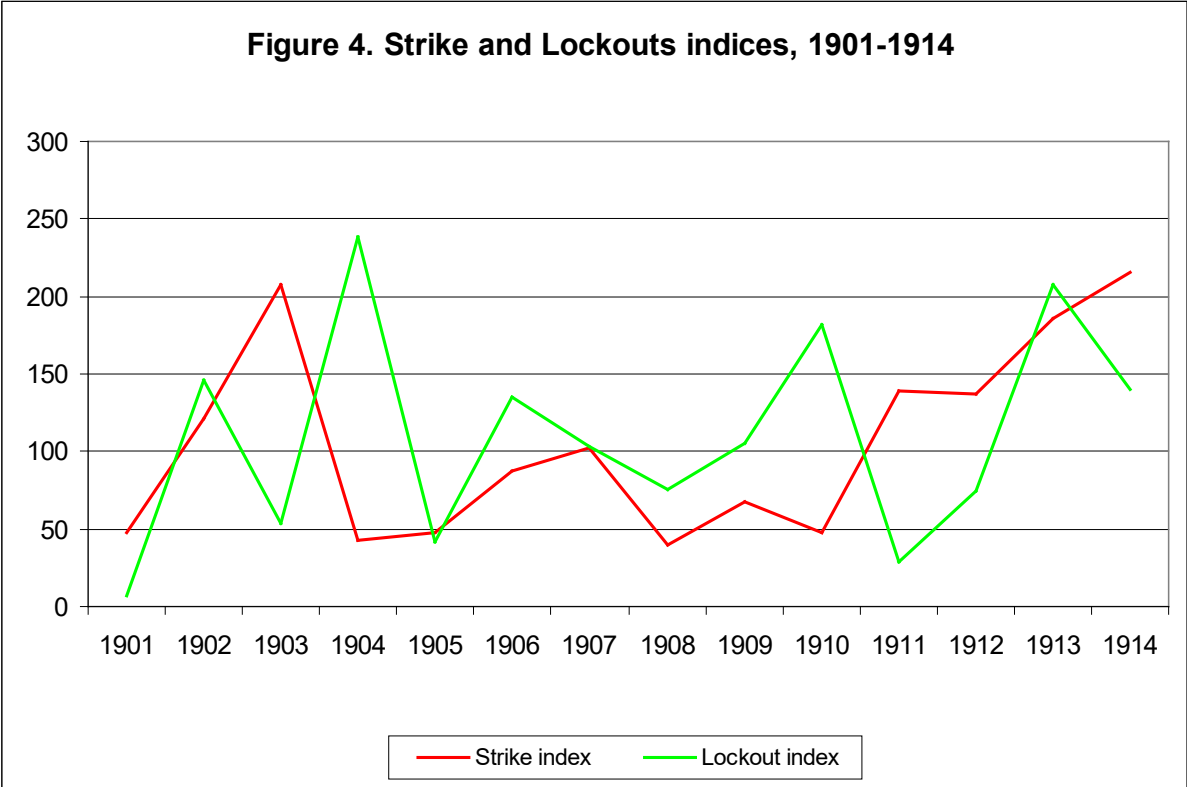
Source: Statistics Netherlands.

Figure 3 shows the index for the years 1901-1914. Using an index that connects the three indicators (number of conflicts, affected workers and workdays lost) confirms the idea that the Netherlands also witnessed a Great Labour Unrest that started in 1908 and lasted until the war broke out. If we take in consideration that almost all strikes and actually all lockouts in 1914 started before August 1, the relative index for 1914 reached almost the same level as 1913 (not shown in the figure). The conclusion at hand is that Dutch workers started an offensive in 1908 that only came to a standstill because of World War I.

Unfortunately, this conclusion is too premature. The official data published by Statistics Netherlands shows the sum of strikes and lockouts. It is known that separating strikes and lockouts in statistics may be troublesome. Therefore, many researchers and data collectors have decided or have felt forced to resign to combined data.¹⁵ When Statistics Netherlands published the original data in the years under research it had not decided yet to publish aggregated data and the data was still divided. On the website of the International Institute of Social History (IISH), a new database on strikes in the Netherlands was published (<https://collab.iisg.nl/web/labourconflicts/stakingen-in-nederland>). This dataset not only gives

¹⁵ LYDDON, Dave. "Strike statistics and the problem of international comparison". In: VAN DER VELDEN, Sjaak *et. al.* *Op.Cit.*, 2007. p. 25.

data that are for some years much higher than the official data by Statistics Netherlands, but it also separates strikes and lockouts. Separating strikes from lockouts makes it possible to recognize the aggressor and defender in a labour conflict. After all, strikes are tools of workers while lockouts are a tool of employers to enforce their demands. From now on, I will use the IISH dataset for analyzing developments. Using formula 1 we can also calculate indices for strikes and lockouts separately. Figure 4 shows the development of these indices.¹⁶



Source: <https://collab.iisg.nl/web/labourconflicts/stakingen-in-nederland>

Before analyzing Figure 4 we must stress that the lines do not show relations between the two indices, but only the developments of strikes and lockout activity related to base values where the average = 100 . On average, one lockout occurred against 16 strikes during the period 1901-1913 (see Table 2).

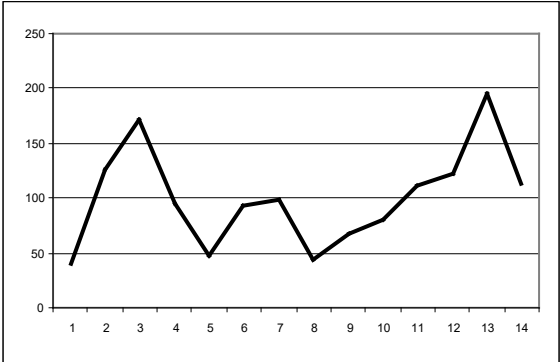
Six of the 13 years show an opposite movement of the indices. This means that during those years (1903-05, 1907, 1910-11) the total conflict index (comparable to Figure 3) is a little flattened while during the other years the development as shown by the overall index is

¹⁶ The calculated indices for 1914 are based on the number of conflicts before August 1 and related to the number of months during which they were counted by dividing the indicators by 7 and multiplying the outcome with 12.

strengthened. The highest peak in strike activity was 1903, the year of a general railway strike and a general strike against a limitation by law of the freedom to strike. The general strike was lost, many workers were victimized and labour retreated as is shown by the drop in strike activity in 1904. Capital on the other hand showed its force by more than quadrupling lockout activity that year. This opposite movement of labour and capital is lost out of sight when the conflict activity as published in the official data is analyzed. Yet there is more.

There is a well known saying that there are lies, damned lies and statistics. This saying should always be kept in the mind when studying strike statistics. So far we have seen that applying more sophisticated ways of measuring labour conflict activity leads us to put into perspective the simple official data published. In Figure 1, we witnessed a clear growth of activity during the years immediately preceding World War I. Figure 4 led to the conclusion that the class struggle as measured by strikes and lockouts was more intense in 1903-04 than in 1910-1914.¹⁷ Drawing the lines of Figure 4 was, however, done without keeping in mind the development of the number of workers. In 1901, there were 1.466 million workers in the Netherlands, a number which grew to 1.886 million in 1914. This growth by almost 30 percent of course influenced the strike capacity of the Dutch working class. We should therefore take this growth into account when calculating an index.¹⁸ Unfortunately information about unemployment is scarce for these years. Adding unemployment figures to the index would make the picture even more complicated; after all unemployed workers are unable to enter strike statistics.

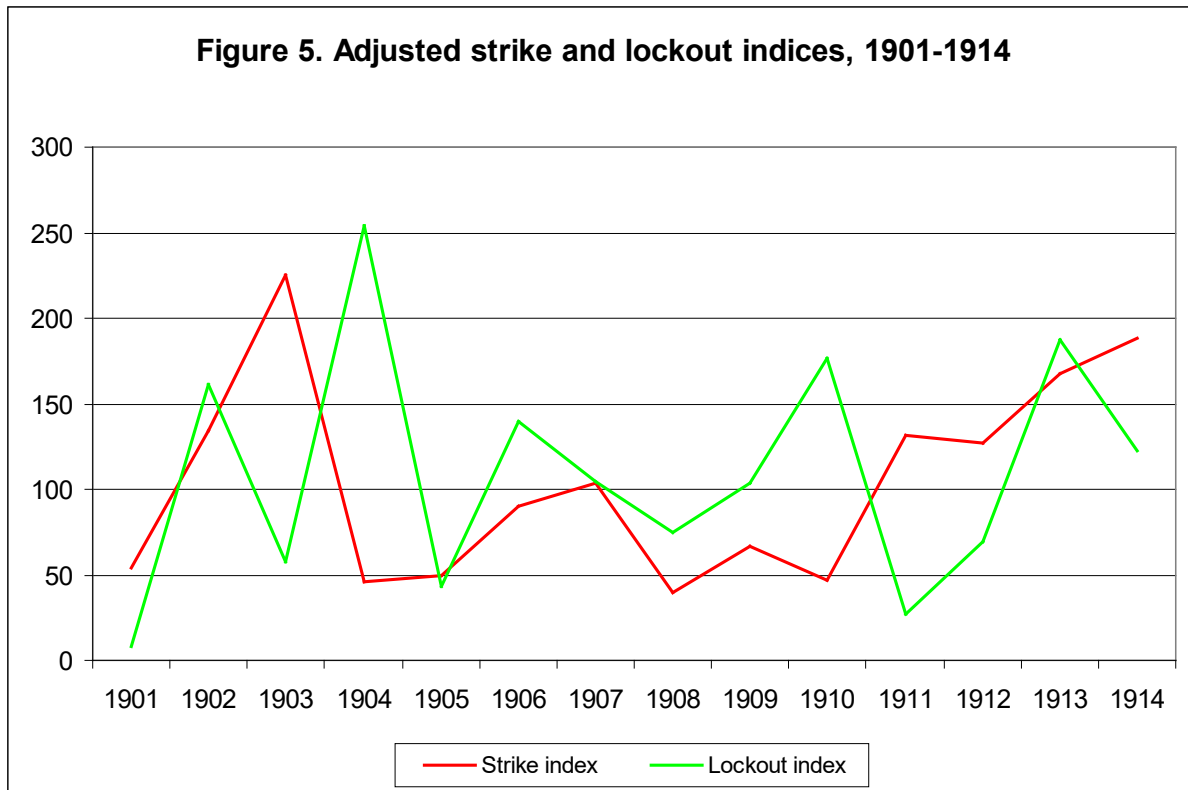
¹⁷ To avoid criticism that the raw data which is different for Figures 3 and 4 and therefore may have influenced the outcome, I also calculated an overall index with the data I collected. The line is roughly the same as in Figure 3.



¹⁸ Others like Kelly and Wilson take another denominator, the share of a specific country in the total world production, but to me this seems improper when one studies human behaviour. PERRY, L.J. & WILSON, Patrick J. "Convergence of work stoppages – a global perspective". *Journal of World-Systems Research*. vol. XIII, n. 2. p.206.

$$I_2 = ((NS_t / NS_{avg} + S_t / S_{avg} + SDL_t / SDL_{avg}) / (W_t / W_{avg})) \times 100/3^{19}$$

Figure 5 shows the strike and lockout indices after dividing the respective labour conflict indicators through the number of workers.



Source: <https://collab.iisg.nl/web/labourconflicts/stakingen-in-nederland>

Now the picture is strengthened that class conflict in the Netherlands during 1910-14 was never as intense as it had been in 1903-04. The line that indicates strike activity in Figure 4 shows that 1914 exceeded 1903. After taking the number of workers into account in Figure 5, however, the strike line never exceeds the 1903 value. Of course, we may note an almost uninterrupted growth of the strike index from 1910 to August 1, 1914. This may indicate that despite the fact that the level of activity was lower than in 1902-04 the feeling was one of recovery after the 1903 defeat. Yet in general, with the general strike of 1903 in mind, it makes sense that no one coined 1911-1914 as a “Great Labour Unrest”.

Still, we may ask a number of questions. How did the attitude of workers, unions and employers in the 1910-14 eras develop? Was there notwithstanding the relatively low level of

¹⁹ NS= Number of strikes (NL = Number of lockouts), S = Strikers, W = Workers, DLS = Days lost during strikes.

strike and lockout activity a feeling in society that a revolutionary development was in progress similar to the one that the Lord Mayor of Liverpool spoke about in 1911 for the British case?

3. Revolution in progress? The discussion about the general strike

The publications about strikes and lockouts of Statistics Netherlands in the years 1911-1915 mentioned the growing numbers. Especially in 1913 when the number of strikes “since 1901, the first year of which data is collected, is the highest counted in any year”.²⁰ A few pages later the same report mentions that the same is true of the number of days lost. With these simple observations, this aspect of the story ended. A few hundred pages followed with the most meticulous information about even the smallest conflict, but not a single word about the threat of a revolution.

We may wonder of course whether other sources show more awareness of some special times people lived in. Did they realize that across the North Sea the period was coined “the Great Labour Unrest”? As we have already seen, Dutch historians were aware of the unprecedented level of strike activity during the pre-war years and especially in 1913. In a number of social-democratic journals, I found references to the strikes in England, but no sign of the feeling that the Netherlands might be on the brink of a revolution. What did take place, however, was a renewed intensification of an old discussion. One might even call this the last years until the 1960s of a discussion about the role of strikes in the victory of socialism. Roland Holst and Vliegen both mentioned this discussion between the advocates of a return to 19th century radicalism and the proponents of a more reformist attitude.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the majority of the international labour movement had moved definitively away from the idea that workers should fight for a revolution. The socialist international – founded in 1889 – was strongly in favour of a revision of the old socialist idea of a revolution. No socialist revolution, but an improvement of workers’ lives under a democratic regime was their goal. This goal could only be attained if a shift in union leadership would take place from – as Beatrice and Sidney Webb labelled him – “the casual and enthusiast and irresponsible agitator to a class of salaried officers expressly

²⁰ Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS) *Werkstakingen en uitsluitingen in Nederland gedurende 1904... 1920*. Gravenhage: Belinfante, 1915. p.XI.

chosen out of the rank and file of trade unionists for their superior business capacity”.²¹ In the larger part of the labour and union movement, this shift had already taken place but now it was also firmly confirmed ideologically.

Only small groups of socialists, unhappy with this “betrayal”, tried to swing the tide back, but they were not very successful. Radical socialists started a discussion about the use of mass-strikes as a way to achieve socialism but it was a minority discussion. In 1902, general strikes for general suffrage took place in Belgium and Sweden. Although they differed considerably, these strikes proved that the general strike was indeed a possibility. The union bureaucracy and social-democratic leaders were however not convinced that they should aim for more than improvements and reform by using the weapon of these mass movements.

In the Netherlands, this hesitating attitude was of course confirmed by the outcome of the 1903 general strike. As we have seen before, the strike was lost and many workers were sacked. Not a result favourable to the case of the revolutionaries let alone that the greater part of the working-class could thus be turned into enthusiastic supporters of mass strikes. The revolutionary current in social democracy therefore remained small and it seemed to lose the discussion intellectually and practically. Until 1905. The year of the first Russian Revolution was the start of an intensification of the international discussion about the use of the general strike. The Polish-German revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg was one of the well-known advocates of revolutionary mass action in the international discussion and she was greatly inspired by the Russian events. What happened in the czar’s empire was in her eyes a confirmation of the fact that working in the organs of parliamentary democracy was not enough to establish socialism. The masses of the working class were able to conquer the world by using the weapon of the revolutionary mass-strike.²²

Rosa Luxemburg had political friends in the Netherlands. Amongst them was Henriette Roland Holst who in 1905 had already published a German brochure *Generalstreik und Sozialdemokratie* which was translated into Dutch one year later.²³ She wrote the book on request of Karl Kautsky who did not have time to complete this project. This is proof of the close connection between the German and Dutch labour movements, an almost inevitable connection because the Dutch economy became more and more intertwined with the growth

²¹ WEBB, Sydney and WEBB, Beatrice. *The history of trade unionism*. 1894. (https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_History_of_Trade_Unionism)

²² LUXEMBURG, Rosa. *Massenstreik, Partei und Gewerkschaften*. Hamburg, 1906.

²³ ROLAND HOLST-VAN DER SCHALK, Henriette. *Algemeene werkstaking en sociaaldemocratie*. Rotterdam, 1906.

of the Ruhr region. Other Dutch socialists who played a role in the German Social Democratic party and discussions were Anton Pannekoek and Herman Gorter who also advocated a return to the idea of a socialist revolution instead of reforming capitalism.²⁴

The majority of the members of the Dutch party were not convinced of the revolutionary analyses and sentiment. Their hard work and perseverance in the city councils and parliament, and the successes won by the modern union movement were proof for the majority that social democracy was the best way to improve the living and working conditions of the labouring masses. They were very pragmatic and not easy to convince by events happening in far away Russia where the czar was still in power. There were, by the way, also social democrats who took a hybrid stand. They were in favour of parliamentary work, but also enthusiastic about the Russian revolution of 1905.²⁵ The discussions, but also the personal accusations of betrayal versus splitting the movement, finally resulted in an actual split. In 1909, the minority was expelled from the party because they refused to stop the publication of their own magazine. They then established a new social democratic party. This *Sociaal-Democratische Partij* (SDP) was the first party in Europe that tried to move away from modern social democracy back to a revolutionary social democracy or socialism.

The union movement witnessed a parallel discussion, but this mainly took place between and not within organizations. This had to do with the fact that the socialist union movement had already split. In 1906, the modern unionists had left the radical *Nationaal Arbeids Secretariaat* (NAS, National Labour Secretariat) and with the support of social democrats founded a new national union, the *Nederlandsch Verbond van Vakverenigingen* (NVV, Dutch Confederation of Trade Unions). In short, the contradictions between the two organizations were federalism (NAS) against centralism (NVV), and revolution (NAS) against reform (NVV). In discussions between the two union currents, the NAS was often labelled syndicalist but Buschman, the author of the history of the NAS, made it clear that this union was not syndicalist in the theoretical sense, but federalist and revolutionary.²⁶ From this it may be clear that there were ideological relations between NAS and SDP although the Marxists in the SDP were convinced that they had to be where the masses were. And the masses were in the NVV that grew explosively and not in the NAS that still suffered from the bad outcome of the 1903 general strike.

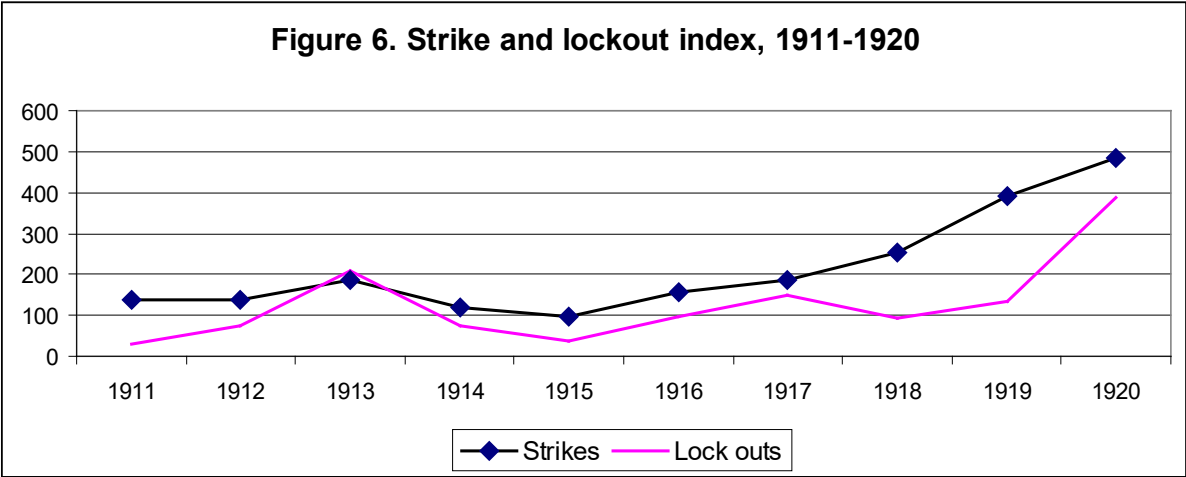
²⁴ BOURRINET, Philippe. *The Dutch and German Communist Left. A contribution to the history of the revolutionary movement*. London: International Communist Current, 2011 [1991].

²⁵ VAN DER VELDEN, Sjaak. *LINKS. PvdA, SP en GroenLinks*. Amsterdam: Aksant, 2010. pp.48-75.

²⁶ BUSCHMAN, Marten. *Tussen revolutie en modernisme. Geschiedenis van het Nationaal Arbeids-Secretariaat in Nederland 1893-1907*. Den Haag: Amrit, 1993 [1933].

1909, the year of the split in Dutch social-democracy, was also the year that the economic conjuncture started an upswing and possibilities for the workers to gain a wage rise improved. In other words, as always during economic upswings, it was time to start an offensive. This offensive is reflected in Figure 5 where the strike index grows in 1909. Capital reacted a year later with an aggressive growth of the number of lockouts and a temporary retreat of labour. However, labour obviously felt more confident than it was in 1905; strike activity started growing again in 1911.

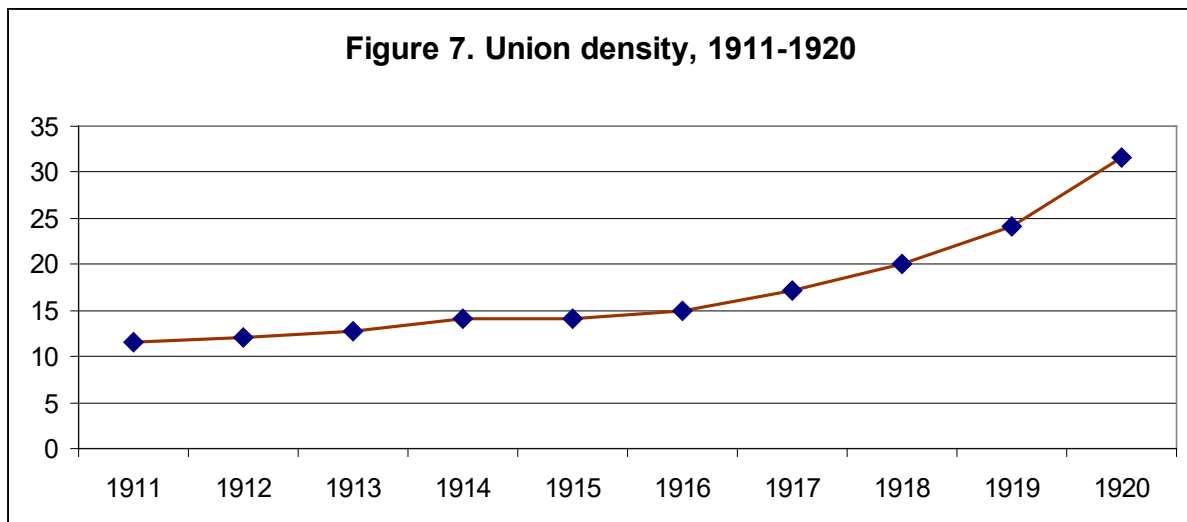
The movement grew until the outbreak of the war. Although the Netherlands remained neutral in the conflict, the union movement decided to stop all offensive acts to employers and the state at the beginning. As is visible in Figure 6, both strike and lock out activity plummeted. Only when the effects of the war also deteriorated the Dutch economy and working-class life, the activity of both workers and employers started to grow again. The years of public unrest, culminating in the failed effort to start a Revolution in 1918, was mentioned earlier. On the wave of international class struggle, the Dutch also became more offensive. Meanwhile capital was reluctant and gave in to many workers' demands. Only in 1920 did employers retake the initiative. This was an omen of the end of the post-war wave of strikes and working-class victories.



Source: <https://collab.iisg.nl/web/labourconflicts/stakingen-in-nederland>

The development of strike activity shows growth just like the percentage of Dutch workers who joined a labour union. This union density is shown in Figure 7. The unions survived the downfall visible in Figure 6 of strikes and lockouts. The fact that the union

movement continued to grow during those early years of the war was mainly the result of the introduction of a state-sponsored unemployment benefit system. After the firm establishment of this system, all unions grew on the wave of working-class radicalism since 1916. A firm indication that workers joined the unions in response to the growth of strikes, food riots and demonstrations is the fact that the more radical NAS grew faster than the moderate NVV and confessional unions.²⁷



Source: Statistics Netherlands

But let us return to the subject of our research, the years coined the “Great Labour Unrest” in the UK. Was there any connection between the strike movements in both countries?

4. Connection to the British movement: the 1911 seamen’s strike

In 1911, a close connection between the Dutch, the British and the Belgian union movements came to the fore. Seamen from these three countries jointly struck against the big shipping companies. The International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF) started the strike, but did not play a significant role during the strike itself.

At an International conference of seamen in 1902, the unions present decided that agitation on an international level was necessary to fight the power of the shipping companies and improve the working conditions of the seamen. It was only in 1911, however, before a

²⁷ VAN DER VELDEN, Sjaak. *Werknemers georganiseerd. Een geschiedenis van de vakbeweging bij het honderdjarig jubileum van de Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (FNV)*. Amsterdam: Aksant, 2005. p.89.

strike broke out. This strike was preceded the year before by rumours that an international strike was at hand because the chairman of the ITF, Havelock Wilson, visited numerous ports during a strike promotion tour. He did so without the consent of the ITF. The Dutch syndicalist, or better, radical, General Seamen's Union (AZB, *Algemeene Zeemans Bond*) showed enthusiasm about the growing internationalism. "All signs indicate that internationalism, the cooperation with people of the same conviction, with colleagues and fellow-sufferers from abroad and overseas, is developing and will soon come to perfection".²⁸ The strike broke out on June 14, 1911, but was not as international as some expected. The Germans refused to participate. They concluded their own agreement with the German shipping companies. The Germans were also unhappy with the selfish actions by Havelock Wilson. The strikes in England, Belgium and the Netherlands on the other hand broke out simultaneously, but their courses were hardly connected.

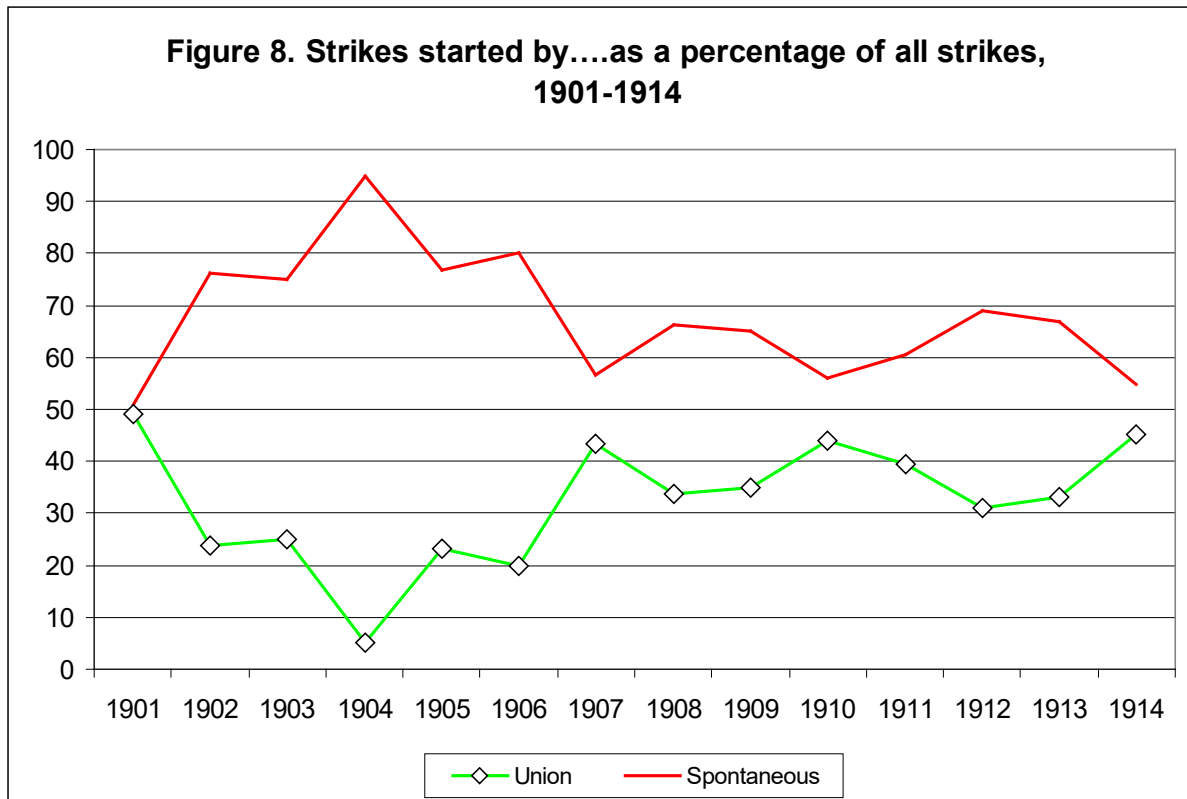
The above-mentioned discussions between social democrats and more revolutionary unionists were evident during the strike. The social democratic union in Rotterdam led the strike completely differently from the more radical union in Amsterdam. In both cities, the strike was complete, but the course was very diverse. After one month, the union in Rotterdam reached an agreement with the shipping companies. A modest wage raise and a collective agreement (the first one ever) for three years were the principal results. In Amsterdam, the radicals managed to extend the strike to the dockworkers and others professions in the port. The strike was accompanied by violence that caused casualties during the "Bloody night of Kattenburg"²⁹ but all this was in vain because of the arrival of many blacklegs. The Amsterdam seamen started mustering on August 9 and their strike was lost. The discussion continued, but the tone had changed for the worse. The Rotterdam union was accused of betrayal because it negotiated a collective agreement and went back to work before the strike in Amsterdam was over. The Rotterdam union replied that they at least had won some improvements while the Amsterdam strikers remained empty handed.

The Dutch seamen's strike was initiated by an international union leader, but without the approval of the union itself and in the Netherlands the strike showed a divided union movement and working class (and a few gains for the Rotterdam strikers, of course). After 1911, strike activity by Dutch workers continued to grow in 1912, 1913 and 1914 as we have seen in the previous figures. If we want to discover a revolutionary mood or at least an

²⁸ "Alles wijst er op dat het internationalisme, het samenwerken met gelijkgezinden, met vak- of lostgenooten van over de grenzen en over de zeeën, zich ontwikkelt en spoedig tot meerdere vervolmaking zal komen" Internationaal Nieuws, *De Nederlandsche Zeeman* vol. 8, nr. 96, september 1910. p. 1

²⁹ Kattenburg was a working-class neighbourhood in Amsterdam.

increased mood of resistance, it may be useful to investigate the beginning of the strikes. Were the strikes started by unions after unsuccessful negotiations and after ultimatums were issued? Or were the workers unwilling to wait and walked out on their own account, spontaneously?

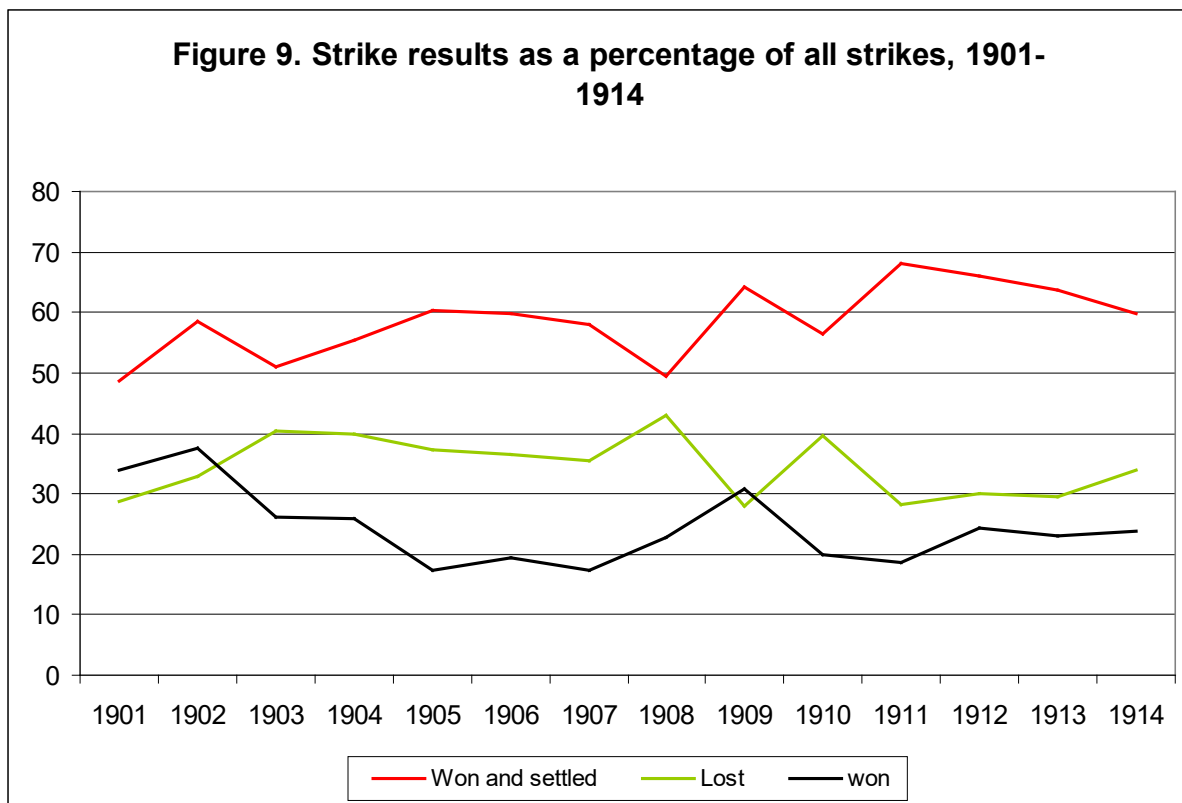


Source: <https://collab.iisg.nl/web/labourconflicts/stakingen-in-nederland>

Figure 8 shows who took the initiative to strike as percentages of all the strikes for which this aspect is known. This means that a strike that started spontaneously may have been taken over or supported by a union after the beginning; something that was more common to the NAS while the NVV more often refused to support in hindsight. It is of course also possible that the opposite happened; a union ignited strike may have lost union support in the course of the events. Given these considerations, the figure is a good indication for the feeling among the workers, the rank and file, but also the feeling in the unions as a whole. The information is biased because from a diminishing but still big part of the total number of strikes it is not clear who started them. Given the character of the historical sources (mostly union magazines and strike reports by unions) we may expect that a large part of the unknown strikes was spontaneous because unions were in general eager to show their activities, especially the

NAS. But if we confine ourselves to the strikes of which we know who initiated them it is clear that the initiative for the 1910-1914 strike wave came more from the rank and file than from the unions. These organizations of the working class only became more active in 1914 and were certainly not the initiators of some Great Labour Unrest. From the differences between the two unions, we may not conclude that there was a clear division between the two national unions regarding strikes. Yes, the NVV was more in favour of negotiations first, a full strike fund and was also more reluctant to start solidarity strikes than the NAS. Yet from these ideological differences, we may not conclude that the NVV was hostile to strikes while the NAS was engaged in all strike activity. From the data, it is clear that NAS involvement with spontaneously started strikes was bigger than the NVV's, but also that more union strikes were started by the NVV. Over the whole period, the NVV was more often involved in strikes than the NAS. Thus, simple conclusions about the attitude of the two currents in union life are probably incorrect. This can be explained from the fact that despite ideological differences most union members and union leaders from both NAS and NVV had the interests of the workers as their main goal.

If we take the information about the start of strikes into account we may conclude that Dutch workers launched an offensive with a growing number of strikes during the years preceding the outbreak of World War I. Union leaders were in general more reluctant than the rank and file and this is understandable because the unions were still recovering from the blow they received in the aftermath of the 1903 general strike. Strike activity plummeted in 1904 and the strikes that took place were in majority initiated by the rank and file. When in 1910 strike activity once again rose, it was again the rank and file who was responsible. And they were also successful as is shown in Figure 9 where the outcome of Dutch strikes is shown.



Source: <https://collab.iisg.nl/web/labourconflicts/stakingen-in-nederland>

From the lost strikes, we may conclude that this indicator grew after the lost 1903 strike and remained relatively stable until 1908 when the positive economic conjuncture made employers more willing to give in to workers' demands. The line that shows the sum of won and settled strikes is a sign of a new mood in Dutch labour relations. After 1903, many employers wanted a return to nineteenth-century patriarchal relations and they were the ones that locked out workers in response to strikes or the growth of union membership (see Figure 5). Others, however, realised that there was no turning back. These modern employers wanted to negotiate with unions and conclude collective agreements. Because of this attitude, a growing number of strikes ended in neither victory nor defeat, but were settled after negotiations. This was a positive outcome for the strikers who won more than they had possessed before the strike, but the employer could also have a good feeling because he did not lose it all.

This development coincides with the growth of the part that unions played in initiating strikes because unions are often more aware of the possibilities and especially the impossibilities to win a strike. They therefore pose more moderate demands than the rank and file during wildcat strikes. This difference between union strikes and wildcat strikes is

confirmed for the entire period 1904-1940 when 67% of the union strikes were won and only 43% of the wildcat strikes.³⁰

5. Explaining the movement

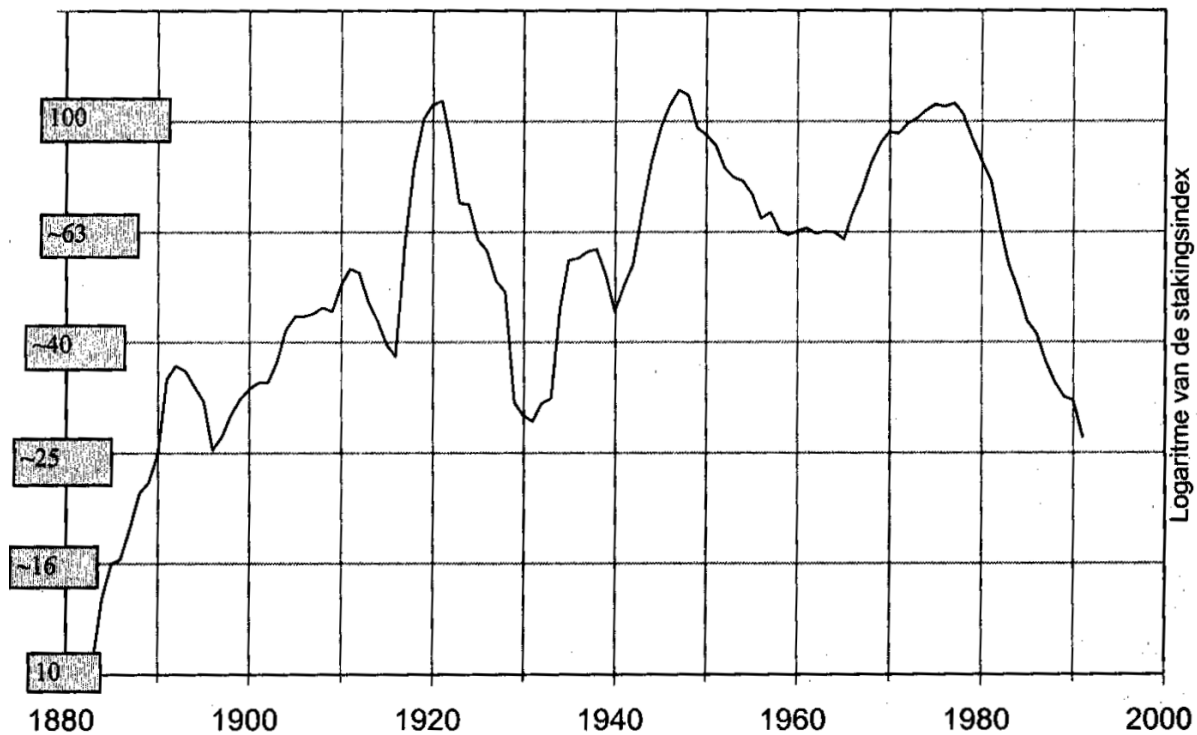
We demonstrated a growth of strike activity in the Netherlands during the same period labelled the “Great Labour Unrest” in the United Kingdom. A similar growth can be seen in other countries. In 2000 and 2003, I investigated the strike movements in 1883-1999 for sixteen core countries of capitalism (Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and the United States) to find out that the five-years moving average of their strike and lockout indices showed clear peaks around 1925, 1955 and 1980 after which a fading away is visible. Low levels were reached in 1918, 1935-1945 and the early 1960s.³¹ In the research by Dr. Wessel Visser from Stellenbosch University (South Africa) and myself published in 2006, we analysed strike index movements in both the Netherlands and South Africa that were more parallel than one might expect.³² The years preceding World War I and 1920 witnessed peaks in both countries.

Figure 10. Strike index (1970=100) in sixteen countries, 1883-1995 (log-transformed, 5-year moving average)

³⁰ VAN DER VELDEN. *Op.Cit.* 2000. p.126.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.280, 400.

³² VANDEER VELDEN, Sjaak and VISSER, Wessel. “Strikes in the Netherlands and South Africa, 1900-1998: a comparison”. *South African Journal of Labour Relations*. vol. 30, n.1, 2006. p.71.



Source: Van der Velden.³³

Looking at this figure for the period 1900-1920, it is obvious that strike activity was growing to an unprecedented level from 1900 onwards, but was interrupted by the outbreak of the 1914-1918 war.³⁴ After this, the growth continued to 1920 before an immense downfall started. A similar interrupted growth started in the early 1930s, followed by another world war that caused a plummeting of strike activity.

Both lowerings of international strike activity may be explained by political-military events, but the “natural” developments of strike activity requires another interpretation. The fact that in so many countries strike and lockout activity moved more or less simultaneously calls for an explanation. It makes sense to look at the development of the economy. Is there any similarity between the movement of strike activity and the economy? As said before, the upswing of strike activity in the Netherlands seems to be related to the economic prosperity of 1909-1910 that was accompanied by a rise in real wages for Dutch workers. Cole, however, uses just the opposite as one of the explaining factors of the growth of labour unrest in Great Britain: a lowering of real wages.³⁵ Thus, two diametrically opposed developments in

³³ VAN DER VELDEN. *Op.Cit.* 2000. p.280

³⁴ We must bear in mind that international statistics for the entire period show many flaws and omissions. So far this is the best we can get from ILO data and other international publications.

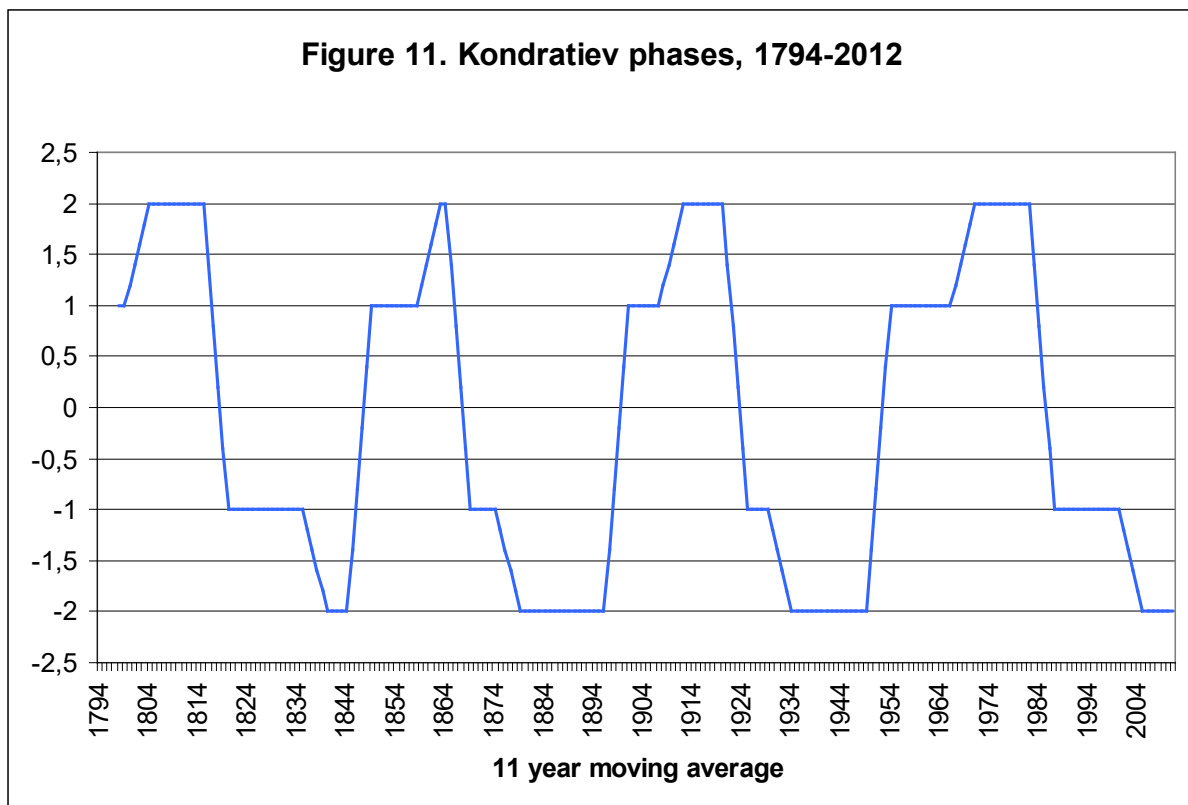
³⁵ COLE. G.D.H. *Op.Cit.* p.480.

working-class life can go together with a rise in working-class militancy in different countries. This remark is in line with the results of my thesis.³⁶ The calculation of correlations between the Dutch strike index and a number of independent variables for twenty-year periods gave many contradictory results. The development of national income to mention just one of the thirteen political, institutional and economic indicators showed alternating values from +0.35 (1961-1980) to -0.11 (1921-1940). Surprisingly, only the development of real wages correlated positively over the entire period of 1881-1994. Before jumping to conclusions, we must be aware of the fact that a correlation tells us nothing about the direction of the relation. It may be that rising wages make workers more confident and thus more prone to ask for more and strike to get it. It may also be that higher strike activity results in higher wages. Simple correlations do not answer the question of which of the explanations is correct.

Nonetheless, there is even more. There is probably also a long-run economic cycle, the Kondratiev wave of roughly forty to sixty years. Recently the Russian economists Aivazov and Kobayakov³⁷ published an overview of the known Kondratiev waves (see Table 1). The growth of strike activity of the pre World War I years clearly coincides with the latter half of the rising phase of the Third Kondratiev wave, the growth phase built upon electrical engineering and chemistry. This growth is also visible in Figure 11 where the Kondratiev is presented on the basis of four phases within the Kondratiev.

³⁶ VAN DER VELDEN. *Op.Cit.* 2000. p. 273.

³⁷ AIVAZOV, Alexander and KOBAYAKOV, Andrey. "Nikolai Kondratiev's 'Long Wave': The Mirror of the Global Economic Crisis. The Global Economy is facing a 'Long Wave' Recession". *Global Research*. November 27, 2008.



The economic growth of 1894-1920 during which the conjuncture movements were only relatively small vibrations, perhaps inspired the labour movement to fight for improvements. On the other side, this same economic growth was the material base of social democracy and its theory of a reformed capitalism; workers did get some improvements in those years. There is still more. The Kondratiev waves are no more than a very rough indication of economic development that is difficult to support with hard figures.

Workers in struggle do not automatically and mechanically follow economic developments. Economic growth since 1894 was accompanied and partly directed by political turmoil. Examples of this are the workers asking for political recognition and universal suffrage. There was also the threat of a war because tensions grew between the imperial powers that had just finished their scramble for Africa.

It is clearly not just the economy and general politics that tempt workers to strike. If the relation was that straightforward, then we would also see an international growth of strike activity during 1945-1965. This was the era of post-war economic recovery but also of anti-communist attacks on radical labour and state intervention in the economy. These interventions by political powers may have hindered workers to strike and explain the

downswing of strike activity since 1948. There is a lot of literature on the relationship between strikes and the economic long waves³⁸, but so far no one has discovered more than a visual development with ups and downs without robust explanations. Focusing on economic development as an explanatory variable looks like the search for a mechanical mover in history. A mover in which there is no room for agency; a situation where the historical subject is ignored. As such, it seems that this kind of search will go on forever without finding any more than visual resemblances.

The waves in strike activity and the so-called Kondratiev waves show us such a resemblance. This may help us to formulate possible relationships, but the real explanation needs a thorough investigation of the historical events. What happened in the Netherlands was a period of economic growth that coincided with a struggling working class. The workers struggled for recognition by employers and the state that unions were the representative bodies of the workers in the newly constructed system of labour relations. The struggle was possibly supported by the fact that the union movement was divided and from Van den Berg's research it is clear that a divided movement inspires most unions to show a more radical attitude. That is the way to win more support from the workers.³⁹

6. Conclusion

In the preceding pages, I have looked for answers to a number of questions. The first question posed by the organizers of the Paris Conference was: Was there a 'Great Labour Unrest' in the Netherlands such as the period coined as such in Great Britain? Second, was there a relation between the strike movements during 1900-1914 in the UK and the Netherlands? And third, regardless of the fact whether the two movements were connected or not, is there an explanation for the strike movement in the Netherlands? My answer to the first question is that in historical sources and literature there was no such thing as a "Great Labour Unrest" in the Netherlands. The phrase is not mentioned at all. There was, however, a growth in strike activity, but this remained in the shadow of the lost 1903 general strike. This strike

³⁸ CRONIN, James E. "Stages, cycles and insurgencies: the economics of unrest". In: HOPKINS, T.K. Hopkins and WALLERSTEIN, I. *Processes of the world-system*. vol. 3, Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980. pp. 101-118; SCREPANTI, Ernesto. "Long Cycles in Strike Activity: an Empirical Investigation". *British Journal of Industrial Relations*. vol. XXV, n.1, 1987; GATTEI, Giorgio. "Elke 25 jaar? Stakingsgolven en lange economische cycli". *Vlaams Marxistisch Tijdschrift*. vol. 25, n. 1, 1991 [1989].

³⁹ VAN DER BERG, Annette. *Trade Union Growth and Decline in the Netherlands*. Rotterdam: Tinbergen Institute Research Series, 2003.

was the moment in the history of Dutch labour in which revolutionaries and reformers definitively parted ways.

One of the strikes that shaped the strike movement of 1900-1914 was the seamen's strike of 1911. This strike was part of an international campaign by Havelock Wilson of the ITF and had its counterpart in a strike in England. While the strike by the British workers was a massive and undivided manifestation of working class strength, in the Netherlands the strikers were divided along the lines of "syndicalism" and "modern" unionism. Rotterdam and Amsterdam showed different stories with different outcomes.

Although the strike movement was not coined the "Great Labour Unrest" the years under study showed a growing strike movement. This movement had – apart from the seamen's' strike – no connection to the events across the Channel. There seems to be a weak correlation to the rising phase of the third Kondratiev wave. As is the case with all correlations, this correlation does not have any explanatory character. After all, the Kondratiev itself is also shaped by the class struggle.

The strike movement of the years immediately preceding World War I was a great one, but smaller than the 1903 movement. An explanation for the emergence of this movement can only be found in the political and socio-economic peculiarities of Dutch history in those years although in the background the world economy and discussions in the world labour movement played a role. This final remark is perhaps a little disappointing and an open door, but so far I cannot find anything better. And, to my knowledge, no one has.

Table 1. Phases of the Kondratiev waves, 1780-2045

First Kondratiev wave.	Rising phase – from late 1780s-early 1790s to 1810-1817.
	Declining phase: from 1810-1817 until 1844-1851.
Second Kondratiev wave	Rising phase: from 1844-1851 until 1870-1875.
	Declining phase: from 1870-1875 until 1890-1896.
Third Kondratiev wave.	Rising phase: from 1890-1896 until 1914-1920.
	Declining phase of the third cycle: from 1914-1920 until 1936-1940.
Fourth Kondratiev wave.	Rising phase: from 1936-1940 until 1966-1971.
	Declining phase: from 1966-1971 until 1980-1985.
Fifth Kondratiev wave	Rising phase: from 1980-1985 to 2000-2007.
	Declining phase from 2000-2007 until approximately 2015-2025 (forecast).

Sixth Kondratiev wave.	Rising phase from 2015-2025 until 2035-2045 (forecast).
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Table 2. Strikes and lockouts in the Netherlands, 1901-1920

Year	Strikes			Lockouts		
	Number	Strikers	Strike days	Number	Locked out workers	Lock out days
1901	153	6,152	68,939	2	300	1,890
1902	158	14,405	456,679	18	3,780	280,017
1903	199	61,913	278,417	19	1,616	15,729
1904	115	4,910	95,820	21	6,818	489,569
1905	167	5,225	66,115	7	2,505	15,862
1906	213	10,744	207,546	22	7,956	65,687
1907	173	12,919	322,683	20	3,640	116,733
1908	118	5,709	57,154	29	1,536	35,028
1909	156	6,437	203,126	41	1,801	58,250
1910	151	4,897	90,087	15	8,931	246,014
1911	234	18,521	427,642	9	977	12,874
1912	306	20,459	302,996	20	2,186	66,005
1913	447	24,441	423,143	29	5,966	359,252
1914	289	14,141	303,155	27	1,883	59,492
1915	286	14,027	150,321	11	1,006	22,429
1916	424	22,917	250,408	30	2,140	86,247
1917	385	34,443	333,584	20	5,438	222,286
1918	372	45,239	647,196	24	3,865	47,167
1919	729	59,044	1,019,053	29	5,810	89,245
1920	551	69,627	1,709,443	14	19,345	610,638

Source: <https://collab.iisg.nl/web/labourconflicts/stakingen-in-nederland>