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Working Class Women's Active Participation in the 1910-14 British Labour Revolt

Ralph Darlington

The so-called 'Labour Unrest' – or what more accurately should be termed 'Labour Revolt' - that swept Britain in the years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War between 1910 and 1914 was one of the most sustained, dramatic and violent explosions of industrial militancy and social conflict the country has ever experienced.¹ After some 20 years of relative quiescence in strike activity, there was a sudden and unanticipated eruption that spread rapidly on a scale well in excess of the 'New Unionism' upsurge of 1889-91.

The strike wave involved a number of large-scale disputes in strategically important sections of the economy involving miners, seamen, dockers and railway and building workers, as well as many other industries. It was a revolt dominated by unskilled and semi-skilled workers, encompassing both members of established and recognised trade unions, and also workers hitherto unorganised or unrecognised who became engaged in a fight to build collective organisation and for union recognition against the hostility of many employers. Action largely took place unofficially and independently of national trade-union leaderships whose unresponsiveness to workers' discontents, endeavours to channel grievances through established channels of collective bargaining and conciliation machinery, and advocacy of compromise and moderation was rejected by workers in favour of militant organisation and strike action from below.

But remarkably, beyond a few single-case studies,² little detailed attention has been given within the fields of industrial relations and labour history to the gender dimension, namely the prominent role played by women workers

¹ DARLINGTON, R. *Labour Revolt in Britain 1910-14*. London: Pluto Press, 2023.

² For example, GORDON, E. *Woman and the Labour Movement in Scotland 1850-1914*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991; KENEFICK, W. 'Locality, Regionality and Gender: Revisiting Industrial Protest Among Women Workers in Scotland 1910-13'. *Journal of Irish and Scottish Studies*, Vol. 8, n.2, 2015, pp. 34-58.

and non-working women in this strike wave revolt and social confrontation. Yet women workers were neither passive observers nor peripheral to the Labour Revolt, but played an active role in a number of stoppages, with young women and girls often the driving force. While the overall number of women workers on strike from 1910 to 1914 was only a fraction of the number of their male counterparts, they participated in numerous strikes both in women-only workplaces and in predominately male workplaces. Many strikes took place in workplaces where most, if not all, workers were not union members before the strike and there was no or little prior form of collective organisation, such that, apart from strike demands over pay and conditions, the issue of union recognition often became the focal point of the women's grievances. However, a number of important large strikes also took place in highly unionised environments, such as the Lancashire 1910 spinners' and 1911-12 weavers' lockouts, and the 1912 Dundee jute workers' strike. And in many male workers' strikes, in industries such as transport, mining and the railways, the wives of workers on strike often mobilised crucial financial support and actively participated in demonstrations, on picket lines and in violent confrontations with scabs, police and military.

This paper attempts to fill the research gap, based on an analysis of 19 different strikes across a varied set of industries in which women were directly involved as workers (in both non-unionised and unionised contexts), as well as 11 other strikes in which they were externally involved *en masse* in supporting predominately male strikers. It explores the causes, features, dynamics, limits and potential, and broader consequences of this activity. Drawing on a range of secondary industrial relations and labour history literature, and deploying new archival material (including papers from trade unions, the Home Office and the Board of Trade), and mainstream and radical left newspapers to foreground hitherto neglected aspects, it reveals fresh insights and provides a systematic analysis that draws out some historical and comparative implications.

Women and Trade Unionism

In the period before the First World War, many trade unions still displayed indifference or even opposition to the inclusion of women as members, with women's increasing participation in industries previously dominated by men often viewed as threatening the male breadwinner's 'family wage'.³ Partly as

³ BOSTON, S. *Women Workers and the Trade Union Movement*. London: Davis-Poynter, 1980; LEWENHAK, S. *Women and Trade Unions: An Outline History of Women in the British Trade Union Movement*. London: Ernest Benn, 1977; SOLDON, N.C. *Women in British Trade Unions 1874-1976*. Bristol: Gill and Macmillan, 1978.

a consequence of such negative predominant attitudes, more than 90 percent of all trade unionists were men in 1914, even though there was a significant increase in union membership among women in the period 1910 to 1914.

Some of the general labour unions that emerged from the ‘New Unionism’ strike upsurge (such as the Matchmakers’ Union and Gas Workers’ and General Labourers’ Union) welcomed the recruitment and organisation of women workers, and there was a notable concentration of women union members in the cotton, jute and boot and shoe industries. A Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) fostered the organisation of women in the same unions as men in predominately female trades. Yet by its very nature, the WTUL excluded the many thousands of women in male-dominated industries where they were excluded from existing unions, as well as in trades where there was no union. Moreover, it was committed to social peace in industry, as opposed to ‘tirades against the bourgeoisie’ which were regarded as ‘unreal’.⁴

It was to address this problem that the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW) – an all-female organisation – was founded by Mary Macarthur in 1906. It organised women working both in predominately male-dominated industries where they were refused admission to the existing unions, as well as women working in unorganised trades where there was no union.⁵ Macarthur regarded a separate national women’s federation as a necessary temporary form of organisation through which women could gain a sense of solidarity and overcome their fragmented and isolated position.⁶ But the NFWW co-operated as far as it could with established unions and gave its active support to the policy of joint organisation for men and women employed in the same trade or industry where that was possible.⁷ Integral to its relative success in growing from 2000 to 20 000 members between 1906 and 1914, with more than 70 branches on the eve of war,⁸ was the way it developed an evangelical style of trade unionism that made determined efforts to use militant strike action as the chief means of organising unorganised

⁴ GOLDMAN, H. *Emma Patterson: She Led Women into a Man’s World*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974.

⁵ DRAKE, B. *Women in Trade Unions*. London: Virago, 1984; HUNT, C. *The National Federation of Women Workers, 1906-1921*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; HUNT, C. *Righting the Wrong: Mary Macarthur 1880-1921: The Working Woman’s Champion*. Birmingham: West Midlands History, 2019.

⁶ HAMILTON, M.A. *Mary Macarthur: A Biographical Sketch*. London: Leonard Parsons, 1925, p. 42.

⁷ HUNT C. ‘Sex Versus Class in Two British Trade Unions in the Early Twentieth Century’. *Journal of Women’s History*, Vol. 24, n.1, 2012, pp. 86-110.

⁸ DRAKE, B. *Women in Trade Unions*. Op. Cit.

women workers.⁹ Indeed, the union's record was largely one of supporting numerous women's strikes across the country.

The mixed-sex Workers' Union – which had been formed in 1898 as a general trade union for unskilled and semi-skilled workers – was also active in supporting strikes in which women workers were involved, with Julia Varley, a former NFWW organiser, becoming the union's chief women's organiser in 1912.¹⁰ There were many other strikes of women workers across the country, involving a variety of other unions, such as in the textile industry.¹¹ And another important development was the formation in September 1911 of the Irish Women's Workers' Union (IWWU), with membership open to all women regardless of their industry or job, albeit that, in many respects, it was closer to a women's section of Jim Larkin's Irish Transport and General Workers' Union than an independent union, with Delia Larkin (Jim's sister) becoming the union's general secretary.¹² But, as already mentioned, many women's strikes took place where there was no or little prior union organisation.

Rank-and File Action and Official Union Leadership

Generally, during the 1910-14 Labour Revolt, many strikes developed with a rank-and-file/union officialdom dynamic at their heart, in which both rank-and-file initiative *and* official action was sometimes crucial, even though overall the restraining influence of national union leaders often undermined rank-and-file potential.

On the one hand, many full-time union officials were emphatically opposed to strike action advocated by militants within their ranks and did what they could to stymie rank-and-file initiatives and unofficial action, even though they were not always successful in this endeavour. They often viewed

⁹ ROWBOTHAM, S. *A Century of Women: The History of Women in Britain and the USA*. London: Penguin Books, 1999, p. 23.

¹⁰ HYMAN, R. *The Workers' Union*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971.

¹¹ KENEFICK, W. 'An Effervescence of Youth: Female Textile Workers' Strike Activity in Dundee, 1911-1912'. *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*. N. 33, 2012, pp. 189-221. (2012); KNOX, W. and CORR, H. 2 "'Striking women": Cotton Workers and Industrial Unrest c.1907-1914'. In W. KENEFICK and MCIVOR, A. (eds.) *Roots of Red Clydeside 1910-1914?: Labour Unrest and Industrial Relations in West Scotland* (pp. 107-128). Edinburgh: John Donald, 1996.

¹² KING, C. 'A Separate Economic Class?', Book Review: 'These Obstreperous Lassies: A History of the Irish Women's Workers' Union'. *Saothar*. N. 14, 1989, pp. 67-70; MORIATORY, T. 'Larkin and the Women's Movement', in (ed.) Nevin, D. *Jim Larkin: Lion of the Fold*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2006, pp. 95-96; JONES, M. *These Obstreperous Lassies: A History of the Irish Women Workers' Union*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988.

spasmodic unofficial stoppages as undesirable, undermining their credibility with employers with whom they had struck agreements on behalf of their members. On the other hand, subject to significant pressures from their rank-and-file union members, with the perceived failure to deliver some improvements in pay and conditions raising the danger of workers bypassing them by acting unofficially, even some moderate union officials occasionally felt obliged to identify with, give official support to, and even call strike action themselves, although they often viewed this as the means to assert officially-sanctioned control that could restrain the struggle. But in addition to those individual local or district-based full-time union officials, who, because they were closer to rank-and-file members, tended to be more responsive to militant pressure from below, there were also a layer of officials who could more accurately be described as union ‘organisers’, including women such as MacArthur, Varley and others.

Significantly, many women’s strikes followed a pattern whereby women workers would ‘spontaneously’ walk out on strike and then call on the NFWW, the Workers’ Union WU or other unions to send an organiser. In the case of MacArthur and Varley, they often helped to enrol workers in the union *en masse*, form a strike committee, launch a strike fund, and campaign for solidarity from other external sources, whilst at the same time helping to negotiate with employers to win improvements in pay and conditions and union recognition.

For example, when 15 000 unskilled women workers in 20 different food processing, glue and box-making factories in Bermondsey, London, walked out in 1911, they immediately turned to the NFWW for assistance and both Mary MacArthur and Marion Phillips of the Women’s Labour League threw themselves into setting up headquarters in the local Labour Institute and ILP base, helping to co-ordinate setting up strike committees, organising daily strike meetings and conducting negotiations with a list of wage demands.¹³ Similarly, during the wave of strikes by West Midlands metal workers in 1913, even though local WU officials such as John Beard and Varley had often not initiated strikes, they quickly supported them, articulated workers’ demands, and helped win solidarity, in the process attracting many new union members. As the ASE’s Midlands Organising District Secretary wryly

¹³ DE LA MARE, U. ‘Necessity and Rage: The Factory Women’s Strikes in Bermondsey, 1911’. *History Workshop Journal*. Vol. 61, n.1, 2008, p. 73.

observed: 'The Workers' Union is not so much directing the strikers as following them, and is making members by the thousand'.¹⁴

But although strike action often appeared 'spontaneous and impulsive', the influence of external (often female) full-time union organisers could also be a contributing factor. For example, before the 1910 Neilston textile workers' strike in East Renfrewshire, NFWW organisers Esther Dick and Kate McLean and leading activists from the Glasgow Trades Council had been instrumental in establishing a branch of the union in the factory. Once the dispute had begun, the Federation drafted in Dick to assist the women in negotiations with management, and within days the majority of workers in the mills were NFWW members.¹⁵

Youthful Assertiveness

During the 1910-14 Labour Revolt, an important factor in the assertion of independent working-class power was the role assumed by young workers (both men and women) who were largely free from the defensive mentality associated with earlier forms of official trade unionism conditioned since the defeat of New Unionism in the 1890s and early 1900s, and who eagerly sought new forms of militant organisation that would allow a direct struggle against the employers and the state. Indeed, it was often very young women and girls who were the driving force of the strikes in which they were involved. For example, a high proportion of the 1700 women involved in the 1910 Neilston textile workers' strike were aged between 15 and 18 years old, with many playing a leading role in its organisation.¹⁶ Likewise the militant women strikers in the Jacob's biscuit factory in Dublin who had welcomed the IWWU so enthusiastically in 1911 were, in the main, very young, often in the early teens, and strong in spirit.¹⁷

As with male workers, women's strikes were invariably assertive, with 'direct action' – the notion that no one could help the workers unless they helped themselves, by taking into their own hands the task of organising against employers - becoming the gospel of the day. Belligerent working-class self-confidence and the vigorous and self-emancipatory nature of

¹⁴ ASE *Monthly Journal and Report*, June 1913; CARR, F.W. (1978) 'Engineering Workers and the Rise of Labour in Coventry 1914-1939', PhD, University of Warwick, September 1978, pp. 34-35.

¹⁵ GORDON, E. *Woman and the Labour Movement in Scotland 1850-1914*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, p. 136; KNOX, W. and CORR, H. "'Striking Women": Cotton Workers and Industrial Unrest c.1907-1914'. Op. Cit, pp. 107-128.

¹⁶ GORDON, E. *Woman and the Labour Movement in Scotland 1850-1914*. Op. Cit, p. 136.

¹⁷ MORIATORY, T. 'Larkin and the Women's Movement'. Op. Cit; JONES, M. *These Obstreperous Lassies: A History of the Irish Women Workers' Union*. Op. Cit.

much strike activity with its underlying demand for dignity, self-respect and control over working lives, was a feature of this so-called ‘effervescence of youth’.¹⁸

But in the process, women often brought what Eleanor Gordon termed ‘specifically female characteristics’ to their workplace resistance – spontaneity, lack of restraint, boisterousness – which, she argued, differentiated women’s militancy from more formal male trade unionism. Thus, strikes often displayed a ‘sudden welling-up of confidence among women workers’, with a carnival-type atmosphere with elements of street theatre being generated which was very different to the more ‘sober and serious’ aspect of demonstrations of male workers, and which could involve the subversion of patriarchal authority through ‘ridicule and sexual innuendo’.¹⁹

Women strikers participated in huge numbers on local solidarity demonstrations, often marching in their own contingents – during the 1910 Neilston textile workers’ strike, there was a 5000-strong march of strikers and their supporters to the home of the manager of the mills at Barrhead, some seven miles away, with pipers, singing and banner-waving, and the carrying effigies of the manager.²⁰ During the 1911 Vale of Leven United Turkey Red women’s strike, the NFWW’s Scottish organiser, Kate McLean, succeeded in organising mass meetings and building branches of the union with an estimated membership of 2000. On the first day, the strikers and their supporters – numbering 7000 at the gates – brought the works to a ‘virtual standstill’. Workers formed an impromptu band, behind which both men and women marched, with women pickets lining the streets to jeer strike-breakers with banners declaring ‘White Slaves, Vale of Leven, No Surrender’. A carnival atmosphere within the Vale was evidenced when a march of thousands was escorted by four bands displayed two effigies, one representing the director of the company and the other the firemen-clerks.²¹

With 20 separate women’s strikes joining together in Bermondsey in August 1911, the *Daily Chronicle* reported on a demonstration:

¹⁸ ASKWITH, Lord. *Industrial Problems and Disputes*. Brighton: Harvester Press. [1920] 1974.

¹⁹ GORDON, E. ‘Women, Work and Collective Action: Dundee Jute Workers 1870-1906’. *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 21, n.1, 1987, pp. 42-44; GORDON, E. *Woman and the Labour Movement in Scotland 1850-1914*. Op. Cit; HAMISH FRASER, W. *A History of British Trade Unionism 1700-1998*, London: Macmillan, 1999, p. 120.

²⁰ GORDON, E. *Woman and the Labour Movement in Scotland 1850-1914*. Op. Cit, p. 244; KNOX, W. and CORR, H. ‘“Striking women”’: Cotton Workers and Industrial Unrest c.1907-1914’. Op. Cit, pp. 120-121.

²¹ *Glasgow Herald*, 14 December 1911.

The women seemed to be in the highest spirits. They went laughing and singing through Bermondsey, shouting, 'Are we downhearted?' and answering the question by a shrill chorus of 'No!'. It was noticeable that many of them had put on their 'Sunday Best'. In spite of the great heat, hundreds of them wore fur boas and tippets – the sign of self-respect.²²

The journalist and historian George Dangerfield considered it was as though 'their strike [was] some holiday of the soul, long overdue'.²³

A predominately women's strike in 1914 by more than 1000 workers at Morton's, a food preparation factory in Millwall, east London, involved a march around the area in which the *Daily Mail* published a photograph under the headline 'Tango Dancing Girl Strikers', with another march to Trafalgar Square accompanied by a band and piper and NFWW banner, and joined at Blackfriars by women workers from Camberwell who were also on strike.²⁴

At the same time, women strikers not only organised picketing outside their workplaces, but also 'flying' picketing, aiming to spread the action to other groups of workers. For example, in July 1914, Mary Bamber, the Liverpool local organiser for the Amalgamated Warehouse and General Workers Union, led a strike of 6000 laundresses, with large mass meetings, pickets, visits to individual scabs' homes to persuade them to join the strike, and a seven-mile march of 1200 women to form a mass picket to close down a laundry in Formby, in the north end of Liverpool.²⁵

During the 1911 Cardiff transport strike, strikes extended with a number of 'marching gangs' of pickets touring the docks and surrounding streets to spread the strike against the advice of their union officials to many other of Cardiff's myriad of dockside workplaces. These included flour mill workers, manufacturing and engineering workers, laundry assistants and wire-rope and brattice cloth workers. The police complained about intimidation 'by bodies of men and women going from place to place with a view to inducing those inclined to remain at work to join their ranks'. When women factory and workshop workers joined the strike wave, the *South Wales Daily News* reported 'the feminine strike was not without its exciting incidents', as women and girls on the potato wharves forced entry into other premises, including Hancock's brewery, where they pitched

²² *Daily Chronicle*, 15 August 1911.

²³ DANGERFIELD, G. *The Strange Death of Liberal England 1910-1914*. London: Serif, [1935] 1997, p. 216.

²⁴ *Daily Herald*, 25 March 1914; JACKSON, S. and TAYLOR, R. *East London Suffragettes*. Stroud: The History Press, 2014, pp. 138-139.

²⁵ REES, J. 'Mary Bamber, 1874-1938'. *North West Labour History*, N. 42, 2017, p. 44.

casks of beer into the docks, and Frank's sweet factory, where it was alleged that 'several employees complained that they were literally dragged out'.²⁶

Women's strikers were also involved in generating financial support and arranging for the collection and distribution of food. For example, in the 1910 Cradley Heath chain makers' strike, the women strikers organised collections outside churches, chapels, football grounds, factories and trade-union meetings, with more than 200 trade union bodies donating to the strike fund by the second week of the strike. So successful were attempts to raise support that a remarkable £4,000 [£482,000 today] was received by the end of the dispute, thereby making it possible to provide all the women with strike pay of five shillings a week, as well as handouts of food and a milk ration for those with children.²⁷

During the 1913 West Midlands metal workers' strikes, because most strikers entered the dispute as non-unionists, they were ineligible for strike pay. So, a massive community effort provided relief, with charity shows at theatres, tradesmen donating food and the Town Council of Smethwick feeding children at school. Frequent meetings and demonstrations were held to maintain morale.²⁸ And during the 1913 Dublin workers' lockout, when Jim Larkin went to seek support from British workers, Delia effectively took charge of the entire undertaking to feed the ITGWU's and IWWU's members and their dependants throughout the six-month dispute. A women's committee of union volunteers, strikers' relatives and the circle of political women in Dublin provided daily breakfasts for 3000 children, lunches for nursing mothers and the distribution of clothing.²⁹

Meanwhile invariably women involved in disputes developed their own organic rank-and-file strike leaders, with representation on their own strike committees or joint male and female strike committees (as during the 1913 West Midlands metal workers' strikes), as well as part of the negotiating teams with management (as in the 1911 Clydebank strike at the huge American-owned Singer sewing machine plant).

²⁶ *South Wales Daily News*, 22 July 1911.

²⁷ BARNESLEY, T. *Breaking their Chains: Mary Macarthur and the Chainmakers' Strike of 1910*. London: Bookmarks, 2010, pp. 43-4; SLOAN, N. *The Women in the Room: Labour's Forgotten History*. I.B. Tauris, 2018, p. 169.

²⁸ STAPLES, C.L. and STAPLES, W.G. "'A Strike of Girls': Gender and Class in the British Metal Trades, 1913". *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol, 12, n.2, 1990, p. 166.

²⁹ MORIATORY, T. 'Delia Larkin: Relative Obscurity'. *Op. Cit*, p. 433.

Argument of Force

Throughout the 1910-14 Labour Revolt, employers attempted to break strikes by encouraging so-called 'blackleg' [sic] labour,³⁰ which invariably led to outbursts of violent confrontation. In the process, women strikers (like their male counterparts) were often aggressive, with many actively involved in mass picketing aiming to try to prevent scabs from breaking strikes, including physical attacks on scabs, albeit that this often-received backing from other workers and local supporters. For example, when six Kilbirnie Curtain net strikers were tried in Kilmarnock for intimidation of 'blacklegs', they were accompanied by 'about sixty sympathisers, including pipers and night-shift workers from Glengarock'. Four of the women were found guilty and fined, and on their return to Kilbirnie, the whole town turned out to welcome them.³¹

During the 1913 West Midlands metal workers' strikes, a large crowd of strikers at Fellows Ltd of Bilston tried to storm the works' gates and stoned the 150 policemen posted there, successfully preventing scabs from working in the strikebound factory. Five young women strikers, who were imprisoned for their alleged intimidation of 'blacklegs', were met on their release by a demonstration under the auspices of the WU, with thousands of people lining the route and giving loud cheers for the girls; a large meeting was held afterwards addressed by Varley and local union reps.³²

During the six-month strike in 1913 and 1914 at the Bliss Tweed Mill in Chipping Norton – a small market town in Oxfordshire – that involved 237 woollen-textile workers (125 women and 112 men), there were a number of incidents of assault on 'blacklegs' and police, with strikers going to court and being fined or imprisoned. Annie Cooper, who had worked at the mills for 26 years, was found guilty of assaulting a strike-breaker and sentenced to 14 days in prison after refusing to pay the fine. On her release, Cooper was met by 1000 jubilant supporters, presented with a silver teapot inscribed to commemorate the occasion from the WU's Julia Varley, paraded through the streets in a wagon pulled by the strikers and accompanied by a brass band, and greeted by a packed meeting at the Town Hall.³³

³⁰ The term 'blackleg', although used colloquially without any direct racist overtones by strike participants, has been placed in inverted commas to highlight that it is not the author's term of choice. DARLINGTON, R. 'The Pre-First World War Women's Suffrage Revolt and Labour Unrest: Never the Twain Shall Meet?' *Labor History*. Vol. 61, N.5/6, 2020; DARLINGTON, R. 'Strikers Versus Scabs: Violence in the 1910-14 British Labour Revolt'. *Labor History*. Vol. 63, n.3, 2022.

³¹ GORDON, E. *Woman and the Labour Movement in Scotland 1850-1914*. Op. Cit, p. 249.

³² *Labour Leader*, 11 August 1911.

³³ RICHARDSON, M. "'Murphyism in Oxfordshire'" – The Bliss Tweed Mill Strike, 1913-14: Causes, Conduct and Consequences'. *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*. N. 25/26,

Community Solidarity

Meanwhile, an important feature of many male workers' strikes during the period 1910 to 1914 was the culture of community solidarity that was generated, encompassing not only other local workers but also the relatives, friends and sympathisers of those directly involved in strikes – notably many strikers' wives and female siblings. While this often involved helping to raise financial support and the day-to-day provision of food and other basic necessities to sustain strikes, it also meant many women in the community were mobilised to support male strikers' use of mass picketing.

For example, during the 1911 Horwich locomotive workers' strike, which was entirely male, women sometimes took a prominent part in picketing and demonstrations. They also attended the mass meetings, sometimes in large numbers, and even attempted to vote, with one speaker at a mass meeting feeling it necessary to call on the women 'to be ladylike'. A riot occurred in September when a large crowd, including several hundred strikers' wives and sisters, assembled at the work's main entrance to await the arrival of 'blacklegs', foremen and company officials, with egg-throwing and fights breaking out with police. Police reinforcements were rushed in, and the next day a crowd threw bottles, potatoes and other missiles and smashed the windows of the manager's house, although the Strike Committee deplored the violence and issued a statement dissociating themselves from it.³⁴

The deployment of extensive ranks of police officers, and sometimes even troops, to defend 'blacklegs' and undermine strikes again and again, merely served to intensify women's solidarity mobilisations, sometimes producing large-scale community confrontations. For example, during the 1910-11 South Wales miners' strike, crowds of women were involved in haranguing, ostracising, and sometimes attacking scabs in the streets or at their homes and frog-marching them back home, throwing stones to smash the windows of their empty homes.³⁵ They were also actively involved in mass picketing outside the Llwynypia pit, with a demonstration of between 7000 and 9000 miners and their supporters, culminating in the legendary riot in the nearby town centre of Tonypany, which damaged 63 shops. Shop fronts were smashed and goods of every description, including drapery, millinery, and

2008, pp. 96-7; RICHARDSON, M. *Bliss Tweed Mill Strike, 1913-14*. Bristol: Bristol Radical History Group, 2013, p. 23.

³⁴ WHITEHEAD, J. '1911: The Great Unrest Comes to Horwich'. *North West Labour History Society*. N. 9, 1983, p. 21; 18-19.

³⁵ EVANS, D. *Labour Strife in the South Wales Coalfield 1910-1911*. London: Educational Publishing, 1911, p. 84; *The Times*, 8 November 1910.

grocery provisions, littered the streets, with many women looters carrying away rolls of cloth, hats, umbrellas, bundles of clothing and even shop fittings.³⁶

Later in November 1910 there was the 'battle of Penygraig', a village near Tonypany, when striking miners ran around a warren of terraced streets attacking the police from the rear and the sides, with many women joining the strikers and, from bedroom windows, showering buckets of hot water and household utensils onto the police. Further clashes took place, including one in July 1911 at the Ely pit, when a 3000-plus-strong crowd of miners threw stones at police escorting a 'blackleg' in to work, from positions on the mountainside above the pit. They were supported by women who collected loose stones in buckets and their aprons to provide relays of ammunition. Police baton-charges failed to dislodge the pickets until 80 soldiers arrived from the Somerset Light Infantry, armed with fixed bayonets and ball cartridge.³⁷

During the 1911 national transport strikes, there were also repeated confrontations in which women were involved. In Hull, following rioting by about 2000 dockers, involving police baton-charges and strikers' launching fusillades of stones and bricks, a town councillor who had been in Paris during the 1871 Commune said he 'had never seen anything like this, and...not known that there were such people in Hull – women with hair streaming and half nude, reeling through the streets smashing and destroying'.³⁸

In Manchester there was also mass picketing against scabs, and repeated confrontations and mini-riots between up to 3000 strikers and the police, with pickets holding up all produce for the wholesale market aided by large crowds of women who pelted officers with peas and raspberries, to which police responded with baton-charges.³⁹ As elsewhere, an important feature of the strike dynamic was the support provided by the wives of seamen and dockers, who regularly addressed mass meetings, with over 100 assembling at the docks gates on one occasion to encourage strikers to remain firm. On Friday 7 July, a demonstration of about 2000 women 'in their tattered shawls and gowns', many of them carrying children in their arms, marched from Salford

³⁶ *Daily Mirror*, 10 November 1910; EVANS, G. and MADDOX, D. *The Tonypany Riots 1910-1911*. Plymouth: University of Plymouth Press, 2010, p. 76.

³⁷ EVANS, D. *Labour Strife in the South Wales Coalfield 1910-1911*. Op. Cit. pp. 90-95; 111.

³⁸ ASKWITH, Lord, *Industrial Problems and Disputes*. Op. Cit, p. 150.

³⁹ *Daily Mirror*, 5 July 1911.

to Manchester city centre with banners carrying slogans such as ‘Our Poverty is Your Danger – Stand by Us!’.⁴⁰

During the 1911 Liverpool transport strike, following a police attack on a rally in St George’s Square (‘Bloody Sunday’), there was rioting on the streets for the following two days, including an attack by 3000 on a convoy of five prison waggons transporting convicted Bloody Sunday prisoners to Walton Gaol under the protection of mounted police and soldiers, resulting in two strikers being shot dead. Although the strike committee disclaimed any responsibility for the protest, arguing that ‘none of the men who took part in the attack on the van were strikers’, the records of those hospitalised and arrested reveals it involved not only dockers and carters, but also local women and children.⁴¹

During the 1912 national miners’ strike, in a few areas where attempts were made to re-open pits with ‘blackleg’ labour backed up by police or military, there were isolated incidents of ‘disorder’. For example, in March, rioting by crowds of up to 6000 pickets and their supporters, including hundreds of women carrying their children, took place for several hours in the Cannock Chase coalfield in Staffordshire, involving ‘threats of vengeance’ against men who were working. Stones and other missiles were thrown, buildings attacked, and windows and plant damaged, leading to police reinforcements being hastily summoned from various districts, and repeated baton-charges to disperse the crowd. Five hundred troops from the 1st West Yorkshire Regiment arrived shortly afterwards.⁴²

And, during the 1913 Cornish clay workers’ strike, strikers sent pickets from pit to pit in mid-Cornwall, winning support, and Julia Varley from the WU was sent to organise the miners’ wives and families of the strikers, holding large demonstrations. When a demonstration of 300 to 400 strikers near Bugle, which included two ‘waggonettes’ full of women organised by Julia Varley, was baton-charged by the police,⁴³ the attack attracted the attention

⁴⁰ *Manchester Guardian*, 8 July 1911; ROBERTS, R. *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century*. London: Penguin, 1990, pp. 94-95; FROW, E. and FROW, R. *The General Strike in Salford in 1911*. Salford: Working Class Movement Library, 1990, p.15; IVES, M. ‘Understanding the Workers’ Revolt of 1911 with Special Reference to the Transport Strikes in Manchester and Salford’. BA Thesis, University of Manchester, 1986, p. 33.

⁴¹ HOLTON, B. *British Syndicalism 1900-1914*. London: Pluto Press, 1976, pp. 101-102; DAVIES, S. and NOON, R. ‘The Rank-and-File in the 1911 Liverpool General Transport Strike’. *Labour History Review*, Vol. 79, n.1, 2014, pp. 69-72.

⁴² ‘Disturbances at Cannock Chase’. 27-28 March 1912, National Archives, HO 45/10675/218.781/130; *Daily Mirror*, 28 and 29 March 1912; *The Times*, 28 March 1912.

⁴³ COSTLEY, N. *The 1913 China Clay Strike*. South West Trades Union Congress, 2013, p. 37.

of the national press and a resolution from the annual TUC Congress protesting against the violent conduct of the police imported into Cornwall.⁴⁴

Strikes and Union Membership Growth

During the 1910-14 Labour Revolt, the realisation that militant strike action could win major concessions from employers had a 'demonstration effect' that encouraged strikes as a key weapon across many industries and led, despite a dramatic reversal of fortune in some individual battles, to a spectacular growth in the total power of organised labour:

...unions became the beneficiaries of a virtuous circle of effectiveness and membership. As the scale of strike activity increased, so did the win rate, and as the win rate increased, bargaining coverage rose, more workers perceived unions to be effective and joined them, which in turn enabled more strikes to be called...and so on.⁴⁵

Previously unorganised workers flocked into unions, with the general unions which catered for less-skilled workers growing much faster than the movement as a whole. In the process, trade-union organisation in Britain was completely transformed, surpassing (in absolute if not relative terms) the achievements of the New Unionism strike wave, with a 62 percent increase in union membership from 2.5 million in 1910 to 4.1 million by 1914, and an accompanying increase in union density (the proportion of workers in the labour force who were union members) from 14.6 percent to 23 percent.

What sharply differentiated this strike wave and accompanying union growth from its late nineteenth predecessor was both its generalised nature and its substantial basis in manufacturing factory-based industries that had been only marginally affected by the earlier upsurge, including an expansion of union organisation among women workers by 54 percent, thereby creating a credible foundation for the spread of female trade unionism beyond its previous textile industry enclave.

For example, after ten weeks on strike, the Cradley Heath chain makers' dispute ended victoriously, with NFWW membership growing to 1700 from 400 before the strike. The ten-day Bermondsey factory strikes resulted in wage rises ranging from one to four shillings a week and improved working conditions, along with union recognition granted by most of the 20

⁴⁴ Report of Proceedings. Forty-Sixth Annual Trades Union Congress, Manchester, 1-6 September 1913, pp. 237-239.

⁴⁵ KELLY, J. *Trade Unions and Socialist Politics*. London: Verso, 1988, p. 101.

employers; the NFWW recruited 2000 members. The 1913 Kilbirnie curtain net workers' strike was resolved after 21 weeks, with the women obtaining a pay increase which, although less than the initial demand, was regarded as a victory, as well as union recognition, with the NFWW enrolling almost 1000 new members. The 1914 Morton's strike in east London lasted 12 days before management, having been overwhelmed by the strikers' public support and embarrassed by the media coverage, agreed to the strikers' demands, including a general wage increase of between ten and 25 percent; 960 women were enrolled by the Federation.

Suffrage Movement Influence

Significantly many women strikers appear to have been influenced and emboldened not only by the growing industrial militancy in which their predominately male counterparts in the trade unions were involved, but also by the militant women's suffrage movement of the period.⁴⁶ Throughout the period of the Labour Revolt, the simultaneous campaign to try to bend parliament to its will and grant women the vote mounted by the suffragettes (the Women's Social and Political Union, WSPU) and suffragists (including the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies) challenged the legitimacy of existing forms of parliamentary democracy.

Of particular relevance was the way the WSPU suffragette leaders escalated their militant campaign of civil disobedience by appealing for a new burst of militancy, with Emmeline Pankhurst declaring: 'The argument of the broken pane is the most valuable argument in modern politics'.⁴⁷ It resulted in coordinated mass breaking of windows of famous department stores in London's West End, physical assaults on government ministers (including the prime minister, home secretary and chancellor), blowing up letter boxes, setting fire to well-known buildings and country houses, and slashing art works in galleries.⁴⁸ As a result of this escalating militant campaign, the suffragettes were to be at the receiving end of extreme repression and violence from the government and police, with more than 1000 activists across the

⁴⁶ HUNT, C. *The National Federation of Women Workers, 1906-1921*. Op. Cit, p. 49; DARLINGTON, R. 'The Pre-First World War Women's Suffrage Revolt and Labour Unrest: Never the Twain Shall Meet?' Op. Cit; DARLINGTON, R. *Labour Revolt in Britain 1910-14*. Op. Cit.

⁴⁷ *Votes for Women*, 23 February 1912.

⁴⁸ RIDDELL, F. 'Can We Call the Suffragettes Terrorists? Absolutely'. *BBC History Magazine*, May 2018, pp. 66-67; ATKINSON, D. *Rise up Women! The Remarkable Lives of the Suffragettes*. London: Bloomsbury, 2018.

country arrested and imprisoned for their actions, and many subjected to systematic force-feeding torture.

In the process, the overall weakening of traditional respect for 'law and order' and constitutional behaviour that characterised the militancy of both the suffrage movement and labour struggles of the period⁴⁹ was reflected in the way in which, as we have seen, many women's strikes across the country were very assertive, and often aggressive, in a context in which philosophies based on the notion of militant 'direct action' became widespread.⁵⁰ In the process, they sometimes adopted 'suffrage tactics of propaganda and demonstration' in order to give maximum impact to their actions, with the production of many leaflets, strike songs, banners, postcards, ribbons, and badges to publicise their struggles.⁵¹

On occasion, the link between the Labour Revolt and the suffrage revolt was relatively explicit. For example, during a strike at the Gundry's net and rope factory in Bridport, Dorset, in February 1912, it was reported that women strikers marched through the streets of the town singing the suffragette anthem 'Shoulder to Shoulder'.⁵² Likewise, at a mass rally in Southwark Park for the Bermondsey women's strikers, platform speaker Charlotte Despard, the ex-WSPU leader who had devoted herself to the strike from the moment it started, was greeted with rapturous cries of 'Good Old Suffragette!'.⁵³

And the support shown by Sylvia Pankhurst and her East London Federation of the WSPU for local workers' struggles was reciprocated in 1913 when dockers' and gas workers' unions marched alongside them on suffrage demonstrations, and dockers acted as stewards and bodyguards – on one occasion in October 1913 fighting hand-to-hand with the police when Pankhurst spoke in Bow.⁵⁴ Similarly, the Sheffield organiser for the WSPU,

⁴⁹ Further adding to the extra-parliamentary and unlawful context was the battle for Irish independence from British imperialism and the threat of civil war that arose from a reactionary counter-mobilisation against the government's proposed Home Rule Bill that was mounted by Ulster loyalists, backed by their supporters in the Conservative Party and upper echelons of the British military. See HALÉVY, E. *A History of the English People, Vol. 2: 1905-1915*. London: Ernest Benn, [1934] 1961.

⁵⁰ HUNT, C. *The National Federation of Women Workers, 1906-1921*. Op. Cit, p. 49; COLE, G.D.H. *A Short History of the British Working-Class Movement, 1789-1947*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1948, p. 321; DARLINGTON, R. 'The Pre-First World War Women's Suffrage Revolt and Labour Unrest: Never the Twain Shall Meet?' Op. Cit.

⁵¹ THOM, D. *Nice Girls and Rude Girls: Women Workers in World War I*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1998, p. 103; THOM, D. 'The Bundle of Sticks: Women, Trade Unionists and Collective Organisation'. In JOHN, A.V (Ed.), *Equal Opportunities: Women's Employment in England 1800-1918* (pp. 261-289). Oxford: Blackwell, 1986, p. 269.

⁵² *Bridport News*, 16 February 1912.

⁵³ *Votes for Women*, 25 August 1911.

⁵⁴ ATKINSON D. *Rise up Women! The Remarkable Lives of the Suffragettes*. Op. Cit, p. 442.

Molly Morris, described how a number of working men who were active in the labour movement (including her future husband, engineering shop stewards' leader J.T. Murphy) used to frequent the WSPU's shop in the centre of the city, were interested in *Votes for Women*, and 'could always be relied upon without asking to act as bodyguards whenever they knew some of us had decided to do some heckling at an opponent's meeting.'⁵⁵

There were some important areas of dialogue, overlap and activity that highlighted the potential for cross-fertilisation between the suffrage and labour movements and for the broader linking of class and gender issues, even if these were not always necessarily consciously recognised, pursued or developed. For example, Sylvia Pankhurst and her East London Federation played a key role in creating a tradition of struggle that linked female suffrage to trade union organisation to improve working women's wages and conditions as part of a wider struggle over poverty, housing and other social issues.⁵⁶ As Dangerfield noted, she discovered 'with unerring instinct, the sources of the country's most profound unrest' and 'carried the purple, white and green banner of militant suffrage into the great movement which...was then surging against the bulwarks of organised Capital'.⁵⁷ It was precisely such activity that led to Sylvia and her federation being expelled from the WSPU by her mother and sister (Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst) who had moved away from its labour-movement roots and separated feminist and socialist projects.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, the expelled group, adding red to its suffragette colours and changing its name to the East London Federation of Suffragettes, continued to build up its influence within working class communities; by the summer of 1914 it had five branches and its newly-launched *Woman's Dreadnought* newspaper had a readership of up to 10 000.⁵⁹

At the same time, the independent left-wing national daily newspaper, the *Daily Herald*, which played an important role in regularly reporting on and supporting both the women's suffrage campaign as well as workers' strikes, and was supported by a network of League branches that drew into its orbit both sets of activists, was another manifestation of the potential for bridges

⁵⁵ MURPHY, M. *Suffragette and Socialist*. Institute for Social Research, University of Salford, 1998, p. 26.

⁵⁶ CONNELLY, K. *Sylvia Pankhurst: Suffragette, Socialist and Scourge of Empire*. London: Pluto Press, 2013; JACKSON, S. and TAYLOR, R. *East London Suffragettes*. Op. Cit; HOLMES, R. *Sylvia Pankhurst: Natural Born Rebel*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020.

⁵⁷ DANGERFIELD, G. *The Strange Death of Liberal England 1910-1914*. Op. Cit. p 176.

⁵⁸ HOLMES, R. *Sylvia Pankhurst: Natural Born Rebel*. Op. Cit; WINSLOW B. *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism*. London: Verso, 2021.

⁵⁹ WINSLOW, B. *Sylvia Pankhurst: Sexual Politics and Political Activism*, Ibid, p. 69.

between the different militant movements.⁶⁰ Undoubtedly the *aggregated* impact of the labour and women's movements contributed to the broad *zeitgeist* of extra-parliamentary 'direct action', widespread civil disobedience, threats and use of aggressive and violent behaviour, and defiance of the authorities evident during the Labour Revolt.

Potential and Limitations

The aggressive challenge to the legitimacy of public order and state power mounted by strikers (male and female) produced deep levels of social polarisation during the period 1910-14. As previously noted, in pursuing their immediate goals of increased wages, better working conditions and trade union organisation and recognition, workers were confronted not only with intransigent employers and hesitant union leaders, but also hostile civil, police, military and government authorities. The collective willingness to flout, challenge and defy these established authorities was another difference from the earlier 'New Unionism' strike wave, with the widespread aggressive and often violent militancy during the later 'mass rebellion' contrasting with the largely more peaceful action previously.

Many workers also became disaffected with parliamentary politics as a result of the functioning of the newly formed Labour Party in the House of Commons, which acted as a mere adjunct of the post-1906 Liberal Party government and frowned on militant industrial struggle. Consequently, the established 'rules of the game' – piecemeal social reform by means of institutionalised collective bargaining and parliamentary action – were widely questioned and put under considerable strain, reinforcing the appeal of combative industrial struggle as the weapon to advance labour movement interests.⁶¹

It should be noted that trade union organisations and radical left political groups rallied to women strikers' causes, with strikes often generating considerable levels of support from other workers locally, regionally and even nationally. Thus, regular financial collections in workplaces, trade union branch and trades council meetings, and public solidarity rallies and demonstrations, all yielded considerable sums and helped to sustain the struggles. Meanwhile, despite only forming a small minority of the labour

⁶⁰ LANSBURY, G. *The Miracle of Fleet Street: The Story of the Daily Herald*. Nottingham: Spokesman, [1925] 2009; HOLTON, B. 'Daily Herald v. Daily Citizen, 1912-15: The Struggle for a Labour Daily in Relation to the "Labour Unrest"'. *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 19, n.3, 1974, pp. 347-376.

⁶¹ DARLINGTON, R. *Labour Revolt in Britain 1910-14*, Op. Cit.

movement, an enormous level of solidarity was also generated for individual strikes by the radical left. Some were left-wing members of the Independent Labour Party, or the two main Marxist political parties, the Social Democratic Federation (that became the British Socialist Party in 1911) and Socialist Labour Party. Others were supporters of Tom Mann's Industrial Syndicalist Education League, as well its various offshoots in different industries (including the Unofficial Reform Committee within the South Wales Miners Federation and the broader Amalgamation Committee Movement that campaigned for industrial unionism). And there was also a wider layer involved in the radical working-class education body, the Plebs League and Central Labour College, as well as Independent Socialist Societies and the support groups around the newspapers *The Clarion* and *Daily Herald* newspapers.⁶² A small but significant layer of working-class women joined most of these organisations.

Nonetheless, there were some individual setbacks for women strikers, including a partial defeat in the 1911-12 North East Lancashire cotton weavers' lockout (in which women formed the majority of the workforce), which, despite winning a five percent increase in piece rates, failed to establish the union closed shop.⁶³ And there was a significant defeat of the 11 000 strikers at the 1911 Singer Clydebank plant (involving a sizeable minority of women workers), with the systematic victimisation of leading activists and the virtual collapse of trade unionism.⁶⁴

In addition, there was inevitably often a problem with the development of female union activism arising from the way in which women had a dual burden of domestic work in the home and paid work outside it. Evening meetings were very difficult to organise and often unsuccessful – with evenings used by women for sewing, baking, pressing and cleaning, and with little time for rest or reading, let alone listening to speakers at a meeting.⁶⁵ Thus there was a problem of encouraging women on the shop floor to participate in decision-making processes of the union rather than their more highly educated middle-class sisters making the decisions for them.⁶⁶

⁶² DARLINGTON, R. *Labour Revolt in Britain 1910-14*. Op. Cit.

⁶³ WHITE, J. L. *The Limits of Trade Union Militancy: The Lancashire Textile Workers, 1910-1914*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1978.

⁶⁴ Glasgow History Workshop, *The Singer Strike, Clydebank, 1911*, Clydebank: Clydebank District Library, 1996; Glasgow History Workshop, 'A Clash of Work Regimes: "Americanisation" and the Strike at the Singer Sewing Machine Company, 1911'. In KENEFICK, W. and MCIVOR, A. (eds.), *Roots of Red Clydeside 1910-1914?: Labour Unrest and Industrial Relations in West Scotland* (pp. 193-213). Op. Cit.

⁶⁵ THOM, D. 'The Bundle of Sticks: Women, Trade Unionists and Collective Organisation'. Op. Cit, pp. 276-277.

⁶⁶ S. KIRTON, *The Making of Women Trade Unionists*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, p. 158.

Moreover, despite the way NFWW branches experienced resounding victories in disputes with employers, resulting in initially high recruitment of new members, numbers could then fall, with branches effectively falling by the wayside, unless there were either national organisers or reliable local activists to build up rank-and-file participation and organise programmes of educational and social events. Problems arose from intimidation of members by employers, the absence of willing, capable volunteers able to co-ordinate activities, the insecurity and enforced temporary nature of employment, poor attendance at branch meetings, which were often held in the evenings, difficulties for women in continuing to pay their subscriptions, and lack of male support. The larger textile unions appear to have had greater success than the federation in recruiting and retaining women members; it was clearly more difficult to sustain membership of a trade union where there was no history of organisation within a trade.⁶⁷

There were also continuing gendered divisions within the labour force generally, with the 1913 Midlands metal workers' strikes resulting in lower pay deals for women workers as the WU failed to challenge the practice of paying unskilled girls and women *less* than unskilled boys and men of the same age, and accepted the notion of the 'family wage' that privileged male workers who, the union believed, were their natural constituency.⁶⁸ The much-heralded new industrial union that emerged in 1910 from the amalgamation of three existing unions into the National Union of Railwaymen rejected the proposal to call itself the 'National Union of Railway Workers' – decreeing that women (13 000 of whom were employed by railway companies) were ineligible for membership. And total female union membership, despite increasing to 427 000 by 1914, still represented only eight percent of the female workforce.

At the same time, there remained a yawning gulf between the militant labour (including radical left) and suffrage movements. Clearly there were some important *objective* factors that mitigated against the development of closer links between the suffrage revolt and labour unrest, including the pronounced gender segregation of the labour market; the overwhelmingly male-dominated composition of trade unionism; the social class differences of the overall membership of respective labour and suffrage movements; and the

⁶⁷ HUNT, C. 'The Fragility of the Union: The Work of the National Federation of Women Workers in the Regions of Britain, 1906-1914'. In DAVIES, M. (ed.), *Class and Gender in British Labour History: Renewing the Debate (or Starting it?)* (pp. 171-189) Pontypool: Merlin Press, 2011.

⁶⁸ STAPLES, C.L. and STAPLES W.G. "'A Strike of Girls': Gender and Class in the British Metal Trades, 1913'. Op. Cit; LEWENHAK, S. *Women and Trade Unions: An Outline History of Women in the British Trade Union Movement*. Op. Cit, p. 141.

overwhelming male composition of members and activists within the radical left organisations.

But such a backcloth was also compounded by crucial *subjective* factors, particularly the narrow and blinkered political orientations and tactics of many key figures within both the labour and socialist as well as the suffrage movements. On the one hand, within the women's movement there was often an exclusive focus on women's suffrage as an end in itself without a link to broader social and political concerns. On the other hand, the radical left was to be severely handicapped by its fairly mechanical political understanding of the link between oppression and exploitation; its abstention from practical intervention within the suffrage movement; and its lack of tactical flexibility in pursuing a united front approach that *both* supported the suffrage movement, including the suffragettes, whilst *at the same time* retaining an independent, class-based socialist politics that aimed to link the fight for suffrage to a broader economic and political struggle against capitalism by working class women *and* men. As a result, even though there were some important interconnections, this did not fundamentally overcome the way in which the Labour Revolt and suffrage revolt generally remained on separate parallel tracks.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ DARLINGTON, R. 'The Pre-First World War Women's Suffrage Revolt and Labour Unrest: Never the Twain Shall Meet?' Op. Cit.

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Three hundred years of British strikes: contours, legal frameworks, and tactics

Dave Lyddon

When an inflationary shock in 2022 unleashed the most significant strike action across Britain for over thirty years, the government proposed further anti-strike laws on top of existing draconian legislation. Three centuries ago, in 1720, thousands of London tailors “burst into open trade revolt” and struck for a pay increase and reduced working hours,¹ exploiting a product market boom: the South Sea Bubble’s beneficiaries wanted smarter clothes. That strike, which forms the starting point of this survey, led to an early statute in effect prohibiting “combinations” in a specific trade. Linking these legislative responses is the (English) “common law” regime that treats “unions as an improper restraint of trade in the market and industrial action as an interference with contracts and property rights”.²

The mid-point of our period – the 1870s (after some manual workers had won the right to vote) – saw unions pressurize governments into a decisive shift from criminal sanctions to civil remedies in the statutory treatment of strikes and strikers, but no change in the common law. There has never been a positive right to strike for British unions or workers (a strike is a breach, not a suspension, of contract) but that has not stopped them from striking. In the criminal era the state, through magistrates (joined later by the police), played a limited role and employers generally had to take the initiative in prosecutions, forcing them to act tactically. In the civil period, collective agreements have never been legally binding on the parties to them (thus keeping the courts out of this activity). These several features mark Britain out from many other industrialized countries.

Not only did Britain experience the first industrial revolution, with the creation of new occupations and industries, but its pre-industrial trades had already developed a significant tradition of association and, as markets fluctuated, strikes. There is, therefore, a longer continuous history of striking than in any other country. A report in the late nineteenth century also claimed

¹ Quote from GALTON, F. W. (ed.). *Select Documents Illustrating the History of Trade Unionism, I. The Tailoring Trade*. London: Longmans, Green, 1896, p. xx.

² WEDDERBURN, Lord. “Freedom of Association and Philosophies of Labour Law”. *Industrial Law Journal*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1989, p. 32.
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that in Britain, “as the foremost producing nation of the world, labour quarrels have been more frequent, on a larger scale, and more pertinaciously fought out, than elsewhere”. Strikes overseas “seldom if ever go on for months and years with dogged persistency as often happens in England”.³

About one-half of strikes (though a larger proportion of strikers and days “lost”) in Britain have been over economic issues: mainly wage rises and (at certain points) against wage cuts.⁴ As a result, strike movements were particularly affected by economic factors, such as the state of product markets, (national, local and occupational) labour markets, and price–wage relationships. Worker and union arguments about non-wage issues, the “frontier of control” challenges to employer and management control, were usually contained within the workplace (though periodically spilled over, as in three major lock-outs in engineering and in the 1984–85 miners’ strike). Even at high points of class struggle, such as during the periodic strike waves, most strikes were restricted to single workplaces (usually only sections or groups within it) and single unions (despite the multi-union character of many industries).

Unlike many European countries, there was also a very limited tradition of political strikes, apart from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, and then the early 1980s, when workers and unions clashed with government policies on industrial relations and wages. That said, some of the big waves of union recognition and also union membership surges – during and immediately after the two world wars and from the late 1960s through the 1970s – occurred when governments felt under some pressure to force employers to collaborate in union-supportive atmospheres, legislatively and administratively. The first and last of these periods (associated with strike waves) were brought to juddering halts, and the last even thrown into reverse, with economic depressions and ideological shifts by new governments.

This survey attempts to capture some of the continuities and discontinuities in this strike experience, from the pre-industrial era to the deindustrialized landscape of much of contemporary Britain. Before proceeding further, there are four preliminary comments. First, there is not the space to discuss the variety of protests that, until the early nineteenth century, made up what Hobsbawm termed “collective bargaining by riot”. There was a strong

³ BOARD OF TRADE, *Report on the Strikes and Lock-Outs of 1888*. C 5809, London: HMSO, 1889, pp. 3, 104.

⁴ CRONIN, J. *Industrial Conflict in Modern Britain*. London: Croom Helm, 1979, pp. 212–219, tables B3 and B4, give raw data on strikes and strikers, 1893–1974. SMITH, C., CLIFTON, R., MAKEHAM, P., CREIGH, S. and R. BURN. *Strikes in Britain*. London: HMSO, 1978, pp. 127–130, tables 25 and 26, give percentages for strikes (1910–76) and days lost (1925–76).

community context to many of these, expressing Thompson’s “moral economy of the crowd”. The strike may have become the dominant form of labour protest in Britain but has never been the only one.⁵

Second, no group of workers is totally unorganized but, for a strike, the “habit of association”⁶ among relatively settled occupational groups has always been key. In the 1890s, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, the pioneer historians and theorists of trade unionism in the Western world, argued: “strikes have been far more numerous in industries which have practised Collective Bargaining *without* Trade Unionism than in those in which durable combinations have existed.”⁷ Even where there were formal unions with an open existence (after 1824), strikes were often not confined to them, especially when involving several workplaces. Movements for a shorter working week (London builders, 1859; north-east engineers, 1871) are examples. In the small coach-making trade only about one-quarter of 250 Glasgow strikers in 1872 for a reduced week were unionists. In the much larger mid-nineteenth-century building trade, Price distinguished between non-unionists prepared to strike (even “to initiate – rather than follow – a movement for improved conditions”) and “blacklegs” (strike-breakers). Often, non-unionists were the majority of strikers. For many, “to be ‘in union’ ... was ... a more common ... experience than to be ‘in the union’.”⁸ As late as 1936, there was no recognized union in about ten per cent of British strikes.⁹ By the twentieth century, such non-unionist strikes were often only resolved by the employer recognizing unions.

Third, national, local, and labour-oriented newspapers have been the most important source for identifying strikes. Their digitization may facilitate attempts at quantification for the era before state records began (in 1888) and fill in many gaps and missing detail for the subsequent period.¹⁰ The labour department initially published information annually on all strikes it identified

⁵ For the period 1750–1850, see CHARLESWORTH, A., GILBERT, D., RANDALL, A., SOUTHALL, H., and C. WRIGLEY. *An Atlas of Industrial Protest in Britain 1750–1990*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996, pp. 1–58. Also see CHARLESWORTH, A. (ed.). *An Atlas of Rural Protest in Britain, 1548–1900*. London: Croom Helm, 1983.

⁶ TURNER, H. A. *Trade Union Growth, Structure and Policy*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1962, p. 106.

⁷ WEBB, Sidney and Beatrice. *Industrial Democracy*. London: Longmans, Green, 1897, p. 220.

⁸ PRICE, Richard. *Masters, Unions and Men*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, pp. 64–71. TURNER, *Trade Union Growth ...*, op. cit., p. 122, suggested the division between unionists and non-unionists became sharper after the late 1870s depression.

⁹ HANSARD, House of Commons, 1 July 1937, column 2167W, written answer.

¹⁰ For example, the *Cotton Factory Times* (1885–1937) and the *Yorkshire Factory Times* (1889–1926) are increasingly available in the subscription-based British Newspaper Archive.

(up to 1899), then only “principal” disputes up to 1913.¹¹ From that date, there has been varying detail;¹² (anonymized) “record books” of strikes from 1901 to 1978 are archived.¹³ Newspaper and official sources can be enriched by union and employers’ association records and, now, their websites (though digital archiving is patchy).

Fourth, a language had to be invented, complicating digital searches. *Strike* (or *fstrike*),¹⁴ as a noun and verb, dates from the 1760s, though the older *turn-out* (a verb, and a noun meaning strike or striker) was still used late into the nineteenth century.¹⁵ Dobson challenged the suggested nautical origin of strike; one possible root is *strike off* (remove from).¹⁶ As a verb, *turn out* is found in 1729 and is probably adapted from turned (or *turn’d*) out of work or dismissed by an employer.¹⁷ Through the eighteenth century, mutiny and desertion were used but, more commonly, refusal to work, quit (quitted) or left work. Although picketing was practised in the late eighteenth century, the word *picket* (sometimes *piquet* or *picquet*), another military term, is not found until the early nineteenth century (as in “captain of the pickets”, 1818 Manchester cotton spinners’ strike);¹⁸ *guard* (1830s) or *sentinel* (London tailors’ strike, 1867) are occasional alternatives.

The term *lock-out* of workers, by employers, was rarely used in the press until the 1853 Preston spinners’ dispute but is found in 1836–37 in Oldham and Preston. Locked-out workers were sometimes termed “lock-outs”, to

¹¹ All strikes, 1888–96; all strikes above minimum thresholds, 1897–1900; then only “principal strikes” from 1901, above a certain size, which, after 1902, varied by sector. Thus, in 1903, there is detail on 72 out of 387 strikes; in 1909, 98 out of 432; and, in the peak year, 1913, some 433 out of 1497. These annual reports, found in UK Parliamentary Papers, finished in 1913. Annual summaries of trade disputes, along with monthly information, were also published in *Board of Trade Labour Gazette*, then *Ministry of Labour Gazette* and its successors: monthly issues, 1893–1970, are in LSE Digital Library, while the more usable annual volumes, up to 1968, are accessible in Hathi Trust Digital Library.

¹² Information on strikes with over 5,000 days “lost” was published, 1957–2001, anonymized apart from industry and locality. At the 1970 peak, this gave detail on 471 of them.

¹³ For record books of strikes reaching minimum thresholds, see Files LAB 34/1–110, The National Archives, London. Details of individual strikes in every fifth year from 1903 to 1938 inclusive are transcribed from these in <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-8994-2>

¹⁴ An f, instead of an s, was found in some words well into the nineteenth century. *The Times* abandoned this usage in 1803.

¹⁵ Sometimes the two run together, as in “turned out on strike”, found as late as 1906.

¹⁶ Used by a tailor at an Old Bailey trial in 1770.

¹⁷ DOBSON, C. R. *Masters and Journeymen*. London: Croom Helm, 1980, p. 19 n. 5, mistakenly suggests this only applied to seafarers. “Turn’d out of work”, as in losing a job, can be found in 1720. To “turn out against” first appears in legislation in 1777. The expression “turn-in” is found in the press in the 1820s (if not earlier) to describe the return to work after a strike.

¹⁸ ASPINALL, A. *The Early English Trade Unions*. London: Batchworth, 1949, p. 282.

distinguish them from turn-outs.¹⁹ By the mid-nineteenth century, *trade union* (originating about 1820) was replacing *combination* (still found in the 1890s).²⁰ *Collective bargaining*, coined in 1891,²¹ rapidly superseded *conciliation* and negotiations. *Unofficial* strike appeared in the late nineteenth century, but *unauthorized* was more common until 1914.

The long view brings a different perspective on strikes, whose history, as with the experience of wage labour, is usually contained in more restricted, and often unlinked, time frames.²² This exploratory survey (with necessarily restricted referencing)²³ develops a limited number of themes running through the period but can only illustrate them sparingly. It clearly cannot be a comprehensive history of three hundred years and there will be many gaps, but it is still a worthwhile exercise in making linkages and seeing patterns over very long periods. One warning: there is far too much to say on the twentieth century but far too little known about the incidence and spread of nineteenth century strikes.²⁴ The survey is in three main sections.

The first outlines the contours and changing sectoral locus of British strikes. Pre-industrial trades dominated in the eighteenth century. Then, as the industrial revolution gathered pace, mining and manufacturing (initially cotton and then engineering and other metal trades) gradually came to the fore, not losing their prominence to the service sector until the 1980s. The

¹⁹ The terms “lock-out” and “strike” are not found or defined in legislation until the Munitions of War Act 1915 but “trade dispute” dates from 1875. KNOWLES, K. *Strikes – A Study in Industrial Conflict: With Special Reference to British Experience between 1911 and 1947*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1952, p. 3, suggests “turn off” (which usually meant dismiss) was an earlier term for lock out but provides no evidence.

²⁰ The term “combination” is first found in a 1667 Act on the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire of 1666. Mainly covering planning and materials, it tried to pre-empt workers taking advantage of the glut of work.

²¹ POTTER, Beatrice. *The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain*. London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1891, p. 217. The author married Sidney Webb the next year.

²² One exception is CHARLESWORTH et al. *An Atlas of Industrial Protest ...*, op. cit., which covers many strike movements over 240 years. For shorter periods, see KNOWLES, *Strikes ... (1911–47)*; DURCAN, J., McCARTHY, W. and G. REDMAN. *Strikes in Post-War Britain. A Study of Stoppages of Work due to Industrial Disputes, 1946–73*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1983; CRONIN, *Industrial Conflict ...*, op. cit. (1870s to 1970s).

²³ Some unreferenced material is from newspaper searches and my unpublished research.

²⁴ For literature on strikes published from 1880 to 1970, see BAIN, G. S. and WOOLVEN, G. B. *A Bibliography of British Industrial Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979, entries 4109–4757. Also see BAIN, G. S. and BENNETT J. D. *A Bibliography of British Industrial Relations 1971–1979*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, entries 2053–2371. For pre-1880 publications, see the bibliographies in WEBB, Sidney and Beatrice. *The History of Trade Unionism*. London: Longmans, Green, 1894, pp. 499–543, WEBB, S. and B. *Industrial Democracy*, op. cit., pp. 879–900, and nineteenth-century Parliamentary Papers. For the last, see the list and commentary in BAGWELL, Philip, S. *Industrial Relations*. Dublin: Irish University Press, 1974, pp. 103–146. The first compilation on important strikes was NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE PROMOTION OF SOCIAL SCIENCE, *Trades’ Societies and Strikes*, London: Parker, 1860 [reprinted 1968].

long-term pattern is of periodic strike waves, though even in these upsurges the underlying bedrock of most individual strikes continued to be small-scale: single workplace and single union.

Most private services (apart from transport and communications) were and are strike-free and often union-free, so it is public services (in which women predominate) – education, health, central and local government – along with the former publicly-owned mail, rail and bus companies, where most strike activity currently takes place. As the public services are generally paid for through general taxation, and most are essential, these strikes have a strong political as well as an economic dimension, giving them a much higher profile and inevitably affecting their tactics.

Labour law is taken next as the main commentators recognize that, especially over strikes, it plays a secondary role compared to economic factors.²⁵ State concern with strikes historically has centred on their economic costs and sometimes public order issues. The rise of the economic doctrine of *laissez-faire* in the eighteenth century clashed with workers' and early unions' defence of existing statutory wage-fixing arrangements. Under common law, most union activity (such as strikes) was deemed "in restraint of trade" and criminal conspiracies. For most of the nineteenth century the legal regime was arguably harsher than in the eighteenth. The "freedom" to strike, conceded in 1875, and reinforced in 1906, was extensive in practice during much of the period to the 1970s, since when there has been significant legislative reaction by Conservative governments espousing neo-liberal economic policies.

Strike tactics are considered last, noting strong continuities from at least the early nineteenth century, such as in the use of picketing and strike pay to make striking more effective, and in employers' counter-strike actions (for example, strike-breaking and victimization), along with tactical changes forced by employers' behaviour and legal constraints. Much British experience in this regard is similar to other industrialized nations – "every industrial group which begins to organize, repeats, in some respects, the behaviour characteristic of ... early labour movements"²⁶ – but with its own distinctive pattern.

²⁵ For example, the leading liberal-pluralist labour lawyer, KAHN-FREUND, Otto. *Labour and the Law*. London: Stevens, 1977, p. 8: "The law has important functions in labour relations, but they are secondary if compared with the impact of the labour market ... and ... with the spontaneous creation of a social power on the workers' side to balance that of management."

²⁶ HILLER, E. T. *The Strike. A Study in Collective Action*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1928, p. 72.

Strike contours and sectoral distribution

We will never know the exact number of strikes, though from the 1890s (covering nearly half our period) we can have some confidence in the trajectory of British strike trends. We are helped by the fact that Britain is probably the only country without a major gap in its strike series.²⁷ From 1893 there are consistent series of three main indicators – strike numbers, workers involved, and days “lost” – which tell us different things though each is problematic.²⁸ All three indicators are used here, as well as the length of strikes. For the quarter-century before 1914 there are also some official records of the number of firms or workplaces involved in individual strikes.²⁹ Strike data are more meaningful when they are broken down by sector, industry or service, and this approach will be taken. One constant feature is the changing occupational mix of strikers as the British economy was and is transformed. This section first analyses the data on strikes before state records began, then discusses strike dimensions from the 1890s, concluding with a brief chronology of strike waves and the periods in between.

Early data

For the eighteenth century we are indebted to Dobson who identified about 350 strikes outside Ireland during 1717–1800; over three-quarters were after 1750.³⁰ My own newspaper searches suggest a higher figure but still only in the hundreds. Combination did not always translate into strikes; and some workers who were prosecuted for leaving work, under Master and Servant Acts, may have been on strike (as, for example, were over 100 Staffordshire colliers imprisoned *en masse* in 1818). The most frequent eighteenth-century strikers were in pre-industrial apprentice-based trades, then textiles (especially wool, mainly in the south-west) and merchant shipping. About one-third of Dobson’s strikes were in London, the main manufacturing centre and a major port (ten times larger than any other British town in 1800 and possibly the world’s largest city then); here at least forty occupations

²⁷ Collection of strike data stopped in March 2020 until mid-2022 because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Starting in 2018, union annual returns (to the Certification Officer) now also give (limited) anonymized strike data. The data are for the United Kingdom, which included Ireland until the end of 1922, but only Northern Ireland after.

²⁸ LYDDON, Dave. “Strike Statistics and the Problems of International Comparison”. In: VAN DER VELDEN, S., DRIBBUSCH, H., LYDDON, D. and K. VANDAELE (eds). *Strikes around the World, 1968–2005. Case-studies of 15 Countries*. Amsterdam: Aksant, 2007, pp. 24–39.

²⁹ Despite coal and cotton experiencing very long multi-employer strikes, almost all their strikes from the late 1880s to 1913 were at single workplaces. This contrasts with building trades where most action was district-based.

³⁰ DOBSON, *Masters and Journeymen*, op. cit.

experienced strikes (and another thirty outside). Wage movements in London by street oil-lamplighters (1777 and 1793) showed that even the “unskilled” could strike. Pin-makers – Adam Smith’s famous example of the division of labour – struck in Manchester in 1785.

Pre-industrial trades remained the most prominent strikers during early industrialization (1780–1840) that was centred on the cotton industry, increasingly driven by steam power. By the beginning of the American Civil War, in 1861, 80 per cent of cotton imported into Britain came from the southern slave states of the USA. Cotton generated 12 per cent of British national income and cotton goods represented 38 per cent of all British exports. The exploitation (and growing resistance) of cotton factory workers, predominantly in Lancashire, was an integral feature of a worldwide capitalist network that traded in human misery on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond.

The second phase of industrialization, until 1895, was based on capital goods industries, particularly iron and steel. Britain, as the “workshop of the world” and at the heart of a huge empire, enjoyed an exceptional position in export markets, while railway construction increased domestic demand for coal, and iron and steel. Steamships and railways facilitated access to overseas markets as well as being exported themselves. The cotton, coal, and iron and steel industries had relatively standard products and paid by piecework, so their main industrial battles were wage-related. Engineering, the child of the industrial revolution, had disparate products and skilled unions; its national lock-outs (1852, 1897–98, 1922) were over union encroachments on managerial prerogative.

Industrialization changed the scale and occupational spread of striking. The first contemporary figures compiled covered the 1870–79 decade, for which Bevan found about 2,350 strikes. Industrialized occupations (iron workers, engineers, shipbuilders, and boilermakers totalled 350, coalminers 310, cotton workers 140) matched still prominent pre-industrial trades (building workers 600, boot and shoemakers 80, tailors 70, though the last two were mechanizing). Only fifteen per cent of Bevan’s strike numbers for 1876–79 can be found in *The Times* newspaper, often seen as an important source.³¹ The stone-masons’ union’s unusually detailed records show about 2,700 strikes in that trade between 1836 and 1896. Yet a later search of *The Times* and the working-class press for 1790–1870, which uncovered 234 strikes and

³¹ BEVAN, G. P. “The Strikes of the Past Ten Years”. *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, vol. 43, no. 1, 1880, pp. 35–54. For strikes in *The Times*, WEBB, S. and B. *The History of Trade Unionism*, op. cit., p. 332, n. 2.

nine lock-outs in London, included no masons' strikes for 1850–60 (though Price has identified no less than seventeen).³²

Too great a reliance on strike reports in *The Times* (the “newspaper of record”, published since 1785 and with useful indexes) would therefore clearly be a mistake. Searching nineteenth-century national (such as the *Manchester Guardian*) and provincial newspapers, union records and the radical and labour press, would more than likely unearth very big numbers of strikes.³³ Many occupations have a significant pre-history of striking buried in newspapers and unpublished dissertations. Gas and rail workers, dockers, even local police forces (which periodically resigned *en masse*), spring to mind. A newspaper report tells us that over 200 striking scavengers and carters left the Edinburgh streets in a “deplorable condition” in 1864, foreshadowing a similar scene during the 2022 Edinburgh Festival. Strikes by gravediggers, to name another unexpected group which made headlines in 1979, can be traced back to the 1870s.³⁴ Although not wage workers, “Resurrection Men” (body-snatchers) who supplied London anatomy schools with corpses for dissection organized their strike equivalent in 1811 when surgeons refused to raise prices.

Strike dimensions from the 1890s

A few years after state records of strikes started being compiled, it was decided to exclude strikes with fewer than ten workers, or lasting less than one day, unless 100 working days were “lost” (a consistent series only dates from 1893). Whatever thresholds were fixed, many strikes just above them would not be counted. A rare estimate suggested that only 62 per cent of eligible manufacturing strikes were picked up in Department of Employment statistics for 1976–77; estimated total strikes (including those below the thresholds) would quadruple the official figure.³⁵ This shows that, at least during the 1970s (and undoubtedly also the late 1960s), striking was much more widespread than official records suggest. The multiplier would be much

³² PRICE, *Masters, Unions and Men*, op. cit., p. 49. GREEN, David. “Lines of Conflict: Labour Disputes in London, 1790–1870”. *International Review of Social History (IRSH)*, vol. 43, 1998, pp. 203–233. The figures in Bevan, Green, and Dobson are available at the Global Labour Conflicts project, <https://datasets.iisg.amsterdam/dataverse/labourconflicts>

³³ One historian refers to “innumerable industrial disputes” in the third quarter of the nineteenth century.

³⁴ LYDDON, Dave. “Striking Facts about the ‘Winter of Discontent’”. *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations (HSIR)*, no. 36, 2015, pp. 213–215.

³⁵ BROWN, William (ed.). *The Changing Contours of British Industrial Relations*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1981, p. 99.

smaller at most other points in time. Until the Office for National Statistics (ONS) took over in 1995, the state labour department used local and national newspapers, and (after 1909) labour exchanges, to identify disputes and send questionnaires to affected employers, who did not have to respond.³⁶ The ONS now relies on union websites and a communist daily (*Morning Star*) and Trotskyist weekly (*Socialist Worker*) newspaper for reports of strikes.

While the recorded number of strikes can be a significant underestimate, the number of working days “lost” (the indicator used in most international comparisons) is much closer to the actual figure, whatever that is supposed to measure. At any point, though, a few very large or very long strikes dominate days-lost figures. For example, during 1960–79, just sixty-four British strikes (0.13 per cent of the total in those years) caused 46 per cent of days lost. This phenomenon was even more pronounced earlier. Coal strikes alone caused two-thirds of days lost in the 1893–1926 period. Just four mining stoppages – 1893 (23.7 million days lost); then over one million miners in the 1912 strike (seven weeks, 30.8m days) and lock-outs of 1921 (three months, over 70m days) and 1926 (over seven months, 145.2m days) – account for nearly half of all days lost in that third of a century.

There was a total of 128,000 strikes in the twentieth century, according to state records.³⁷ Apart from 1913 and 1918–20, in only one year before 1940 were there *over* 1,000 strikes. Then (with one exception) there were *never less than* 1,000 strikes per year until after 1987. This contains twenty-five years – 1955–79 – when (excepting one) there were *never less than* 2,000 strikes per year. As a result, more than three-quarters of twentieth-century strikes occurred between the mid-1930s (with growing economic recovery after the slump of 1929–33) and the mid-1980s (with its prolonged mass unemployment). Over one-third of these were in mining, which experienced more than 1,000 strikes most years from 1944 to 1964, before falling rapidly with the industry’s contraction.

This type of mining strike, the dominant pattern, reflected a different phenomenon to the large set-piece battles (“trials of strength”). Its dimensions are better captured, for numbers involved and length, by using the median, rather than the mean (the traditional measure, which is distorted by very big or very long strikes). During 1893–1913 their median length was six to eight days but had fallen to one day by the late 1930s. The 95th percentile was well over 100 days pre-1914, but down to eleven days by the late 1930s. Church

³⁶ For collection methods, see OUTRAM, Quentin. “Early British Strike Statistics”. *HSIR*, no. 25/26, 2008, pp. 177–196.

³⁷ CRONIN, *Industrial Conflict ...*, op. cit., p. 192, mistakenly suggests over 175,000 strikes from 1888 to 1975.

and Outram, using Shorter and Tilly's terms, suggested that "tests of endurance" had been replaced by "shows of strength". Median strikes in mining involved around 150 workers pre-1914, rose in the First World War, then fell to pre-war levels in the 1930s. The sheer number of mining strikes after 1940 precluded similar detail. A sample every fifth year gave a median strike in 1943 of sixty workers and just over thirty in 1953–63 – much smaller. They remained short: a median of one day throughout.³⁸ Almost all mining strikes were at a single colliery (and most only a section of one) but there were periodic wider movements.

Such strikes were likely all unofficial, not recognized by a union in advance. In fact, during the 1960s and 1970s, 95 per cent of all British strikes were unofficial *and* unconstitutional (in breach of disputes procedures, the "British disease").³⁹ By then the metals, engineering, shipbuilding, and vehicles sector was their main site. A data set for companies in the Engineering Employers' Federation found three-fifths of the strikes it recorded internally during 1920–70 took place in the last six years, 1965–70, when the median length was one-and-a-half days and only a quarter lasted five days or more.⁴⁰ Within this strike explosion, the car industry was prominent, though by the end of the 1960s the giant British Leyland was the only car manufacturing member of the federation. Its constituent factories provided 40 per cent of these engineering strikes in 1969 and 30 per cent in 1970. A separate source reveals that in one twelve-month period in the mid-1960s one car assembly factory experienced 297 stoppages, with 100 lasting no more than half an hour; another had 104, with the majority over in an hour or less. In both cases, many were actually shop-floor meetings.⁴¹ Very few of these short stoppages were even reported to the employers' federation.

³⁸ CHURCH, Roy and OUTRAM, Quentin. *Strikes and Solidarity. Coalfield Conflict in Britain 1889–1966*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 79–80, 225–6. For the data set for 1893–1940, see <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-3899-1>

³⁹ Unofficial action was common earlier. When responding to the Board of Trade during 1888–95, unions approved of three-quarters of strikes that they expressed an opinion on. In 1910–14, about 60 per cent of the 250 cotton strikes were unofficial – WHITE, Joe. *The Limits of Trade Union Militancy*. London: Greenwood Press, 1978, pp. 186–225. Only one-quarter of strikes of unionized workers in 1936 were definitely official – see note 9, above. See, generally, KNOWLES, *Strikes ...*, op. cit., pp. 30–40.

⁴⁰ DEVEREUX, Paul and HART, Robert. "A Good Time to Stay out? Strikes and the Business Cycle". *IZA Discussion Paper* no. 3614, 2008, table 3, which shows 6,455 strikes during 1965–70. For the data set, see <https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-5841-1>

⁴¹ Figures from the Motor Industry Joint Labour Council. The World Labor group database in SILVER, Beverly. *Forces of Labor*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 44, table 4.1, shows 1955–59 as the "high point" of labour unrest in the UK automobile industry. This was based on mentions in the *New York Times* index but is misleading as strike levels were much higher in the 1960s and 1970s.

From 1940 until the mid-1970s there was relatively full employment and soft (often protected) product markets, which facilitated workplace union organization. Widespread (though not universal) industry-wide bargaining also left plenty to be decided at the workplace, hence the strike explosion. One aspect of the unofficial tradition was that when such strikes lasted more than a few days, the union(s) in question would sometimes be forced to “officialize” them, to recognize shop-floor discontent and more effectually to control them. The most spectacular examples of this were at the Ford Motor Company, when unofficial and blatantly unconstitutional strikes, mostly involving tens of thousands, broke out over grading and equal pay (1968), penalty clauses (1969), and pay offers (1971 and 1978).

The third main strike indicator – the number of strikers – measures participation. It exceeded half a million per year infrequently before mid-century, only in years of big coal strikes or the unrest before, during, and after the First World War. Yet this figure was reached most years from 1959 to 1989, with peaks in 1968–74 and 1979–84. The year of greatest participation was 1979, with over four million striking. This was a qualitative shift from the past: striking had become more widespread as unionization had broadened and deepened. It did not last, being followed by a rapid fall. The table below shows the dramatic transformation in all three main strike indicators from the mid-1960s (when mining strikes were declining fast) – with the 1980s a transition period from a high to a historically very low level.

TABLE: *Annual averages of strike activity, 1964–2019*⁴²

Periods	Number of strikes	Workers involved	Working days lost
1964–67	2,233	759,000	2,597,000
1968–74	2,846	1,684,000	11,703,000
1975–79	2,310	1,658,000	11,663,000
1980–84	1,351	1,298,000	10,486,000
1985–90	838	702,000	3,600,000
1991–96	244	226,000	656,000
1997–2001	192	145,000	357,000

⁴² Publicly available annual figures from the ONS and predecessor state sources. The time periods group years with similar numbers of strikes.

2002–08	135	493,000	777,000
2009–14	121	542,000	645,000
2015–19	85	70,000	255,000

Strikes waves and the periods in between

Before discussing this precipitous decline, a little more history. It is now commonplace to recognize “strike waves”.⁴³ There were important strike and union movements in 1824–25 and 1834, and especially the regionally concentrated 1842 “general strike”. In the last two, more than economic issues were raised, the last overlapping with Chartism (and the fight for the vote). To date, historians have not tended to link such movements with the strike waves of the early 1870s and late 1880s when economic booms saw surges in unionization and a strike “contagion” beyond the hitherto local and sectional focus of most strikes. Not until the 1910–14 labour unrest were the gains made in strike upsurges not generally lost in the next economic downturn. Of the fourteen major strike movements in that immediate pre-war period, all but three were district- or region-based. State-sponsored industry-wide wage bargaining from 1916 broadened conflicts. Hence the rash of (often long) national strikes and lock-outs in 1919–26: seventeen in eleven industries, on a scale never since repeated. The immediate post-war boom had been followed by significant deflation and employers trying to cut wages in line with falling prices.

This period culminated in the 1926 “General Strike” (with an estimated 1.58m strikers) to support the miners, most of whom (especially in exporting coalfields) faced significant pay cuts and longer working time. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) could not order unions to strike, so convened a conference of union executive committees, which process bound individual unions. Rail, road transport, docks, iron and steel, printing, and most building, union members came out first. Engineering, shipbuilding and chemical workers joined after eight days but the strike was called off a day later amid much acrimony and the miners left to fight alone.⁴⁴ Workers in cotton (then still the leading export industry) experienced major strikes and lock-outs

⁴³ For a literature summary, see KELLY, John. “Long Waves in Industrial Relations”. *HSIR* no. 4, 1997, pp. 3–35.

⁴⁴ Situating 1926 within a longer tradition, see LYDDON, Dave and JEFFERYS, Steve. “La Tradition des grèves générales au Royaume-Uni”. In: MORELLI, A. and D. ZAMORA (eds). *Grève générale, Rêve général: Espoir de transformation sociale*. Paris: L’Harmattan, 2016, pp. 55–80.

through 1929–32, during the world depression, over work intensification and pay cuts.

There were then very few big strikes before the 1970s at which point pay claims regularly clashed with a series of government wage restraint policies. One exception was a seven-week strike of 120,000 printers which won the 42-hour-week in 1959, followed by the 40-hour week in 1962, opening the floodgates for other manual workers. This repeated the pattern of the two big post-war working-week reductions when some strikes and many strike threats had generally led to 47/48 hours in 1919–20 and 44/45 hours in 1946–49.

The 1968–74 strike wave saw record numbers of strikes in 1969 (3,116) and 1970 (3,906), then a series of big national strikes, not all successful, with the miners' spectacular wage victory in 1972 even eclipsing the Conservative government's self-destruction in face of the 1974 miners' pay strike. The Labour government's efforts to control wages finally blew up in the so-called "Winter of Discontent" of 1978–79 when a pay rise ceiling of five per cent foundered on price increases of twice that level. The largest single strike movement since 1926 then occurred after the Conservatives won the 1979 election when later in the year an "intermittent strike strategy" of one- and two-day strikes by 1.5m engineering workers won the 39-hour week.

The 1980s have been depicted, in Hyman's memorable phrase, as the years of "coercive pacification" when employers "exploited the new opportunities to challenge the former balance of power [...] sometimes brutally, sometimes with sophistication".⁴⁵ Mass unemployment, product market restructuring and government-inspired industrial contraction reached a climax with the 1984–85 year-long miners' strike against pit closures. Two of the other post-war "strike-prone" industries – cars and docks – suffered some major defeats and job loss; two further ones – shipbuilding, and iron and steel – were massively run down and re-privatized. Long-dominant unofficial strikes were dramatically squeezed as individual strikers' vulnerability to dismissal was exposed. Official strikes rose to become the norm after the 1980s (though postal workers developed, and then sustained, a strong unofficial tradition for many years, built on refusing to handle mail diverted from offices on strike).

By historical standards, the period from the early 1990s has seen sustained extremely low levels of strike activity. A year ago, the narrative would have ended with this conclusion, reinforcing the idea of continuing "labour quiescence". But the inflation of 2022–23 changed everything. While some

⁴⁵ HYMAN, Richard. *Strikes* (4th edn). London: Macmillan, 1989, pp. 199–200.

groups (such as university workers, particularly since 2018) had been striking regularly against real wage and pensions erosion in the post-financial-crash (2008) era of austerity, the floodgates now opened. Despite the similarities with the “Winter of Discontent” of 1978–79 (declining real wages and then pay offers well below price rises), there are important differences. Then it was mainly a movement of manual workers: such as lorry drivers in the private sector, and local authority and hospital staff, many of whose public-service jobs have subsequently been outsourced to private companies.⁴⁶ In 2022–23, it is mainly white-collar and professional workers (school-teachers, university staff, civil servants, ambulance staff, nurses and junior doctors), in the public services, who have been prominent alongside rail, postal, bus, and dock workers.

The main union for nurses, the Royal College of Nursing – RCN, had never before had a strike in mainland Britain. Like the doctors’ union (British Medical Association – BMA) and eight other healthcare bodies, its not-for-profit company status as a professional association had to be given special legislative dispensation (in 1971) to include trade union objects in its constitution. The RCN then sustained a no-strike policy until 1995, after which it still resisted industrial action (by contrast, the junior doctors struck several times in 2015–16). Mounting economic and workload pressures forced RCN members to vote for strikes. Even criminal-law barristers (advocates in higher courts), who are not organized in a trade union, so not covered by the law on strike ballots, ran a campaign of escalating action until they were on indefinite strike over pay in September 2022. The Conservative government has turned professionals into strikers. The RCN, with half a million members (90 per cent female), and the BMA with 160,000 (over 50 per cent female), are by far the largest unions still not identifying with the wider labour movement by staying outside the TUC.⁴⁷ Their strikes might mean that is now up for discussion.

The changing legal framework

State policy towards unions in Britain was not significantly out of line with the wider Western European experience. This generally moved from *repression* (criminalization) in the first half of the nineteenth century to *toleration* (full legality but no positive action) in the second half, followed by *recognition* (positive legal rights within a supportive framework) in the first

⁴⁶ LYDDON, “Striking Facts ...”, op. cit.

⁴⁷ Several professional healthcare unions have joined the TUC: for example, the Royal College of Midwives in 2015, after their strike in 2014.

half of the twentieth century.⁴⁸ Yet the forms these took could be very different. In Britain, “collective laissez-faire” (through collective bargaining) was more important than legislation for securing most industrial rights. At its high point (1906–79, with interruptions), the British experience mixed toleration and recognition as unions and workers never achieved a positive legal “right to strike”: a strike is a breach (not suspension, as in many countries) of contract and renders the employee liable to dismissal. Much state support for collective bargaining, starting in the 1890s, was dismantled after 1979, accompanied by cumulative restrictions on the freedom to strike (summarized below). This has shifted the environment to what might be called restricted toleration: unions can only currently lawfully strike within increasingly prescribed limits but still function within the space available. This section first discusses the criminal sanctions available against strikers until the 1870s, then the civil law framework since then, in which (from the first Thatcher government in 1979) union “freedom” to strike has been increasingly circumscribed by statute.

The criminal era

It is difficult to discuss the legal shifts and their consequences other than chronologically. The first near-general statute against combinations was passed in 1548 (during the Tudor period of statutory intervention in the growing wage-labour market) but it has rarely been commented upon, though newspaper searches can identify its use. From 1721 until the end of the eighteenth century, successive laws then banned, in effect, combinations (but usually substituted some statutory wage-fixing arrangement) in certain specific trades following strike movements.⁴⁹ Imprisonment (sometimes with “hard labour”) of selected strikers could follow if employers applied to a magistrates’ court. The threat might be sufficient; while, in court, magistrates often secured promises of “good behaviour”. From the mid-1770s (possibly earlier) until 1799 the 1548 Act’s draconian sanctions – imprisonment on bread and water if heavy fines were not paid quickly; for repeat offences, the pillory and then an ear cut off – were regularly publicized in the London and provincial newspapers. Six joiners were sentenced in Liverpool under this law in 1785, for example; five London shoemakers were spared the same penalty four years earlier when the prosecutors interceded for a much lower fine. Striking flax dressers in Newcastle upon Tyne were threatened with the statute in 1790 if they did not return to work. Spreading labour militancy in

⁴⁸ JACOBS, Antoine. “Collective Self-Regulation”. In: HEPPLER, Bob (ed.). *The Making of Labour Law in Europe*. London: Mansell, 1986, pp. 193–241.

⁴⁹ Sporadic earlier statutes covered building trades.

the late eighteenth century saw a 1796 Act passed against papermakers' combinations while one on millwrights (strategically important in early industrialization) drafted in 1799 was overtaken by the total ban in the 1799/1800 Acts.

The quarter-century of the main "Combination Acts" saw the triumph of laissez-faire in the labour market as the remaining Tudor (sixteenth century) wage-fixing and apprenticeship laws were repealed. Workers were now left to their own devices under rampant capitalism. It has been suggested that before the 1824 repeal of *all* existing combination acts, "strikes of any magnitude or duration were almost impossible" and "there were then very few disputes during which the leaders of the men were not sent to prison".⁵⁰ Yet most strikes, as before 1799, were probably small and relatively short but far from all, while bargaining in some trades continued as before. Although many court cases led to imprisonment, others were used to extract contrition. Employers could also pursue common-law conspiracy charges, in higher courts, against workers during, or when threatening, strikes. These carried longer sentences than the combination laws (which were limited to three months' maximum). There were many such trials in the late eighteenth century, during the Combination Acts era, and up to 1875, with employers and courts showing tactical flexibility but ready to punish. Three examples follow.

John Doherty, a future cotton spinners' leader, served two years with hard labour after the big 1818 Manchester strike. To avoid two more years, he entered into a "recognizance" to keep the peace (by pledging money and arranging sureties from others). "Co-conspirators" included James Gorton (one-year sentence), who died of gaol fever, and David Crooks (picket captain) who had served five months before sentenced to three years.⁵¹ Some eighteen members of the Benevolent Society of Coachmakers, charged with conspiracy after a March 1818 strike, pleaded guilty in order to be discharged "on their own recognizances". Despite providing affidavits that the society was broken up, William Connell, its leader, was later imprisoned for one year in November 1819 and fined £500. He required a surety of another £500 himself for good behaviour for three years, and two other sureties of £200 – impossible sums. He was still in gaol in April 1821, his fate unknown. Henry Selsby, full-time secretary of the Journeymen Steam-Engine Makers, was arrested with twenty-five others in 1846. He had only signed a strike fund

⁵⁰ BOARD OF TRADE, *Report on ... 1888*, op. cit., p. 9.

⁵¹ KIRBY, R. G. and MUSSON, A. E. *The Voice of the People*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1975, pp. 23, 87, 115.

appeal but was found guilty with eight others. The case was dismissed on appeal, but £1,800 legal costs incurred.⁵²

After the 1824 total repeal of the Combination Acts (ironically, on laissez-faire principles) had quietly made its way through Parliament there was a reaction. The 1825 Combination Act reinstated the crime of conspiracy except, importantly, for combination on wages or hours. Workers remained liable to prosecution, most commonly for “intimidation” within the workplace or when picketing outside, but also for the vaguer “molesting” or “obstructing”. An 1871 law even worsened the situation by imposing imprisonment for certain offences at work (minor violence or its threat) otherwise dealt with by fines. Prison capacity increased and treadmills were introduced in 1817. Most imprisoned strikers were there for falling foul of the Master and Servant statutes (dating back to the sixteenth century) for which any breach of contract (such as leaving work without notice) could invite criminal sanctions; more of these laws were enacted after 1800 than before.⁵³

One example of how the (breach of contract) law was used is the Preston cotton workers who struck without notice in 1853 (before their big dispute erupted). They were issued with summonses to attend court where they agreed to return to work, pay for the summonses, and give the required notice. After much campaigning, criminal sanctions were removed from most breaches of contract by the 1867 Master and Servant Act. But, even under this, there could be convictions for “aggravated” breaches, as when over twenty gas workers received six weeks’ hard labour after (fledgeling union) activists were dismissed in 1872 and a strike ensued. Five others received twelve months’ imprisonment for common law conspiracy, the judge ruling that this had not been extinguished by an 1871 Act. As a *cause célèbre*, some remission was secured, but the principle kept that conspiracy merited more than the three months for the statutory offence committed.⁵⁴ In another celebrated case, sixteen women, mainly wives of agricultural workers, were imprisoned with hard labour in 1873 for allegedly using threats of bodily harm against strike-breakers. The repression of strikes and strikers before 1875 was not one of gradual amelioration, though many employers of organized labour held back from prosecuting.

⁵² JEFFERYS, James. *The Story of the Engineers 1800–1945*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1945, pp. 26–27. BRENTANO, Lujo. “The Growth of a Trades Union”. *North British Review*, vol. 53, 1870, pp. 80–81.

⁵³ HAY, Douglas. “The Master and Servant Statute of 1823”. *HSIR*, no. 43, 2022, p. 3. Several eighteenth-century combination statutes contained punishments for quitting work.

⁵⁴ COURTHOYS, Mark. *Governments, Labour, and the Law in Mid-Victorian Britain*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004, pp. 166–188.

Civil remedies against strikers and unions

One feature of the union campaigns against criminalization was their demand for equality before the law and an end to those laws that treated workers worse than ordinary citizens committing the same offence. They did not ask for special treatment. With the ending of most criminal sanctions against strikers (except for certain picketing offences) in 1875, they now faced potential civil action for breach of contract, under the Employers and Workmen Act of that year. The court might withdraw summonses if the wrong was admitted and a lower sum agreed; or strikers might be “bound over” (for a period of “good behaviour”) and no damages paid. It was most regularly used against miners. In South Wales, in just over two-and-a-half years, 1910–12, coal owners recorded thirty-four instances of damages or out-of-court settlements. Some 3,000 miners were involved in one 1928 case alone. Damages were often taken from wages, but non-payment could lead to prison. A 1950 case saw twelve miners so jailed; a strike forced one’s release, and the local union raised the money for the rest. Miners’ cases died out in the early 1950s in the now nationalized industry, but colliery overmen (supervisors) were proceeded against in 1952 and 1956, and colliery clerks threatened with action as late as 1961. Employers can still sue for breach of contract today, but it is rarely financially worthwhile.

Our main concern therefore is not with the impact of civil law on workers, but on trade unions, which achieved lawful status, thus protecting their funds, in 1871. They were still “in restraint of trade” under the common law but members were now given immunity (a negative freedom) against prosecutions for conspiracy. Strikers were granted this protection in an 1875 law. After these legislative breakthroughs, judges (steeped in the common law and its prejudices against combinations) sought an alternative route to outlawing unions. They turned their attention to the common law of *tort* to make union officials, then unions, liable in civil courts – especially for *inducing breach of contract*, which would generally happen in the case of a strike. Remedies for torts are *injunctions* (court orders) and *damages*. This judicial offensive, starting in the 1890s, came to a head with heavy damages and costs awarded against a railway union (1901 *Taff Vale* case). The total cost (damages and legal expenses) incurred in different cases up to 1906 was at least £200,000 – a huge sum.

The 1870s’ reforms of strike law were tied up with the extension of the franchise, with committing parliamentary candidates to supporting union reforms, with union supporters on two royal commissions (of inquiry), and the beginnings of a working-class voice in Parliament. The build-up to this

saw the creation, in 1868, of the TUC as the permanent peak federation of unions. The next breakthrough came after unions had created the Labour Party (in 1900) to give political representation independent of the Liberal Party. In 1906 the Liberal government, pressed by the infant Labour Party in Parliament, passed the Trade Disputes Act to give unions not positive rights (which were not asked for) but negative *immunity* from tort liability during trade disputes. It was their *Magna Carta (Libertatum)*,⁵⁵ yet, resting on the common law, was always vulnerable. The Webbs warned: “It must not be imagined that either the ingenuity of the lawyers or the prejudice of the judges has been exhausted”.⁵⁶

Labour governments, supporting this wide freedom to strike, strengthened the law in 1965 and 1976 to counter adverse court judgments, and repealed the regressive Conservative legislation of 1927 and 1971, in 1946 and 1974 respectively. From 1980, though, Conservative governments incrementally limited union immunity by narrowing a lawful trade dispute (including banning solidarity action, secondary picketing – other than your own workplace – and “political” strikes) and making unions liable by allowing injunctions and the possibility (rarely used) of damages against them. Injunctions usually stop or prevent a strike. Breach of an injunction is a criminal offence; in the 1980s, several large fines and *sequestrations* (seizure of assets) ensued against unions for “contempt of court” (not obeying court orders).

Since 1984, unions have also had to hold statutory ballots for official strikes.⁵⁷ The government justified this as being democratic, though when workplace ballots were replaced by mandatory postal ones in 1993 there was the predicted drop in voter turnout. In reality, according to a 2019 court judgment, “Parliament’s intention was to ensure that employees ... have an opportunity to decide whether and how to vote away from the environment of the workplace *with all its actual or perceived pressures*”. Labour governments of 1997–2010 kept the Conservatives’ framework of six statutes passed between 1980 and 1993, breaking with their own history of supporting a wide freedom to strike, as they believed these laws represented a new settlement with public support.

⁵⁵ Great Charter of Freedoms, which in 1215 set out the laws that had to be followed by the king and everyone else.

⁵⁶ WEBB, Sidney and Beatrice. *The History of Trade Unionism* (rev. edn). London: Longmans, Green, 1920, p. 606, n. 2.

⁵⁷ After 1990, unions had to *repudiate*, in writing, members’ unofficial (now meaning unballoted, and therefore unlawful) strikes or unions would be deemed legally liable.

The 2016 Trade Union Act (passed by the first majority Conservative government since 1997) significantly tightened the law: a 50 per cent turnout is needed in all strikes to retain immunity but also a 40 per cent yes-vote of all those balloted in “important public services”. Two weeks’ notice must be given (to the employer) of any action while a ballot mandate now only lasts six months, instead of notionally indefinitely, necessitating re-ballots during long disputes.⁵⁸ While evidence from 2018 showed that turnout tended to decline with the size of ballot, many large ballots in the inflationary environment of 2022–23 have secured high turnouts. Unions have also used ballots as a negotiating tactic, generally not needing to strike to secure acceptable concessions from many employers.⁵⁹ The union leaderships have also had to campaign much more actively to secure the necessary turnouts in ballots, while workplace activists have to argue more publicly the case for strikes with their colleagues and workmates. These are unintended consequences of government actions.

Whichever legal framework they have faced, workers and unions have learned to work around it as best they can, though, as at present, the laws can limit unions’ manoeuvrability and the effectiveness of their strikes.

Strike tactics and counter-strike actions

Discussing the eighteenth century, one labour economist noted: “Where we find employment in the modern sense, the past becomes contemporary: despite all the differences of intervening centuries, wage-earners naturally react in the same way to the same predicaments.”⁶⁰ Unions and workers have always tried to time, to their advantage, the holding of strikes. There are a limited number of other strike tactics – indefinite, fixed length, or discontinuous; all-out, selective, or one at a time – and these have been recycled according to circumstances.

Employers also developed a repertoire of actions to combat strikes: victimization of activists (“ringleaders”), strike-breaking, strike insurance, to name but three. The most dramatic – the lock-out – was historically associated with employer solidarity and was most appropriate for, and therefore mainly used in, manufacturing, hence its limited use with the decline of both of these.

⁵⁸ The Labour Party is currently committed to repealing this Act, and the 2023 Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill, when next in government, but will retain some form of strike ballots.

⁵⁹ LYDDON, Dave. “Strike Ballots under the 2016 Trade Union Act”, *Industrial Relations Journal*, vol. 52, no. 6, 2021, pp. 479–501.

⁶⁰ PHELPS BROWN, Henry. *The Origins of Trade Union Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 14.

By the end of the nineteenth century, employer recognition of unions, and hence some stable arrangement for collective bargaining, was increasingly seen as a “business fact” if the union organized most of an occupation or industry and its members were well-disciplined.⁶¹ The strike tactics used, and the employers’ response would change once the union was recognized.

For analytical purposes, strike pay and picketing, which have been continuing features in making strikes more effective, are considered after discussing, first, strike tactics, and then employers’ counter-strike actions.

Workers’ and unions’ strike tactics

One continuing strike tactic that predates union recognition concerns timing – to exploit rising product markets, seasonal peaks, pressure points, and labour shortages. There are many examples, but a few will suffice. When new army regiments were raised in 1778, gunsmiths and sword-makers threatened to strike over wages. Another instance from that period was when “scenemen” and carpenters at Sadlers Wells theatre in London struck in 1785 when refused an immediate wage rise before a performance. In 1913, short-lived unions of waiters and cooks forced important concessions at posh London restaurants and hotels by holding or threatening sudden strikes just before big events.⁶² A more recent example was a small number of steel erectors taking advantage of a very public deadline. They won a £3,000 bonus payment in late 1999 “following [strike] threats to scupper the erection” of the huge London Eye Ferris-wheel, built on London’s South Bank in time to celebrate the Millennium.

It can work the other way. When the 1972 national miners’ strike was settled successfully in February that year, the employer manoeuvred to making that month (rather than November) the future settlement date. The shutting of collieries that precipitated the miners’ strike in March 1984 also occurred as winter was ending and the demand for coal in power stations was falling. By the time the next winter loomed, organized strike-breaking under police protection was underway, though the strike held for several more months. In the very different environment of universities, after examination marking had been targeted by a lecturers’ union, employers used a multi-year agreement in 2006 to shift the settlement date from April (which threatened exams) to August (in the students’ long vacation). The protracted nature of recent university disputes, though, has brought exam marking boycotts back into

⁶¹ ASHLEY, W. J. *The Adjustment of Wages*. London: Longmans, Green, 1903, pp. 34–35.

⁶² See LYDDON, Dave. “Postscript: The Labour Unrest in Great Britain and Ireland, 1910–1914 – Still Uncharted Territory?”, *HSIR*, no. 33, 2012, pp. 258–259.

play – though some universities (lawfully) withhold all pay for this partial completion of contract, tantamount to a lock-out.

Historically, indefinite strikes (*sine die*) were long the norm, only ending with victory, compromise, defeat or rout. But, in the post-1945 “full employment” economy, “demonstration stoppages”, or “token” strikes – usually one day – became part of workers’ and unions’ repertoire. Workers held them (unofficially where they were unionized) to draw attention to issues or to strengthen a negotiating position. Unions wanted to avoid the national “trials of strength” associated with inter-war industry bargaining (and many large and long nineteenth-century disputes). The engineering unions, for example, held one-day strikes in 1953, 1962, and 1968, and a “snowball” strike in 1957, which was settled before needing to engage their weaker districts. This caution was replicated by most public-service unions (particularly of non-manual workers) when (from the 1970s onwards) they started to hold national strikes. Since the 1970s, rail unions have also generally held series of one-day strikes as they are more disruptive than continuous action.⁶³

“All-out” strikes were less frequent when more than one workplace was involved, such as in wage movements which were district-based before the early twentieth century. In the late eighteenth century, a tactic had emerged of picking off one employer at a time – or a “rolling strike” – often levying those still working to fund the strikers. Cotton spinners first used it in 1810 and consistently applied it in big stoppages. It was sometimes referred to as striking *in detail* (one at a time) rather than *en masse*. In the run-up to action for the nine-hour day (54-hour week) London building workers in 1859 initially selected five firms “by chance out of a hat”, then sent deputations to four of them. It had been intended to select “by ballot” which of the firms should be struck first, but one of the deputations to a leading company was dismissed and a stone-masons’ strike ensued which was escalated to all the firm’s workers.⁶⁴ Employers particularly disliked this tactic and would sometimes impose a wider lock-out to counter it (see below). Whenever unions could use it without retaliation, they would.

A modern variant of this are the selective strikes of strategic groups that have been deployed as part of national disputes in public services, such as in the civil service (1979 and in 2022–23) and by local government non-manual workers (1989), usually after one-day all-out strikes have launched the dispute. Much more recently, co-ordinated strikes have been organized to

⁶³ LYDDON, Dave. “Rediscovering the Past: Recent British Strike Tactics in Historical Perspective”, *HSIR*, no. 5, 1998, pp. 107–151; LYDDON, “Strike Ballots ...”, *op. cit.*, pp. 489–490.

⁶⁴ NATIONAL ASSOCIATION ... *Trades’ Societies and Strikes*, *op. cit.*, pp. 59–60.

maximize impact: as with the private rail companies (especially in 2022–23, when fourteen train operating companies and the national rail infrastructure organization would regularly strike on the same days); and two large coordinated strikes across several different public services took place in early 2023. The largest such action saw a one-day strike in November 2011, after 2.6m members in about thirty unions had been balloted on cuts to the four main public-service pension schemes.

Under the post-2016 ballot turnout rules, those unions engaged in industry-wide bargaining (such as universities or local authorities) can choose between aggregate ballots or separate (workplace/employer) disaggregated ballots. The university lecturers' union ran a series of disaggregated ballots from 2018 separately on pay and pensions as it could not guarantee a national 50 per cent turnout, especially over pay. This enabled strikes (every year from 2018) in institutions where the threshold was reached.⁶⁵ In the current strike wave, unions of civil servants, nurses, and physiotherapists have resorted to disaggregated ballots and, as a result, brought out more than half their members; this tactic is not used by schoolteachers as there are thousands of state schools and some are very small. National strike action in the public services is almost always discontinuous (the 1977–78 firefighters' strike being an exception) – to keep the public on board and limit strikers' loss of earnings, among other reasons – though the increasingly established pattern of occasional one-day stoppages has given way to longer blocks, not least because of time-limited ballot mandates.

Employers' counter-strike actions

Employers were not passive. While large companies could often confront strikes alone, an industry's employers usually acted together. The “document”, a so-called agreement (between a company and individual workers) not to be a union member, was forced on to strikers in many high-profile nineteenth-century disputes. In the Bradford woollen workers' strike of 1825, most employers even “turned off” the working children of those strikers who refused to sign such an undertaking. Fulfilling a similar function, “discharge notes” required workers to have a favourable reference from their previous employer. A refinement was the “list” (or “blacklist”): strikers' names circulated to stop them being hired elsewhere.⁶⁶ Victimization of strike

⁶⁵ This organizing groundwork led to two successful aggregate ballots in October 2022, followed by strikes: at over 140 universities over pay, and at nearly 70 concerning a pension scheme.

⁶⁶ Its wider use denied jobs to active trade unionists, including strike leaders, as in the building industry. A 1999 law (not effected until 2010) prohibited blacklists.

leaders was common. For example, the Pitmen's Union's organizer, Tommy Hepburn, was excluded from every north-east colliery in 1832. Poverty forced him to desist from union activity to obtain a mining job. Many had to emigrate.

Employers' associations also provided "strike insurance" to their member firms from the early nineteenth century. In 1803 the Manchester master spinners also associated together to raise a fighting fund of £20,000 to defeat the mule-spinners' demands. The Engineering Employers' Federation (founded 1896) formalized its ad hoc compensation to strike-hit member companies into an Indemnity Fund. This paid record sums as late as the 1969–70 strike surge and was used to subsidize employers in the wave of some thirty sit-in strikes in Greater Manchester during 1972 (six employers were expelled for making concessions on working hours). Sometimes the means of keeping employers in line were more draconian; in the Preston cotton lock-out of 1853, members of the Preston Masters' Association bound themselves by a bond of £5,000 each to stick together.

More visible than strike insurance or similar schemes was the use of strike-breakers, though generally not extensively where there was a union tradition. They were used in gas manufacture until 1889 and regularly on the railways before the early twentieth century – lock-outs were clearly inappropriate for these particular industries. The Shipping Federation, the shipowners' body, was formed in 1890 specifically "as a fighting machine to counter the strike weapon".⁶⁷ To avoid clashes in the ports, shipowners accommodated strike-breakers offshore. Even during the heyday of strike-breaking, 1890–1914, only about twelve per cent of all strikes were settled by partial or complete replacement of strikers. Most were small-scale; in cotton, the figure fell from nine to three per cent between 1888–92 and 1910–14.⁶⁸ Of course, the army and then police had been consistently deployed to protect strike-breakers and, especially after 1945, the military sometimes provided the strike-breaking service itself (though often not very successfully) in certain essential services, such as firefighting.

The employers' most confrontational policy was the lock-out. In an early example (1786), over eighty bookbinders at four companies were locked out after giving strike notice over a shorter working day. When, in 1858, two glass manufacturers circulated strikers' names, events escalated; the union decided

⁶⁷ POWELL, L. *The Shipping Federation*. London: Shipping Federation, 1950, p. 5.

⁶⁸ MCIVOR, Arthur. "Employers' Organisations and Strike-breaking in Britain, 1880–1914", *IRSH*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1984, p. 6. WHITE, Joe. "Lancashire Cotton Textiles". In: WRIGLEY, C. (ed.). *A History of British Industrial Relations 1875–1914*. Brighton: Harvester, 1982, p. 225.

to strike two vulnerable firms and then more, but the masters organized themselves and a lock-out of seventeen factories ensued.⁶⁹ The engineering employers' historian admitted: "the success of the general lock-out used to depend on bankrupting the unions and starving out the workers".⁷⁰

Lock-outs (especially over wages) were most common in cotton and coal. One large coal company determined in 1867 "to either crush the union or keep their works closed". After the early 1870s' boom, coal-owners in most areas "forced wage reductions so substantial that they provoked strikes and caused lock-outs". Those unions not destroyed were seriously hobbled.⁷¹ A number of employers' associations were eventually faced with established (often skilled) unions; they "might defeat them, but ... could not destroy them". So they forced these unions into industry-wide conflicts and their victories allowed them to "redesign the system of industrial relations to a pattern of their own choice – the central procedure agreement". In return for national recognition, unions would not strike until a workplace dispute had been considered at a series of joint meetings; otherwise, they would pay agreed fines or face lock-outs as a punishment. Such agreements were made after big lock-outs in cotton spinning (1893), footwear (1895), engineering (1898), shipbuilding (1908), and part of the building trade.⁷²

Sustained full employment, post-1945, undermined these procedural arrangements, hence the rise of "unconstitutional" strikes (in breach of the agreed disputes procedure) then. With changed product and labour markets accelerating industrial and company restructuring, especially in the 1980s and later, the need for employer solidarity weakened in many industries and industry bargaining declined. Mass dismissals of strikers (and strike-breaking) re-emerged in the 1980s (Rupert Murdoch's News International⁷³ the leading example). Reacting to union pressure, a 2004 Labour government law gave official strikers a twelve-week "protected" period against dismissal, but did not apply it to unofficial strikers as Gate Gourmet catering workers (mainly of south Asian heritage) at Heathrow Airport found out the next year. In 2022 the Conservative government revoked a 1973 regulation stopping

⁶⁹ NATIONAL ASSOCIATION ... *Trades' Societies and Strikes*, op. cit., pp. 93–97, 106–113.

⁷⁰ WIGHAM, Eric. *The Power to Manage*. London: Macmillan, 1973, pp. 270, 272.

⁷¹ CHURCH, Roy. *The History of the British Coal Industry, vol. 3, 1830–1913*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, pp. 661, 664, 673.

⁷² CLEGG, Hugh. *The Changing System of Industrial Relations in Great Britain*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1979, pp. 65–66. When the engineering employers abandoned national bargaining in 1989, a handful of firms were initially selected to strike for a shorter working week, handing the initiative back to the unions.

⁷³ Publisher of *The Times* and other newspapers.

employment agencies supplying strike-breakers. As this survey is being written, the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill is progressing through Parliament; this could allow (without any redress) the dismissal of workers who refuse to obey a “work notice” to provide cover during a strike in certain important services.⁷⁴ We will have to see how this might work in practice.

Making strike tactics effective: funds and pickets

Historically, unions were often prepared to persuade strike-breakers to leave by paying them travelling money and other financial inducements. Dealing with the importation of strike-breakers from continental Europe became an important function of the London-based International Workingmen’s Association (the First International), 1864–72. More generally, strike funds have often been central to union activity. Purely “strike societies” were seen as a “constant menace to peace” by one nineteenth-century observer, as their members were anxious to hold disputes which collapsed when money ran out. By contrast, the accumulation of large funds by nineteenth-century craft unions, through their friendly benefits, could be “an effective ‘moral influence’ in negotiations with employers”. The provision of such benefits, while binding individual members to the union, would be secondary to maintaining or improving wages and conditions, some unions being temporarily bankrupted by the cost of long strikes or by out-of-work pay during trade depressions.⁷⁵

Union strike pay was not always confined to union members. The engineers’ society paid £7,700 to non-society men and labourers in the 1852 lock-out; and in an 1879 strike it was even paying for “children of non-society men”. The cotton weavers continued to collect funds from, and pay strike benefit to, non-members until the late nineteenth century; local associations did so “on strategic occasions” up to nearly 1914. When unorganized workers struck in the twentieth century, unions seized opportunities to recruit them. Hence a hosiery union gave strike pay to “a very large body of unorganized workers” in 1932, while a general union paid out to unorganized workers in their 1934 strike at a strategically important car body factory.⁷⁶

In very recent years, strike pay provision has been greatly expanded because, in a period of very low strike activity, unions were determined not to let lack

⁷⁴ Unions must also take “reasonable steps” to ensure that all union members identified in a “work notice” comply with it or they lose protection from being sued for damages by the employer

⁷⁵ WEBB, S. and B. *Industrial Democracy*, op. cit., pp. 160, 158.

⁷⁶ TURNER, *Trade Union Growth ...*, op. cit., pp. 122, 300. KNOWLES, *Strikes ...*, op. cit., p. 23. LYDDON, Dave. “‘Trade Union Traditions’, The Oxford Welsh, and the 1934 Pressed Steel Strike”, *Llafur*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1993, p. 110.

of funds undermine their members' preparedness to strike. This took on added urgency when turnout barriers were erected to make winning ballots harder. Strike pay, especially if sustained at high levels, changes the economics of striking: "For each side, some point exists at which it would be forced to capitulate since its resources would have been depleted".⁷⁷ Unite, the dominant union in the private sector and with most collective agreements, launched a £25m strike fund in 2012 (in 2023 this has now reached £70m). Strike pay at £30 per day could be doubled at the general secretary's discretion; when he announced at a bus company picket, in 2017, that Unite would do just this, the manager settled within hours. Unite standardized the benefit at £50 in 2019 and then £70 in 2021, with no striker now to receive more than normal net pay – a far cry from the traditionally low post-1945 levels. The main teaching union has long reimbursed net earnings for single-school strikes; the lecturers' union has now introduced strike pay, on proof of hardship, as has the main nursing union.

Another continuing strike weapon for workers is picketing, a public manifestation of the strike: to fellow workers; to potential strike-breakers; to those transport workers collecting or delivering material; and to the general public. Large picket numbers would deter strike-breakers as well as making the latter reluctant to testify in court if cases were taken against pickets; by contrast, small numbers of pickets would sometimes limit themselves to identifying those breaking the strike. In all cases, though, pickets were potentially vulnerable to victimization by an employer or to arrest for some infraction. In the 1818 Manchester cotton spinners' strike, mass pickets of several hundred would go before starting time to a factory where they were not known to the employer. Similar caution applied under a different legal regime. In Merthyr Tydfil, in South Wales, the police reported in 1911 that the same strikers would not approach non-strikers "on more than one occasion during 15 or 16 days", so that they could not be charged with "persistently" following individual strike-breakers (a crime under an 1875 Act, and ever since).

One early tradition of strikers going from factory to factory to encourage workers in the same trade to join them was still alive in the twentieth century, even when employers tried to thwart it by shutting factory gates. At a Llanelli (South Wales) tinplate works in 1911, "cold roll" boy strikers climbed the walls to invite their counterparts to join them. In 1960, 300 engineering apprentices scaled the walls of a major Manchester factory and brought out 200 from the firm's apprentice school. Finally, in 1970, female clothing

⁷⁷ WALTON, R. E. and McKERSIE, R. B. *A Behavioral Theory of Labor Negotiations*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965, p. 32.

workers in Leeds marched “in monstrous battalion strength, ringing [i.e. surrounding] factories and chanting ‘Come out, you sods’ (and worse)”.⁷⁸

While, in the early post-1945 era, picketing was often token or unnecessary, there were flashpoints. For example, in a big 1956 official strike over redundancy, at the Austin car factory in Birmingham, pickets lay down in the road to stop lorries. In the same company’s Morris factory in Oxford, a different tactic was applied: strikers lined the road in silence, holding up their union membership cards, when the non-strikers (the large majority) left at the end of a shift. Mass picketing became a big political issue from the 1972 miners’ strike. Tens of thousands of miners participated and their pickets were eventually respected, successfully strangling the electricity power stations, not just coal-fired ones. In the different environment of the 1984–85 strike, the solidarity was more limited, the police were mobilized nationally, and the miners forced to focus on preventing strike-breaking within their own ranks, leading to over 11,000 arrests, with about half appearing in court. Many miners were stopped by the police from attending picket lines, sometimes when they were miles away.⁷⁹

The legislative attack on secondary picketing in 1980 was not just a reaction to the effectiveness of mass pickets in some key strikes but also the experience of the road haulage strike in January 1979. Described by a leading participant as “an official strike run on an unofficial basis”, this involved the Labour government having to reach agreement with the main union to allow the delivery of essential items. Despite this, some local strike committees continued to decide what goods could be moved.⁸⁰ In the different climate of today, picket lines are often theatre, with large numbers (despite a government Code of Practice since 1980 suggesting a limit of six), lots of placards and noise – and very much aimed at the wider public and its support.

Finally, while similar strike tactics and conduct are found over long periods, the increasing ease of communication has changed how workers organize themselves during strikes. A mid-nineteenth-century commentator could observe that “the railroad, the penny post, and the public press have revolutionized society ... [and] rendered much easier even the business of

⁷⁸ Quoted in LYDDON, Dave. “The Changing Pattern of UK Strikes, 1964–2014”. *Employee Relations*, vol. 37, no. 6, 2015, p. 742.

⁷⁹ LYDDON, Dave. “From the Greatest Victories to the Biggest Defeat: The British Coalminers’ National Strikes of 1972, 1974 and 1984–85”. In: do PAÇO, A. S., VARELA, R., and S. van der VELDEN (eds), *Strikes and Social Conflicts: Towards a Global History* (2nd edn). Lisbon: International Association Strikes and Social Conflict, 2012, pp. 102–111

⁸⁰ SMITH, Paul. “The ‘Winter of Discontent’: The Hire and Reward Road Haulage Dispute, 1979”. *HSIR*, no. 7, 1999, pp. 27–54, quote from pp. 47–48.

agitation”.⁸¹ The series of unofficial strikes by engineering apprentices in the mid-twentieth century “were typically spread by the apprentices themselves, travelling within districts on foot, typically as columns of demonstrators, and by bicycle, and between districts by motor-cycle, by car (1960) and finally by aeroplane (from Manchester to Glasgow in 1964).”⁸² In 2018 a postal union official could emphasize that, before and during strikes, the employer, Royal Mail, “can’t compete with us on the ground *and on social media*.”⁸³

Concluding comments

Viewing British strikes over three centuries shows that patterns both of strike activity and its legal framework, which seemed fairly fixed for several decades or more, were historically transitory. There is no obvious long-term trajectory of either, being buffeted by the winds of class struggle (in many periods, “class struggle from above”). Strike waves were a regular feature between the 1870s and 1920s – as they were across Western Europe and the USA⁸⁴ – bringing surges of unionization in their wake before many of them were rolled back, though never entirely. Very different strike waves book-ended the 1970s which period saw the last great surge of unionization before a long period of decline, during which the shape of the trade union movement has been transformed.

As economic issues have dominated strike activity, with occasional political ramifications, the changing occupational mix of participants over time indicates which groups of workers were at the forefront of fighting the terms of their exploitation. Pre-industrial (mainly handicraft) trades dominated strike activity well into the industrial revolution. Overlapping with these groups, King Coal and King Cotton (or should it be Queen Cotton, given the proportion of women), the motors of the industrial revolution, became the site of much strike activity for extremely long periods, during and after the (long drawn out) process of industrialization. The output of both industries peaked just before 1914. Cotton lost its world domination, with state-sponsored contraction starting in the 1930s and on a much larger scale from the late 1950s. Coal was long the main fuel for industrial and household purposes but was gradually replaced until most of its output went into electricity generation (and this was critical in the major battles of the 1970s and 1980s). After the

⁸¹ NATIONAL ASSOCIATION ... *Trades’ Societies and Strikes*, op. cit., p. 215.

⁸² RYAN, Paul. “Apprentice Strikes in the Twentieth-Century UK Engineering and Shipbuilding Industries”. *HSIR*, no. 18, 2004, pp. 1–63, quote from p. 22.

⁸³ Quoted in LYDDON, “Strike Ballots ...”, op. cit., p. 492.

⁸⁴ See table 2, “international and national strike waves, 1870–1974”, in KELLY, “Long Waves ...”, op. cit., p. 9.

managed decline of the 1950s and 1960s, a final wave of state-inflicted contraction (in this case politically motivated) hastened coal's demise in the 1990s. Coal and cotton's specific market exposure also meant that their strike rhythms historically were to some extent outside the mainstream of the rest of the working class. Workers in engineering and related industries, especially in car manufacture, took over from miners as the most prolific strikers towards the end of the long post-1945 boom until the market contractions, plant closures, and offshoring, of the 1980s and subsequently.

Elsewhere, seafarers who were so important to the British economy for centuries have long been overshadowed by workers in other transport industries – railways, roads, docks – that developed particularly in the nineteenth century and are currently more integral to this island's economy than the shrunken domestic manufacturing sector. Dockers rose, fell (under the onslaught of containerization) and have risen again (in 2022). Railways were union-free in the nineteenth century, relatively strike-free for much of the twentieth century, but central to working-class struggle in the twenty-first century (a similar tale could be told of postal services). In some ways, mail and rail have taken over from coal and cotton as prominent sites of resistance to employers.

Public services – health, education, local and central government – were generally strike-free zones until the last fifty years. Recognition was a slow process, then arbitration arrangements, especially in the 1940s and 1950s, meant that there was no need to strike for most groups. That changed in the 1960s, and then dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s, when a succession of government wage restraint policies meant that public sector pay became a political battleground (as it is again now, with the Conservative government's low-tax and small-state agenda). Women make up two-thirds of union membership in the public services, which collectively have much higher union density than the private sector (hit by tertiarization, the shift from manufacturing to services, common to many “mature” economies). This century, education workers – in schools, colleges, universities – have been their strike leaders. Within public services, the final British taboo has been decisively breached with the nurses' and junior doctors' strikes in the 2022–23 upsurge.

Women's increasing prominence as strikers rather than, historically, mainly as the community backbone behind long strikes is a historic, irreversible, and welcome shift. Another historic shift, though very unwelcome, is the resurgence of the belief in British ruling class circles that strikes can be legislated away. This underpinned the Combination Acts of 1799–1824 and increasingly also the Conservative governments' post-1979 sequence of neo-liberal anti-strike laws. The 2016 Act was sold to the public as “the latest

stage in the *long journey* of modernisation and reform”,⁸⁵ in which the 2023 Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Bill, and other threatened restrictions, represents a serious escalation. This “journey” is not just about the legality of strikes – remember, the “common law” treats “unions as an improper restraint of trade in the market and industrial action as an interference with contracts and property rights”⁸⁶ – but their legitimacy in a democratic society. How, over the next few years, the Labour Party deals with this situation – legislatively (if it gets the chance), organizationally (given its union affiliations and funding), and ideologically (what does it believe in?) – will mark another watershed in the centuries-old struggle for the freedom to strike.

⁸⁵ Quoted in LYDDON, “Strike Ballots ...”, op. cit., p. 497.

⁸⁶ See note 2 above.

Differences in strike attitudes and behavioural reactions among British, German, and French samples

Denise Vesper and Cornelius J. König¹

Strikes are a long-known phenomenon of industrial relations and a powerful tool for workers in collective bargaining. Kelly (1998) describes them as the most powerful means of workers and most costly for the employers on the other side of the bargaining table. Examples for strikes are strikes among train and aircraft workers in the United Kingdom (Jasper & Harris, 2022), from Lufthansa staff in Germany (Deutsche Welle, 2022), and from rail workers in France (RFI, 2022). There can also be concerted strike actions across countries affecting multinational companies (e.g., Geary, 2022). These strikes likely differ from country to country due to legal or cultural differences in the industrial relations system of the respective countries. Nonetheless, what all these strikes have in common is that they in some way or another affect the public in their daily lives. Some strikes have direct effects on the public, such as cancelled flights or reduced public transport, whereas other strikes might not directly influence the public but still hope for and rely on approval and support from the public for their case. From the union's perspective, the public is an important stakeholder for strikes, as the unions build on the public approval of strikes. Public approval can be more or less important for the union, depending on the sector, affected group, media coverage, and caused disruption. This approval can also consist of the positive third-party evaluation of strikes (Kelloway et al., 2008). Thus, having knowledge about public attitudes to strikes can be considered helpful during the decision-making process among union members in all countries. Furthermore, it is also important for employers to know about the public attitudes to strikes, as they are sitting on the other side of the bargaining table and can also use negative public attitudes to strikes in their negotiation strategy.

To assess these public attitudes, Vesper and König (2022) introduced the strike attitudes and behavioural reactions scale (SABeRS). They found that their measure consists of five factors: negative reactions to strikes, legitimacy of strikes, informing oneself about strikes, strike-related social network

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behaviour, and support of strikers. Furthermore, they found in two studies that union members and people with a strike history evaluated strikes more positively than non-union members and people without a strike history (Vesper & König, 2022). What is missing so far is the comparison of these strike attitudes between samples from different countries. This comparison is necessary to further develop robust explanations for similarities and differences between countries.

In this article, we compare the strike attitudes between a British, a German, and a French sample. We decided to focus on these three countries as they are the three most important Western European countries and are comparable regarding their size and economic strength. Despite these similarities, the three countries differ in their traditions and regulations regarding strikes. Furthermore, we assess in all three samples the relationship between the SABeRS and willingness to strike, union membership and previous strike participation. With our article, we contribute to the literature in several ways: first, we show that strike attitudes do differ between different countries. Second, we show that the relationships between strike attitudes and other variables such as willingness to strike or union membership are similar across the three samples. These similarities indicate that although the samples do overall differ in their strike attitudes, some processes that form strike attitudes are likely comparable between the three countries, such as attitude formation through experiencing a strike.

Case Descriptions and Theoretical Background

To understand cross-country similarities and differences in strikes and the attitudes towards strikes, it is necessary to consider the industrial relations system of the specific countries, especially as the differences have further increased (Hyman, 2001, 2018). In the UK, for example, the industrial relations system can be described as a liberal-individualist repressive regime since the Thatcher era (Howell & Givan, 2011). This means that the state abstains from intervening in industrial relations, implies a focus of free collective bargaining, and solving labour disputes is mostly left to unions and employers (Allern & Bale, 2017; Visser, 2019). However, individualized procedures are the dominant form as there has been a massive de-collectivization and individualization of regulatory mechanisms since the Thatcher era (Howell, 2007). Furthermore, the UK has a relatively low coverage of collective agreements, contrary to Germany, where the bargaining coverage is rather high. However, in both countries, the bargaining coverage has considerably decreased from 1980 to 2014 (Hyman, 2018), in contrast to France, where still more than 90% of workers are covered by

national or company agreements (Hyman, 2018; Visser, 2019). Collective bargaining in the UK is also more decentralized with bargaining mostly taking place at the company-level, again contrary to France and Germany, where bargaining is mostly conducted at the sector or industry level (Visser, 2019).

The German industrial relations systems is often described as a social-partnership regime characterised by a strong sense of cooperation (Allern & Bale, 2017; Dribbusch, 2016). Employee representation takes place in a dual system with sectorial bargaining and local work councils. The principle of collective bargaining autonomy guarantees and at the same time limits the action field of unions to conflicts about wages and working conditions (Brinkmann & Nachtwey, 2013). Works councils on the other hand are committed to protect the bargaining peace at work and address more individualized grievances other than wages. The works councils are elected by the whole workforce and are institutionally separated from the unions. This and the concept of centralized multi-employer industry-wide agreements ensures that the level of conflict is rather low in Germany compared with France, where protest is much more likely to include strikes (Dribbusch, 2007, 2009; Larsson, 2014).

The French regime of industrial relations is much more polarized and can be described as consisting of a fragmented trade union movement and high hostility from employer organizations (Larsson, 2014; Visser, 2019). In France, working life is also a relationship with the state and not only with the employer (Visser, 2019). Hence, trade unions are also more concerned with shaping the public provision of social benefits than with the negotiation of collective bargaining agreements (Crouch, 2017; Hyman, 2001). French law allows any of the five main unions to appoint a workplace representative in any firm with at least 50 employees (Bryson et al., 2011). This representative is allowed to negotiate certain terms and conditions once a year, such as pay, working hours, or pensions.

The three countries also differ in their prevalent employee workplace representation (Addison & Teixeira, 2019). In Germany, employees can only be represented by works councils at the workplace – this is the case for 47% of the employees (Addison & Teixeira, 2019). These work councils have strongly anchored legal rights, contrary to French work councils which have a much weaker position (Visser, 2019). In the UK and France, it is however possible to be represented by a union only, a works council only, or both. In the UK, the most prevalent form of representation is the works council only (16%; Addison & Teixeira, 2019) followed by both, works council and union

(13%; Addison & Teixeira, 2019). In France, employees are mostly represented by both (45%; Addison & Teixeira, 2019). Furthermore, the countries also differ in their union density rate: in the UK, 23.5% are members of a union, whereas in Germany only 17.0% are union members, and in France only 7.9% (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2019). The traditional union density rate also differs, with France having a traditionally low membership rate, whereas those from UK and Germany can be interpreted as middle membership rates (Allern & Bale, 2017; Uba & Jansson, 2021). What all three have nonetheless in common is that unions experienced a decline in membership from the 1980s to today (Crouch, 2017). France has also a traditionally conflict ridden and politicized pluralistic organization of workers in unions (Visser, 2019). These union density differences might lead to the belief that there are less strikes in France than in the other two countries. However, the opposite is the case: in France, the level of strike participation based on the ratio of employees involved in strikes per 1000 dependent employees was 10.6%, compared to 4.8% in the UK and 0,7% in Germany (Checchi & Visser, 2005). Despite all differences, France and Germany have been found to have similarities in their process of interest representation in that employee representatives' effectiveness is based on their handling of daily issues on the shop floor and on their integration with the outside trade union (Hege & Dufour, 1995). Hence, it is important to move from the concrete to the abstract, that is to the process and relationships within that process, to establish a better basis for comparisons (Hege & Dufour, 1995; Hyman, 2001).

There are also differences in the right to strike among the three countries (Büttgen & Clauwaert, 2021; Guedes & Balanescu, 2021; Inversi & Clauwaert, 2021). Whereas in the UK no fundamental right to strike exists and organizers and participants can be held liable for damages (Inversi & Clauwaert, 2021), strikes are considered an individual right guaranteed by the Constitution in France (Guedes & Balanescu, 2021). Furthermore, industrial action can be interpreted as a breach of the employment contract in the UK and hence, the employer can dismiss the worker after the period of statutory protection of twelve weeks is over (Inversi & Clauwaert, 2021). This is not the case in France or Germany. In France, strikes are an individual right and not a trade union right, and this is guaranteed by the French Constitution. The only exception in France is the public service for which the right to strike is regulated by law (Guedes & Balanescu, 2021). In Germany, the freedom to strike derives from the constitutional freedom of association (Büttgen & Clauwaert, 2021). The German right to strike is almost entirely based on case law and only some regulations, such as a linkage to a collective agreement and initiation of a strike by a union, exist (Büttgen & Clauwaert, 2021).

Furthermore, a peace obligation exists only in Germany. A peace obligation prohibits strikes and other forms of collective action during the time of the collective agreement (Visser, 2019). German unions also have to follow the *ultima ratio* principle, which implies that industrial action may only be used as a last resort, and to follow rules of fair play when calling for a strike (Waas, 2014).

The strikes in the three countries also differ in their duration and participation (Piazza, 2005). In the UK, strikes are typically of medium duration and medium participation rate compared to other countries, whereas typical strikes in Germany are short with relatively few participants and strikes in France are often brief but with mass participation. Some French strikes are rather a protest against the state than a protest against employers (Larsson, 2014). Furthermore, the recourse to the strike threat during the annual collective bargaining is considered rather natural by both sides in France (Besancenot & Vranceanu, 1999). What all three countries have in common is that the rate of strikes after 1980 was significantly (i.e., at least 30%) lower than that prior to 1980 (International Labour Organization, 2020; Piazza, 2005). However, at least in France, strikes have become more dispersed regarding the affected sectors and cities, spontaneous and shorter, and there has also been an increase in individual conflict manifestations (Pilati & Perra, 2019).

Previous research on strikes has frequently been linked to trade unions. Nonetheless, unions and union membership do not constitute a necessary condition for strikes around the globe (Vesper & König, 2022). For instance, if UK trade unions call for strikes during collective bargaining, any worker may participate in strikes, whether or not they are a trade union member (Government Digital Service, 2020). The same applies to Germany (Dribbusch, 2016) – the only difference between German union members and non-members is that union members receive strike pay from the union during the strike. In France, strikes are an individual right, so strikes can be conducted without the involvement of trade unions (Poutvaara et al., 2017). Since unions are not a necessary condition for strikes in all countries, strikes should be considered as a separate issue from trade unions.

Not only can strikes affect strikers, unions, and employers, but very often also the public. Examples for strikes with considerable impact on third parties are the strikes of university lecturers in the UK (Weale & Al-Khalaf, 2020), healthcare workers in Germany (The Local, 2019), and employees in public transport in France (Nossiter, 2019). The public must cope with the consequences of having no lectures, adjusting to the emergency plan in

hospitals, being forced to adjust travel plans, and being stuck in traffic jams. All of these consequences can be perceived as burdensome depending on how they are assessed by those affected (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the event of strikes, affected third parties may find the situation uncontrollable and unpleasant and hence, experience a rather high level of stress.

The beliefs and behavioural actions of third parties to strikes also have an important function in indicating public consent with strikes. This public approval is a powerful tool for unions, especially when it comes to creating the impression of legitimacy. The ability to achieve legitimacy is a crucial factor according to institutional theory for the survival of organizations (e.g., Díez-Martín et al., 2013; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This argument from institutional theory is also relevant to the area of strikes. Organizations such as unions and employers follow societal norms to avoid public criticism. Hence, they legitimize their behaviour. Both in advance of strikes and during strikes, unions and employers try to present their position to the public as rational and comprehensible (e.g., with press releases and television interviews). For this purpose, trade unions use media campaigns in which they invest much time to sell their positions to the public (Hansen & Hau, 2022; Kelloway et al., 2008). Obtaining this support can significantly influence the success of the union (Hennebert & Faulkner, 2017), because public support has the ability to influence the political activities of unions, to affect the loyalty of members, and to shape employers' dealings with trade unions (Chang & Cooke, 2018). Hence, public opinions and behavioural intentions towards strikes determine, at least in part, the support and legitimacy of strikes.

To assess public opinion towards strikes, Vesper and König (2022) introduced the strike attitude and behavioural reactions scale (SABeRS). This scale consists of five factors, which map behavioural reactions to strikes (support of strikers, strike-related social media behaviour, and informing oneself about strikes), cognitive aspects (legitimacy of strikes), and affective aspects (negative reactions to strikes). However, this scale has, up to now, only been used in Germany, and differences between the three countries (France, Germany and UK) in regard of strike attitudes, behavioural reactions to strikes, and willingness to strike have not been studied. As the number of days not worked due to strikes varies considerably from 209,435 in Germany to 1,738,537 in France in 2016 (International Labour Organization, 2020), strike attitudes and reactions of third-parties should differ between the three countries. Especially in France, strikes are almost considered as a cultural good and many French citizens consider it the most influential way to achieve their goal (Ancelovici, 2008). Hence, the strike attitudes and reactions of

French respondents might be more positive than the ones of British and German respondents. Furthermore, as Germany is widely considered a low-strike country, whereas the UK has mixed numbers and France is usually described as a high-strike country (Vandaele, 2016), the willingness to strike should differ accordingly across the three countries. Hence, we investigated the following two research questions: *Do the strike attitudes and behavioural reactions differ between the three countries (RQ1) and does the willingness to strike differ between the three countries (RQ2)?*

Next to direct differences in attitudes, the countries could also exhibit differences in the relationships between their attitudes and other variables. In this study, we hence assess the relationships of the SABeRS with willingness to strike, union membership, and strike participation across the three countries to test whether similar or different relations are found across the countries. Willingness to strike is especially important for unions, as they rely on the willingness to strike of their members to plan their procedure during collective bargaining (Martin, 1986). Furthermore, as strikes can cause harm to all parties involved, knowing about the willingness to strike of the employees is important for unions, employers and organizers of strikes in order to plan further activities (Barling et al., 1992). Willingness to strike is enhanced when unfairness in work relationships is perceived by employees and when these employees have a high collectivistic orientation towards work (Buttigieg et al., 2008). It decreases when employees judge the societal system as justified (Jost et al., 2012). Willingness to strike was also associated with loyalty to one's union (Barling et al., 1992) and appears to be increased for workers with lower perceived employability (Jansen et al., 2017). Vesper and König (2022) showed that the five factors of the SABeRS were related to willingness to strike in three different German samples. Thus, we test whether these relationships are also found cross-culturally. We hypothesize more formally: willingness to strike is expected to be negatively related to negative reactions towards strikes in the United Kingdom, Germany and France (H1), and positively associated with legitimacy of strikes in the United Kingdom, Germany and France (H2), informing oneself about strikes in the United Kingdom, Germany and France (H3), strike-related social network behaviour in the United Kingdom, Germany and France (H4), and support of strikers in the United Kingdom, Germany and France (H5).

For unions, next to public attitudes to strikes, the attitude of their members towards strikes during a collective bargaining process is also important. Union members tended to be more willing to strike (Jansen et al., 2017). They also reported to support strikers more, to show more strike-related social-network behaviour, and to inform themselves more about strikes compared to

non-members (Vesper & König, 2022). Furthermore, union members expressed a higher legitimacy of strikes, and fewer negative reactions to strikes than participants who were not members of a union (Vesper & König, 2022). We thus hypothesize: Union members show fewer negative reactions towards strikes in the United Kingdom, Germany and France (H6) and report a higher legitimacy of strikes in the United Kingdom, Germany and France (H7) than non-members. Additionally, union members inform themselves more about strikes in the United Kingdom, Germany and France (H8), show more strike-related social network behaviour in the United Kingdom, Germany and France (H9), and support strikers more than non-members in the United Kingdom, Germany and France (H10).

To have already participated in a strike seems to enhance the probability to participate in another strike (Campolieti et al., 2005; Martin & Sinclair, 2001). Thus, past participation in a strike could affect behavioural reactions toward strikes and strike attitudes, as well as perceptions of the usefulness of strikes during collective bargaining. People with a strike history reported more positive attitudes to strikes than people who had no strike history (Vesper & König, 2022). We hypothesize more formally: People with a strike history will report fewer negative reactions towards strikes in the United Kingdom, Germany and France (H11), perceive strikes as more legitimate in the three countries (H12), inform themselves more about strikes in the three countries (H13), show more strike-related social network behaviour in the three countries (H14), and support strikers more in the three countries (H15) than people without strike history.

METHODS

Sample

We collected our data in January 2020 using an online panel provider that operates panels in seven countries, among these are the United Kingdom, Germany, and France. All data is uploaded to an OSF project (https://osf.io/46bdr/?view_only=f0f58b6c57154b93b534f80e_550ae51f). All participants received a small compensation for their participation (0.50 €). A total of 1652 people participated in the study. The only inclusion criterion was that participants needed to be employed. Following our

preregistration (<https://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=tx4q7x>), we adhered to [several steps to ensure data quality. These steps are based on recommendations from Meade and Craig \(2012\). As a first step, participants who were unemployed were screened out](#) ($n = 92$). This step was conducted to ensure that participants could go on strike. Secondly, we excluded participants who chose the option “No” when asked whether their responses could be used for scientific analyses ($n = 33$). In our third step, we took care of swift completion and excluded all participants ($n = 78$) who answered the items faster than two seconds per item on average (Huang et al., 2012). Our last step was to excluded participants who consecutively selected the same response option for more than six items ($n = 88$; Johnson, 2005). Hence, our final sample included $N = 1361$ participants.

Overall, the mean age of the participants was 46.33 ($SD = 10.03$). In the total sample, 33.1% reported being male and 66.9% reported being female. Furthermore, 82.6% were not union members and 71.3% had never participated in a strike. The British participants ($n = 444$) had a mean age of 46.82 ($SD = 10.68$). In the British sample, 34.2% indicated that they belong to the male sex and 65.8% reported to belong to the female sex. Of the British participants, 77.5% were not union members and 81.8% had never participated in a strike. The mean age in the German sample ($n = 454$) was 44.80 ($SD = 10.64$), 34.6% were male and 65.4% were female. Of the German participants, 86.3% were not union members and 78.2% had not participated in a strike. The French participants ($n = 463$) had a mean age of 47.36 ($SD = 8.53$). A third of the French participants were male (30.7%) and 69.3% were female. In the French sample, 83.8% were not union members and 54.6% had no strike history.

Materials

To assess the strike attitudes and behavioural reactions, we used the 15 item SABeRS (i.e., three items for each factor, Table 1). Items were answered on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = “Do not agree” to 5 = “Agree.” To measure *willingness to strike*, we used four items based on Akkerman et al. (2013). An example item is “I would strike for more money.” All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from “Not at all” to “Very likely” and can be found in Table 1. The SABeRS and the willingness to strike scale were translated from German to English and French using a back-translation process (e.g., Schaffer & Riordan, 2003) with two individuals who were fluent in German and either English or French independently translating the items. Issues that arose were solved through discussion. *Membership in a*

union was assessed with one item asking participants whether they were a union member (as in the European Social Survey Round 9, 2019). *Strike history* was measured with a single item asking participants if they had ever participated in a strike (as in the World Values Survey Round 6, 2014). The reliability scores of the different scales and measures for the three samples were calculated to ensure that the items worked sufficiently, using Cronbach's α and McDonald's ω (Dunn et al., 2014; McDonald, 1999; see Table 2).

Procedure

First, participants had to choose their preferred language. On the welcoming page, the purpose of the study was explained, and participants read a definition of strikes. Then participants answered demographic items. Those who were currently unemployed were screened out. All employed participants continued to the next page, where they had to fill out the SABeRS, the willingness to strike items, the general system justification scale (Kay & Jost, 2003), one item assessing the political orientation, the item about union membership, and the item about strike history. The results regarding the general system justification and the political orientation can be found in a different article (XXX [names suppressed for blind review], 2022).

Statistical Analyses

To answer H1-H5 (relation between SABeRS and willingness to strike), the respective correlations for each sample were calculated. We computed several multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVA) to answer RQ1 (country differences in strike attitudes), RQ2 (country differences in willingness to strike), H6-10 (differences between union and non-union members), and H11-15 (differences between participants with and without strike history). For all MANCOVAs, the included covariates were age, gender, and education. The independent variables varied according to the question that should be answered. For RQ1 and RQ2, country affiliation was used as the independent variable. Union membership was the independent variable in the MANCOVA answering H6-10 and strike history was the independent variable in the MANCOVA regarding H11-15. For all MANCOVAs except for RQ2, the five factors of the SABeRS were the dependent variables. The dependent variable used to answer RQ2 was willingness to strike.

MANCOVA is used to assess whether significant mean differences in the dependent variable(s) exist between the groups used as independent variable (Pituch & Stevens, 2016). It removes the effects of the covariates from the model by regressing the covariates on the dependent variables. The residuals of this regression are then used to test whether the independent variable still influences the dependent variable(s). This allows to assess the true effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable(s).

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

We assessed the measurement equivalence of the SABeRS between the three samples and obtained partial scalar equivalence. This implies that no systematic response biases exist between the three groups (Chen, 2008). Hence, mean comparisons between the three samples are valid and meaningful. The analyses are reported in another article, currently under review (XXX [names suppressed for peer-review]). Furthermore, we assessed the measurement equivalence of the willingness to strike scale. Although we found no partial scalar equivalence for the willingness to strike scale in its current form, excluding the item “I would strike for better working hours” (based on modification indices) resulted in partial scalar equivalence when the restrictions for item 2 (“I would strike for better working hours”) were relaxed. Hence, we can compare the means between the three samples.

Test of Hypotheses

To assess whether there are differences between the three countries in the SABeRS (RQ1), a MANCOVA with the independent variable country affiliation and the control variables age, gender, and education was conducted (see Table 3).² We found statistically significant effects of country affiliation after controlling for the effect of age, gender, and education on negative reactions, $F(2, 1355) = 14.37, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .02$, legitimacy, $F(2, 1355) = 12.57, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .02$, and support of strikers, $F(2, 1355) = 5.84, p = .003, \eta_p^2 = .01$. There were no significant differences in informing oneself about strikes and strike-related social network behaviour. German participants

² We also conducted all analyses without control variables as their usage is controversially discussed in social sciences (see Bernerth & Aguinis, 2016; Wysocki et al., 2022). The results differed only slightly and can be found in the supplemental materials.

reported significantly fewer negative reactions towards strikes compared to British and French participants. British and French participants did not differ in their negative reactions. Furthermore, German participants reported a significantly higher legitimacy of strikes than British participants and a descriptively higher legitimacy of strikes compared to French participants. British participants reported significantly less legitimacy of strikes compared to French participants. Regarding the support of strikers, British participants reported significantly more support of strikers than French and German participants. Thus, we can answer Research Question 1 with yes, there are significant differences between the three countries in three of five subscales of the SABeRS.

To answer Research Question 2 (i.e., whether the willingness to strike differs among the three countries) we conducted an analysis of covariance with the factor country affiliation, the covariates age, gender, and education, and the dependent variable willingness to strike. The covariates age, $F(1, 1355) = 21.68, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .02$, and gender, $F(1, 1355) = 4.25, p = .039, \eta_p^2 = .003$, were significantly related to the willingness to strike. Education did not exhibit a significant effect on willingness to strike, $F(1, 1355) = 3.37, p = .067, \eta_p^2 = .002$. There was also a significant effect between the three groups in their willingness to strike, $F(2, 1355) = 26.16, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$. To determine which group means differed significantly, we computed Bonferroni-corrected planned contrasts. The means of the German and the British sample ($p < .001$), as well as the means of the German and the French sample ($p < .001$) differed significantly from each other. The means from the British and the French sample did not differ significantly from each other ($p = .277$). Germans reported the highest willingness to strike ($M = 3.89, SD = 1.17$), followed by the British sample ($M = 3.54, SD = 1.16$) and the French sample ($M = 3.41, SD = 1.16$). These results answer Research Question 2: Differences in the willingness to strike do exist between the three samples.

To answer hypotheses H1 to H5 (i.e., the relations between the five factors of the SABeRS to willingness to strike), correlations between the willingness to strike and the five factors were calculated for each sample (Table 4). In the British sample, negative reactions to strikes were significantly negatively correlated to willingness to strike. Furthermore, the other four factors (support of strikers, informing oneself about strikes, strike-related social network behaviour, and legitimacy of strikes) were all significantly positively correlated to willingness to strike in the British sample. For the German and the French sample, the same correlation patterns were found. Thus, hypotheses H1 to H5 were supported.

Hypotheses 6 to 10 concerned the differences between union members and non-members on the SABeRS factors. To answer these hypotheses, one MANCOVA for each sample was calculated with the independent variable union membership, the covariates age, gender, and education, and the five subscales of the SABeRS (i.e., negative reactions to strikes, legitimacy of strikes, informing oneself about strikes, strike-related social network behaviour, and support of strikers, Vesper & König, 2022) as dependent variables (see Table 5). Significant differences were found between union members and non-members for the British sample, $F(10, 868) = 4.27, p < .001$, Wilk's $\Lambda = .91, \eta_p^2 = .05$, the German sample, $F(10, 888) = 2.59, p = .004$, Wilk's $\Lambda = .94, \eta_p^2 = .03$, and the French sample, $F(10, 906) = 4.58, p < .001$, Wilk's $\Lambda = .91, \eta_p^2 = .05$, with union members evaluating strikes more positively compared to non-members for each subscale (i.e., they reported fewer negative reactions towards strikes and a higher legitimacy of strikes, sought more information about strikes, reported more strike-related social network behaviour, and supported strikers more than non-members, only in the German sample did union members and non-members not significantly differ in their strike-related social network behaviour.). Thus, Hypotheses 6 to 10 were supported.

Hypotheses 11 to 15 concerned the differences between people with vs. without a strike history. To answer these hypotheses, one MANCOVA for each sample was calculated (see Table 6). This time, strike participation was used as the independent variable, covariates were age, gender, and education, and the five subscales of the SABeRS as dependent variables. There was a statistically significant difference in the five SABeRS subscales based on prior strike participation in the British sample, $F(10, 868) = 7.95, p < .001$, Wilk's $\Lambda = .84, \eta_p^2 = .08$, the German sample, $F(10, 888) = 6.96, p < .001$, Wilk's $\Lambda = .86, \eta_p^2 = .07$, and the French sample, $F(10, 906) = 11.99, p < .001$, Wilk's $\Lambda = .78, \eta_p^2 = .12$. In all three samples, people who had a strike history assessed strikes as more legitimate, reported fewer negative reactions towards strikes, reported more strike-related behaviour in social networks to strikes informed themselves more about strikes, and supported strikers more than people who had no strike history. Hence, Hypotheses 11 to 15 were supported.

Discussion

This study assessed differences between a British, a German and a French sample in their strike attitudes and behavioural reactions, as well as in their willingness to strike. We found significant differences between the three samples in three of five factors of the SABeRS and in their willingness to strike. The second objective of this study was to assess whether the SABeRS shows similar relationships with willingness to strike, union membership and previous strike participation in all three countries. These hypotheses were also supported. The factors strike-related social media behaviour, informing oneself about strikes, support of strikers, and legitimacy of strikes were positively associated with willingness to strike in all three samples, whereas negative reactions to strikes were negatively related to willingness to strike. In addition, union members in all three samples reported fewer negative reactions, a higher legitimacy, more strike-related social network behaviour, informing themselves more about strikes, and more support of strikers than non-union members. The same pattern was also obtained for participants who already participated in a strike compared to those who had no strike history. Regarding the differences between the three countries in their strike attitudes and behavioural reactions, one could have assumed that the French sample might report the most positive attitudes as they consider strikes almost a cultural good (Ancelovici, 2008), but in these analyses the French sample reported the highest negative reactions to strikes and the lowest support of strikers compared to the British and German samples. This might be due to the ongoing general strike in France during the time of the data collection which might have taken its toll on the nerves of the French public. The French sample still reported a rather high legitimacy of strikes and reported informing themselves as much about strikes as the British sample and more than the German sample. In the strike-related social network behaviour, all three samples reported rather low levels. Thus, there are differences in the three countries regarding their strike attitudes and reactions, but further research is needed to look for causes of these differences.

Additional differences were found in regard of the willingness to strike. We assumed that the French sample might show the highest willingness followed by the British sample and then the German sample, based on the differing frequency of strikes in the three countries (Vandaele, 2016). Our results draw a different picture: the German sample reported the highest willingness to strike despite living in the country with the lowest strike frequency. The British and French samples did not differ significantly from each other in their willingness to strike. Hence, strike frequency in a country

might not picture the willingness to strike of the public but influences of regulations and laws that inhibit or foster the tendency to strike. These relations could be assessed in further studies. Another reason for this unexpected result might be that the ongoing general strike in France also influenced the willingness to strike among French participants in a negative way as they might already have participated themselves in this general strike. This also aligns with the fact that in the French sample almost half of the participants reported to have participated in a strike before, compared to only around 20% in the other samples. Future research could further assess other reasons for this result, for example one other reason could also be that our German participants have a greater intention-behaviour gap (Sheeran & Webb, 2016) than our French participants. Hence, they might report a higher willingness, but when it comes to strike, they might shy away from their initial intention and not participate.

Furthermore, we showed that the relationship of the strike attitudes with the variables willingness to strike, union membership and strike history was similar across the three samples: negative reactions were negative related to willingness to strike, all other factors of the SABeRS were positively related with willingness to strike across all countries. Additionally, union members and participants with a strike history reported in all three samples more legitimacy, informing themselves more about strikes, more support for strikes, more strike-related social network behaviour, and fewer negative reactions to strikes than non-union members and participants without strike history. This indicates that some processes that might influence attitudes, such as experiencing a strike as a striker, work in the same way across the three countries. Furthermore, this aligns with previous research showing that a collective identity can develop during strikes (López-Andreu, 2020) which might have long-lasting influences on strike attitudes.

Hence, although the samples differ overall in their strike attitudes, some similarities regarding the relationships with other variables were also found. Reactions to strikes could thus differ depending on where these strikes take place due to cultural, legal, or other differences. This study gave a first indication of differences between the three countries examined, but further studies are needed to look at these differences in more detail. This also includes the question as to when a strike is considered legitimate, which is especially important for unions building on public support for strikes during collective bargaining (Kelloway et al., 2008). In accordance with institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), trade unions' survival hinges on public support of strikes to some extent.

Limitations and Future Research

This study also has its limitations. Two of these seem particularly noteworthy. First, the legitimacy of strikes and support of strikers' factors correlated rather highly with each other. This correlation could be caused by the subjunctive formulation of the support of strikers-items: people who evaluated strikes as legitimate reported that they would rather support strikers. However, it should be waited whether this correlation remains high if the scale is used for a specific strike, as a specific strike allows for the reformulation of the items measuring the support of strikers' factor, so that they display real behaviour and not only behavioural intentions. Second, this study followed a cross-sectional design with a single questionnaire containing all scales. Hence, common-method bias might be an issue in our study (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Future research could try to assess the strike attitudes and other variables at different time points. Furthermore, other measures such as actual strike participation and not the mere willingness might also be considered in future research. The most important aspect that future research could tackle is to assess what might be reasons for the differences found between British, German and French participants in their strike attitudes. This research should also consider the role of crises such as the Covid 19 pandemic, the Ukraine war, or the cost of living crises on strike attitudes and willingness to strike.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to assess the differences in strike attitudes between British, German and French samples. We found that the three samples did differ in both attitudes to strikes and their willingness to strike. Surprisingly, Germans reported the most positive attitudes to strikes and the highest willingness to strike. We also found that the strike attitudes and behavioural reactions were significantly related to willingness to strike and differed between union members and non-members in all three samples. Future research can assess reasons for the differences found in strike attitudes.

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Table 1

Items in English, German, and French

Factor	English	German	French
Negative reactions to strikes	I feel disturbed by strikes.	Ich fühle mich von Streiks gestört.	Les grèves me dérangent.
Negative reactions to strikes	Strikes strain myself.	Streiks belasten mich.	Les grèves m'accablent.
Negative reactions to strikes	I am annoyed by strikes.	Von Streiks bin ich genervt.	Les grèves m'énervent.
Legitimacy of strikes	Strikes are necessary.	Streiks sind notwendig.	Les grèves sont nécessaires.
Legitimacy of strikes	Strikes are justified.	Streiks sind gerechtfertigt.	Les grèves sont justifiées.
Legitimacy of strikes	Strikes are a waste of time. (reverse-coded)	Streiks sind eine Zeitverschwendung.	Les grèves sont une perte de temps.
Informing oneself about strikes	I read news about strikes.	Ich lese Nachrichten über Streiks.	Je consulte les informations au sujet des grèves.
Informing oneself about strikes	I am interested in the reasons of strikes.	Ich interessiere mich für die Gründe von Streiks.	Je suis intéressé(e) par les raisons des grèves.
Informing oneself about strikes	I acquire background knowledge about strikes.	Ich eigne mir selbst Hintergrundwissen zu Streiks an.	J'acquiers moi-même des connaissances de fond sur les grèves.
Strike-related social network behaviour	I share information about strikes on social media.	Ich teile Informationen zu Streiks in den sozialen Netzwerken.	Je partage des informations sur les grèves dans les réseaux sociaux.
Strike-related social network behaviour	I comment on posts about strikes on the social media.	Ich kommentiere Beiträge in sozialen Netzwerken zu Streiks.	Je commente les publications concernant les grèves sur les réseaux sociaux.
Strike-related social network behaviour	I look at posts about strikes on social media.	Ich schaue mir Beiträge zu Streiks in sozialen Netzwerken an.	Je regarde les posts concernant les grèves sur les réseaux sociaux.
Support of strikers	I would show my support to strikers.	Ich würde Streikenden meine Unterstützung zeigen.	Je voudrais montrer mon soutien aux grévistes.
Support of strikers	I would accept flyers from strikers.	Ich würde Flyer von Streikenden entgegennehmen.	J'accepterais des tracts de grévistes.
Support of strikers	I would support the strikers' position in conversations.	Ich würde die Seite der Streikenden bei Diskussionen einnehmen.	Je prendrais le parti des grévistes dans une discussion.
Willingness to strikes	I would strike for more money.	Ich würde für mehr Geld streiken.	Je ferais la grève pour une meilleure rémunération.
Willingness to strikes	I would strike for better working hours.	Ich würde für bessere Arbeitszeiten streiken.	Je ferais la grève pour de meilleurs horaires de travail.
Willingness to strikes	I would strike for better working conditions.	Ich würde für bessere Arbeitsbedingungen streiken.	Je ferais la grève pour de meilleures conditions de travail.
Willingness to strikes	I would strike for more days off.	Ich würde für mehr freie Tage streiken.	Je ferais la grève pour plus de jours de congé.

Table 2

Internal Consistencies of the Five Factors of the Strike Attitude and Behavioural Reactions Scale (SABeRS) and Willingness to Strike for the Three Samples (N_{UK} = 444, N_{DE} = 454, N_{FR} = 463)

Sample	Factor	Cronbach's α	McDonald's ω	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
UK	Negative reactions towards strikes	.75	.76 [.72-.81]	2.75	0.95
UK	Legitimacy of strikes	.86	.86 [.83-.89]	3.41	0.96
UK	Informing oneself about strikes	.69	.69 [.64-.74]	3.40	0.89
UK	Strike-related social network behaviour	.84	.85 [.82-.88]	1.89	0.98
UK	Support of strikers	.85	.85 [.83-.88]	3.20	1.03
UK	Willingness to strike	.91	.91 [.89-.93]	3.54	1.18
DE	Negative reactions towards strikes	.88	.88 [.85-.90]	2.41	1.05
DE	Legitimacy of strikes	.79	.80 [.76-.84]	3.76	0.85
DE	Informing oneself about strikes	.81	.81 [.78-.84]	3.30	0.97
DE	Strike-related social network behaviour	.86	.86 [.83-.89]	1.79	0.98
DE	Support of strikers	.80	.80 [.76-.83]	3.01	0.98
DE	Willingness to strike	.90	.90 [.87-.92]	3.93	1.09
FR	Negative reactions towards strikes	.87	.87 [.85-.90]	2.85	1.28
FR	Legitimacy of strikes	.86	.86 [.84-.89]	3.59	1.11
FR	Informing oneself about strikes	.68	.69 [.64-.74]	3.36	0.98
FR	Strike-related social network behaviour	.85	.85 [.82-.88]	1.91	1.12
FR	Support of strikers	.87	.88 [.85-.90]	2.95	1.31
FR	Willingness to strike	.87	.87 [.84-.89]	3.38	1.21

Note. UK = United Kingdom, DE = Germany, FR = France. Numbers in brackets represent the 95% confidence interval.

Table 3

Results of the MANCOVA with the Independent Variable Country Affiliation

	British		German		French	
	participants		participants		participants	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Negative reactions towards strikes	2.75	1.10	2.44	1.11	2.82	1.12
Legitimacy of strikes	3.41	0.99	3.74	1.00	3.61	0.99
Informing oneself about strikes	3.40	0.93	3.34	0.94	3.32	0.95
Strike-related social network behaviour	1.89	1.03	1.78	1.04	1.93	1.05
Support of strikers	3.20	1.12	3.00	1.13	2.96	1.14
Multivariate results						
<i>F</i>	15.16					
<i>df</i> ₁	10					
<i>df</i> ₂	2702					
<i>p</i>	< .001					
Wilk's Λ	.90					
η_p^2	.05					

Note. $N_{UK} = 444$, $N_{DE} = 454$, and $N_{FR} = 463$. UK = United Kingdom, DE = Germany, FR = France. Control variables: Age, gender, education. The covariates age, $F(5, 1351) = 13.56$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, gender, $F(5, 1351) = 3.35$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, and education, $F(5, 1351) = 12.83$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, were significantly related to the SABeRS,

Table 4

Correlations of the Five Factors of Strike Attitudes and Behavioural Reactions Scale and Willingness to Strike for the Three Samples

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
	UK/DE/FR	UK/DE/FR	UK/DE/FR	UK/DE/FR	UK/DE/FR	UK/DE/FR	UK/DE/FR	UK/DE/FR	UK/DE/FR
1 Negative reactions towards strikes -									
2 Legitimacy of strikes	-.58/-.58/-.76	-							
3 Informing oneself about strikes	-.11*/-.20/-.33	.43/.43/.47	-						
4 Strike-related social network behaviour	-.08/-.08/-.26	.31/.25/.33	.45/.49/.51	-					
5 Support of strikers	-.48/-.40/-.66	.74/.65/.76	.50/.63/.63	.42/.44/.51	-				
6 Willingness to strike	-.41/-.32/-.43	.67/.53/.53	.32/.33/.41	.32/.21/.34	.57/.48/.53	-			
7 Age	-.04/.03/-.00	-.07/-.01/-.06	.00/.10*/.09	-.16**/-.09/-.08	-.04/.10*/.01	-.20/-.09/-.05			
8 Gender	-.02/-.01/.05	-.00/.07/-.09*	.12**/.16/.01	.06/.02/-.03	.00/.11*/-.05	.03/.08/.03	.10*/-.02/.18		
9 Education	.07/.13**/.14**	.00/-.05/-.07	.18/.12*/.06	.12*/-.01/-.05	-.00/.01/-.08	-.00/.01/-.09	-.19/-.24/-.14**	-.00/.06/-.06	
<i>M</i>	2.75/2.41/2.85	3.41/3.76/3.59	3.40/3.30/3.36	1.89/1.79/1.91	3.20/3.01/2.95	3.54/3.93/3.38	46.82/44.80/47-36	1.34/1.35/1.31	4.06/3.73/4.64
<i>SD</i>	0.95/1.05/1.28	0.96/0.85/1.11	0.89/0.97/0.98	0.98/0.98/1.12	1.03/0.98/1.31	1.18/1.09/1.21	10.68/10.64/8.53	0.48/0.48/0.46	1.96/1.85/1.54

Note. $N_{UK} = 444$, $N_{DE} = 454$, $N_{FR} = 463$. UK = United Kingdom, DE = Germany, FR = France. Values in bold are significant with $p < .001$. Gender was coded with 1 = female, 2 = male. Education was coded from 1 = primary education to 8 = doctoral degrees. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 5

Results of the MANCOVA with the Independent Variable Union Membership for All Three Samples

	British sample				German sample				French sample			
	M_{union} <i>members</i>	SD_{union} <i>members</i>	M_{non-} <i>members</i>	SD_{non-} <i>members</i>	M_{union} <i>members</i>	SD_{union} <i>members</i>	M_{non-} <i>members</i>	SD_{non-} <i>members</i>	M_{union} <i>members</i>	SD_{union} <i>members</i>	M_{non-} <i>members</i>	SD_{non-} <i>members</i>
Negative reactions												
towards strikes	2.47	0.95	2.83	0.94	2.00	1.03	2.48	1.02	2.26	1.24	2.96	1.23
Legitimacy of strikes	3.88	0.94	3.27	0.94	4.11	0.83	3.70	0.83	4.11	1.09	3.49	1.09
Informing oneself												
about strikes	3.59	0.87	3.34	0.86	3.59	0.94	3.26	0.95	3.80	0.96	3.28	0.96
Strike-related social												
network behaviour	2.15	0.96	1.80	0.96	1.88	0.98	1.78	0.97	2.50	1.09	1.79	1.09
Support of strikers	3.66	1.00	3.05	0.99	3.45	0.96	2.93	0.97	3.57	1.28	2.83	1.27
Multivariate results												
F	4.27				2.59				4.58			
df_1	10				10				10			
df_2	868				888				906			
p	< .001				.004				< .001			
Wilk's Λ	.91				.94				.91			
η_p^2	.05				.03				.05			

Note. $n_{British\ union\ members} = 100$, $n_{British\ non-members} = 338$, $n_{German\ union\ members} = 62$, $n_{German\ non-members} = 388$, $n_{French\ union\ members} = 75$, $n_{French\ non-members} = 382$; the sample sizes are different to the overall sample sizes as some participants chose the option “not specified” for union membership and were excluded from these analyses. Covariates were age, gender, and education.

Table 6

Results of the MANCOVA with the Independent Variable Strike Participation for All Three Samples

	British sample				German sample				French sample			
	M_{strike} participation	SD_{strike} participation	$M_{no\ strike}$ participation	$SD_{no\ strike}$ participation	M_{strike} participation	SD_{strike} participation	$M_{no\ strike}$ participation	$SD_{no\ strike}$ participation	M_{strike} participation	SD_{strike} participation	$M_{no\ strike}$ participation	$SD_{no\ strike}$ participation
Negative reactions												
towards strikes	2.11	0.93	2.89	0.91	2.00	1.02	2.53	1.01	2.37	1.19	3.28	1.18
Legitimacy of strikes	4.03	0.95	3.28	0.93	4.18	0.82	3.64	0.82	4.07	1.03	3.17	1.02
Informing oneself												
about strikes	3.71	0.87	3.33	0.85	3.78	0.91	3.18	0.92	3.75	0.91	3.03	0.91
Strike-related social												
network behaviour	2.35	0.96	1.78	0.95	2.22	0.96	1.68	0.95	2.15	1.10	1.69	1.10
Support of strikers	3.89	0.99	3.04	0.99	3.59	0.93	2.84	0.94	3.55	1.19	2.44	1.20
Multivariate results												
F	7.95				6.96				11.99			
df_1	10				10				10			
df_2	868				888				906			
p	< .001				< .001				< .001			
Wilk's Λ	.84				.86				.78			
η_p^2	.08				.07				.12			

Note. $n_{British\ strike\ participation} = 81$, $n_{British\ no\ strike\ participation} = 360$, $n_{German\ strike\ participation} = 99$, $n_{German\ no\ strike\ participation} = 350$, $n_{French\ strike\ participation} = 210$, $n_{French\ no\ strike\ participation} = 248$; the sample sizes are different to the otherwise reported sample sizes as some participants chose the option “not specified” for strike participation and were excluded from these analyses. Covariates were age, gender, and education.

Supplemental Material

Results without control variables

To answer Research Question 1, a MANOVA with the independent variable country affiliation was conducted (see Table S1). A statistically significant difference in the five subscales of the SABeRS based on country affiliation was found, $F(10, 2708) = 17.30, p < .001$, Wilk's $\Lambda = .88, \eta^2 = .06$. German participants reported less support of strikers, less strike-related social network behaviour, informing themselves less about strikes, fewer negative reactions towards strikes, and a higher legitimacy of strikes, than British participants, and slightly more support of strikers than French participants. British participants reported less legitimacy of strikes and fewer negative reactions to strikes compared to French participants. Furthermore, British participants reported informing themselves about strikes and showing strike-related social network behaviour just as much as French participants, whereas British participants reported more support to strikers than French participants.

We conducted an analysis of variance with the factor country affiliation and the dependent variable willingness to strike to answer Research Question 2. The three groups differed significantly in their willingness to strike, $F(2, 1358) = 26.59, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .04$. The German sample reported the highest willingness to strike ($M = 3.93, SD = 1.09$), followed by the British sample ($M = 3.54, SD = 1.18$) and the French sample ($M = 3.38, SD = 1.21$).

Hypotheses 6 to 10 concerned the differences between union members and non-members on the SABeRS factors. To answer these hypotheses, one MANOVA for each sample was calculated with the independent variable union membership and the five subscales of the SABeRS as dependent variables (see Table S2). Significant differences were found between union members and non-members for the British sample, $F(5, 432) = 7.15, p < .001$, Wilk's $\Lambda = .92, \eta_p^2 = .08$, the German sample, $F(5, 444) = 4.33, p = .001$, Wilk's $\Lambda = .95, \eta_p^2 = .05$, and the French sample, $F(5, 451) = 7.40, p < .001$, Wilk's $\Lambda = .92, \eta_p^2 = .08$, with union members evaluating strikes more positively compared to non-members for each subscale

Hypotheses 11 to 15 concerned the differences between people with vs. without a strike history. To answer these hypotheses, one MANOVA for each sample was calculated (see Table S3). This time, strike participation was used as the independent variable and the five subscales of the SABeRS as

dependent variables. There was a statistically significant difference in the five SABeRS subscales based on prior strike participation in the British sample, $F(5, 435) = 13.34, p < .001, \text{Wilk's } \Lambda = .87, \eta_p^2 = .13$, the German sample, $F(5, 443) = 12.28, p < .001, \text{Wilk's } \Lambda = .88, \eta_p^2 = .12$, and the French sample, $F(5, 452) = 23.57, p < .001, \text{Wilk's } \Lambda = .79, \eta_p^2 = .21$. In all three samples, people who had a strike history assessed strikes as more legitimate, reported fewer negative reactions towards strikes, reported more strike-related behaviour in social networks to strikes informed themselves more about strikes, and supported strikers more than people who had no strike history.

Table S1

Results of the MANOVA with the Independent Variable Country Affiliation

	British		German		French	
	participants		participants		participants	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Negative reactions towards strikes	2.75	0.95	2.41	1.05	2.85	1.28
Legitimacy of strikes	3.41	0.96	3.76	0.85	3.59	1.11
Informing oneself about strikes	3.40	0.89	3.30	0.97	3.36	0.98
Strike-related social network behaviour	1.89	0.98	1.79	0.98	1.91	1.12
Support of strikers	3.20	1.03	3.01	0.98	2.95	1.31
Multivariate results						
<i>F</i>	17.30					
df ₁	10					
df ₂	2708					
<i>p</i>	< .001					
Wilk's Λ	.88					
η_p^2	.06					

Note. $N_{UK} = 444$, $N_{DE} = 454$, and $N_{FR} = 463$. UK = United Kingdom, DE = Germany, FR = France

Table S2

Results of the MANOVA with the Independent Variable Union Membership for All Three Samples

	British sample				German sample				French sample			
	<i>M</i> _{union members}	<i>SD</i> _{union members}	<i>M</i> _{non-members}	<i>SD</i> _{non-members}	<i>M</i> _{union members}	<i>SD</i> _{union members}	<i>M</i> _{non-members}	<i>SD</i> _{non-members}	<i>M</i> _{union members}	<i>SD</i> _{union members}	<i>M</i> _{non-members}	<i>SD</i> _{non-members}
Negative reactions												
towards strikes	2.48	0.90	2.83	0.96	2.00	1.00	2.48	1.04	2.28	1.26	2.96	1.26
Legitimacy of strikes	3.86	0.80	3.27	0.97	4.11	0.79	3.70	0.85	4.09	1.08	3.49	1.10
Informing oneself												
about strikes	3.58	0.86	3.34	0.90	3.61	0.96	3.26	0.96	3.80	0.98	3.28	0.96
Strike-related social												
network behaviour	2.12	1.12	1.80	0.92	1.88	1.15	1.78	0.95	2.49	1.32	1.79	1.04
Support of strikers	3.65	0.87	3.01	1.03	3.46	0.98	2.93	0.96	3.56	1.30	2.83	1.28
Multivariate results												
<i>F</i>	7.15				4.33				7.40			
<i>df</i> ₁	5				5				5			
<i>df</i> ₂	432				444				451			
<i>p</i>	< .001				.001				< .001			
Wilk's Λ	.92				.95				.92			
η_p^2	.08				.05				.08			

Note. $n_{\text{British union members}} = 100$, $n_{\text{British non-members}} = 338$, $n_{\text{German union members}} = 62$, $n_{\text{German non-members}} = 388$, $n_{\text{French union members}} = 75$, $n_{\text{French non-members}} = 382$; the sample sizes are different to the overall sample sizes as some participants chose the option “not specified” for union membership and were excluded from these analyses.

Table S3

Results of the MANOVA with the Independent Variable Strike Participation for All Three Samples

	British sample				German sample				French sample			
	M_{strike} participatiion	SD_{strike} participation	$M_{no\ strike}$ participation	$SD_{no\ strike}$ participation	M_{strike} participatiion	SD_{strike} participation	$M_{no\ strike}$ participation	$SD_{no\ strike}$ participation	M_{strike} participatiion	SD_{strike} participation	$M_{no\ strike}$ participation	$SD_{no\ strike}$ participation
Negative reactions towards strikes	2.13	0.83	2.88	0.93	2.01	0.94	2.53	1.06	2.39	1.23	3.26	1.18
Legitimacy of strikes	3.96	0.73	3.29	0.97	4.18	0.77	3.64	0.84	4.04	0.99	3.19	1.07
Informing oneself about strikes	3.72	0.82	3.33	0.89	3.79	0.89	3.18	0.94	3.75	0.89	3.03	0.94
Strike-related social network behaviour	2.27	1.18	1.79	0.91	2.22	1.06	1.68	0.92	2.14	1.21	1.70	0.99
Support of strikers	3.84	0.82	3.05	1.01	3.59	0.78	2.84	0.98	3.53	1.20	2.45	1.20
Multivariate results												
F	13.34				12.28				23.57			
df_1	5				5				5			
df_2	435				443				452			
p	< .001				< .001				< .001			
Wilk's Λ	.87				.88				.79			
η_p^2	.13				.12				.21			

Note. $n_{British\ strike\ participation} = 81$, $n_{British\ no\ strike\ participation} = 360$, $n_{German\ strike\ participation} = 99$, $n_{German\ no\ strike\ participation} = 350$, $n_{French\ strike\ participation} = 210$, $n_{French\ no\ strike\ participation} = 248$; the sample sizes are different to the otherwise reported sample sizes as some participants chose the option “not specified” for strike participation and were excluded from these analyses.

Social movements as laboratories of dual power

Panagiotis Sotiris

Introuduction

Traditionally thought as a way to describe singular moments within revolutionary sequences, dual power is a dynamic that emerges during periods of hegemonic crisis, widespread social protest and contestation and emergence of massive, participatory and expansive forms of organization of movements. In what follows ‘dual power’ will be dealt both in the way it was originally defined, but also as the horizon of movements when they cross certain thresholds of mass participation, ruptural orientation, and politicization. This is based on the assumption that within a Marxist perspective on social transformation, dual power offers a way to deal with a crucial strategic node, namely the passage from movements as contestation and protest to movements as struggles for power and transformation.

Trajectories of dual power

The notion of dual power has a long history in Marxism. In its original formulation by Lenin dual power refers to the characteristics of the 1917 Russian revolutionary sequence and the broadening of the scope of the revolutionary process.

The highly remarkable feature of our revolution is that it has brought about a dual power.¹

The crucial premise in Lenin’s argumentation was the radicalisation of the Soviets as the political form that expressed the proletarian orientation towards rupture and transformation.

What is this dual power? Alongside the Provisional Government, the government of the bourgeoisie, another government has arisen, so far weak and incipient; but undoubtedly a government that actually exists and is growing—the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies.²

¹ Lenin, V.I. 1964, *Collected Works*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, vol. 24, p. 38.

² Ibid.

Lenin was thinking of a revolutionary situation in progress, stressing the explosive co-existence of two antagonistic forms of power, the power of the Provisional Government and the power of the Soviets, as a reflection of the antagonistic class character of each one and a particular moment within an escalated form of class struggle. It was a confrontation between two antagonistic political projects, representing not only antagonistic class alliances but also antagonistic practices of politics.

What is the class composition of this other government? It consists of the proletariat and the peasants (in soldiers' uniforms). What is the political nature of this government? It is a revolutionary dictatorship, i.e., a power directly based on revolutionary seizure, on the direct initiative of the people from below, and not on a law enacted by a centralised state power. It is an entirely different kind of power from the one that generally exists in the parliamentary bourgeois-democratic republics.³

The power of the Soviets was not commensurate or symmetrical to the bourgeois exercise of power. In contrast, we are dealing with a different and antagonistic practice of politics. This is stressed by Lenin's assessment of the Paris Commune.

This power is of the same type as the Paris Commune of 1871. The fundamental characteristics of this type are: (1) the source of power is not a law previously discussed and enacted by parliament, but the direct initiative of the people from below, in their local areas—direct “seizure”, to use a current expression; (2) the replacement of the police and the army, which are institutions divorced from the people and set against the people, by the direct arming of the whole people; order in the state under such a power is maintained by the armed workers and peasants themselves, by the armed people themselves; (3) officialdom, the bureaucracy, are either similarly replaced by the direct rule of the people themselves or at least placed under special control; they not only become elected officials, but are also subject to recall at the people's first demand; they are reduced to the position of simple agents.⁴

Lenin echoes Marx's reasoning in writings such as *Civil War in France*. The political form of the dictatorship of the proletariat is radically incommensurate and antagonistic to the bourgeois state. It is not an alteration of classes in control of the same state apparatus but a new practice of politics and a new form of state power, aiming at the ‘withering away’ of the state.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Lenin op.cit., pp. 38-39.

In Marx's conception, which Lenin studied attentively on the eve of the October Revolution, we are not dealing with an alternative state apparatus but with autonomous forms of working-class organization, antagonistic to the state and aiming at the transformation not only of political forms but also of the relations of production. As Étienne Balibar has suggested, we can see

the penetration of political practice to the sphere of "labour", of production. In other words, it is the end of the absolute separation, developed by capitalism itself, between 'politics' and economics'. Not in the sense of an 'economic policy' that has nothing new, not even by the transfer of political power to workers, but in order to exercise it as workers, and without stopping workers, the transfer, in the sphere of production of an entire part of political practice. Therefore, we can think that work, and before it social conditions, become not only a 'socially useful' and 'socially organised' practice, but a political practice.⁵

The importance of the Soviets was widely recognized by all tendencies of the Russian revolutionary movement. They had a history stretching back to the various forms of factory committees, strike committees, workers committees and other forms of coordination and organization in the 1905 revolution before the formation of the 'councils of workers deputies', the *soviets* and in particular the St. Petersburg soviet, and then the emergence of soldiers and peasants' soviets. And in 1905 the soviets already showed their potential as organs of proletarian self-government and revolution.⁶

In 1917 there was an expansive movement of workers' councils all over Russia, often engaged in forms of workers' control in various forms and degrees, in a movement that was both contradictory and impressive,⁷ and led to various forms of local soviets, thus creating a situation where even before the armed insurrection of October the soviets indeed had real power.

Lenin insisted that since there was an open revolutionary crisis, these forms of autonomous proletarian organization were already establishing an antagonistic political form. They were not just forms of self-organization; they represented a novel political practice and were the product of the collective ingenuity of the working class. They were neither invented nor proposed by the Bolsheviks; they emerged as part of the dynamics of the 1905

⁵ Balibar, É. 1974, *Cinque études du matérialisme historique*, Paris : Maspero, pp. 96-97.

⁶ Anweiler, Oscar 1974, *The Soviets: The Russian Workers, Peasants and Soldiers Councils, 1905-1921*, translated by Ruth Hein, New York: Pantheon Books, p. 64.

⁷ Sirianni, Carmen 1982, *Workers Control and Socialist Democracy*, London: Verso.

revolution. What the Bolsheviks did was incorporate the soviets in the particular strategy for proletarian hegemony.⁸

The proletariat cannot “lay hold of” the “state apparatus” and “set it in motion”. But it can smash everything that is oppressive, routine, incorrigibly bourgeois in the old state apparatus and substitute its own, new apparatus. The Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies are exactly this apparatus.⁹

Trotsky, writing after the Revolution in contrast to Lenin whose basic theorization of dual power came in the form of a conjunctural political intervention, tended towards seeing dual power as a constitutive element of revolutionary situations in general.

This double sovereignty does not presuppose—generally speaking, indeed, it excludes—the possibility of a division of the power into two equal halves, or indeed any formal equilibrium of forces whatever. It is not a constitutional, but a revolutionary fact. It implies that a destruction of the social equilibrium has already split the state superstructure.¹⁰

The role of the workers and soldiers’ councils in the 1918 German revolution was also widely discussed, since that particular experience showed that the councils were more like a contested terrain between different tendencies and different social strata rather than simple expressions of ‘dual power’.¹¹

The experience of factory councils in Italy led Gramsci to important insights regarding such institutions of worker’s democracy, which in a manner similar to that of Lenin treated them as potential forms of a Workers’ State.

The socialist State already exists potentially in the institutions of social life characteristic of the exploited working class. To link these institutions, co-ordinating and ordering them into highly centralized hierarchy of competences and powers, while respecting the necessary autonomy and articulation of each, is to create a genuine

⁸ On the attitude of Lenin and the Bolsheviks towards the soviets see Shandro, Alan 2007, ‘Lenin and Hegemony: The Soviets, the Working Class, and the Party in the Revolution of 1905, in *Lenin Reloaded: Towards a Politics of Truth* in Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis, and Slavoj Žižek, Durham: Duke University Press. Shandro has also stressed the importance of relation between the Soviets and the potential for proletarian hegemony: (Shandro, Alan 2014, *Lenin and the Logic of Hegemony. Political Practice and Theory in the Class Struggle*, Leiden: Brill, p. 245).

⁹ Lenin op.cit, vol 26, pp. 102.

¹⁰ Trotsky, Leon 2008, *History of the Russian Revolution*, tr. Max Eastman, Chicago: Haymarket, p. 150.

¹¹ On the role of councils in the German Revolution see Broué, Pierre 2005, *The German Revolution 1917-1923*, translated by John Archer, Leiden: Brill.

workers' democracy here and now – a workers' democracy in effective and active opposition to the bourgeois State.¹²

Gramsci's experience with the factory council movement was formative regarding the form and functioning of hegemonic apparatuses of a potential proletarian hegemony. One can see elements of this conception in his complex conceptualization of the re-absorption of civil society by political society within the 'regulated society'. As Christine Buci-Glucksmann noted:

By way of the councils, Gramsci took up for the first time the practical and political task of hegemony: [...] This spontaneity, in other words, which is undergoing self-education in the councils, has nothing in common with the libertarian exaltation of spontaneity. It arises rather from a critique of all those forms of anarchism and revolutionary syndicalism which had so dragged down the Italian workers' movement.¹³

The theme of dual power would come forward again during the Spanish Civil War. And then one could also point definitely to the experience of the Resistance movements in occupied Europe. These movements represented forms of dual power in the sense of the opposition between the occupying forces and the collaborationist governments on one hand and the forms of popular power in the liberated areas but also between the resistance networks in the cities, especially when they took over important tasks such as the distribution of food aid or when they successfully managed to resist forced labour. One could see such dynamics of dual power in countries with large resistance movements under communist leadership in Italy, in Greece, in Yugoslavia. These movements played an important role in creating an imagery of popular power that remained for a long time afterwards.¹⁴

Post-WWII developments and the way the Left moved towards a more reformist direction, beginning with the very idea of the National Unity Governments, would also lead to the abandonment of the conception of dual power. This was already evident in the acceptance of parliamentarism within Popular Fronts and later in the hybrid of one-party state parliamentarism of the 'People's democracies'. After the 1960s the official line of the communist movement turned towards a democratic, parliamentary road to socialism.

¹² Gramsci, Antonio 1977, *Selections from Political Writings. 1910-1920*, edited by Q. Hoare and translated by J. Mathews, London: Lawrence and Wishart, p. 64

¹³ Buci-Glucksmann, Christine 1980, *Gramsci and the State*, translated by David Fernbach, London: Lawrence and Wishart, p.160.

¹⁴ For the Greek case see Hatzis, Thanasis 1983, *Η Νικηφόρα Επανάσταση που χάθηκε* [*The Victorious Revolution that lost*]. Athens: Dorikos and Skalidakis, Yannis 2015, 'From Resistance to Counterstate: The Making of Revolutionary Power in the Liberated Zones of Occupied Greece, 1943–1944', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 33: 155-184.

Socialism was presented as the natural evolution of a democratic parliamentary process. Dual power was not part of the debate, with the exception of communist or councilist heterodoxies.

However, there would be a return of the notion of dual power in Latin America. René Zavaleta Mercado used dual power to describe particular moments in Bolivian history and in particular the 1952 liberation and the formation of the *Asamblea Popular* under the initiative of COB in May 1971, but also to assess the situation in Chile under Allende. For Zavaleta dual power is a ‘Marxist metaphor that designates a special type of state contradiction or state conjuncture of transition’.¹⁵ It is a trope referring to complex situations that cannot be easily summarized in a definition. Consequently, he referred not to dual power but to the ‘duality of powers’¹⁶ in order to theorize the complex and uneven character of such conjunctures, the ‘qualitative contemporaneity of the before and after’.¹⁷

The notion of dual power would also re-emerge as part of the attempt to theorize the Chinese Cultural Revolution. In this form it referred to the possibility of a revolution inside the revolution or in the form of the emergence of autonomous proletarian institutions in a contradictory relation to the framework of the supposedly proletarian state, something exemplified in experiments such as the Shanghai Commune.¹⁸

One could also see a return of the notion in the neo-Leninism of certain groups of the revolutionary left after the experience of the broader 1968 turmoil and the return of a reference to insurrectionary politics, the ‘hasty Leninism’ that Daniel Bensaïd described in his *Impatient life*.¹⁹ After all, May 1968 was also an example of a general strike.

Antonio Negri considered the impressive wave of militancy and struggle, especially the ‘Hot Autumn’ of 1969, as pointing an insurrectionary sequence based upon the particular dynamism of workers struggle against the capitalist command of the enterprise within the context of the crisis of the Planner-State and of the very process of exploitation, hence the centrality of the struggle

¹⁵ Zavaleta Mercado, René 1974, *El poder dual en América Latina*, Mexico : Siglo Veintiuno Editores, p. 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁸ Jiang, Hongseng 2014, *La Commune de Shanghai et la Commune de Paris*, tr. Eric Hazan, Paris : La fabrique.

¹⁹ Bensaïd, Daniel 2013, *An Impatient Life : A memoir*, tr. by David Fernbach, London: Verso.

against work, which justifies a new Leninism.²⁰ It is in this context that Negri would insist in that particular period that ‘dual power’ can only be describing a very particular ‘moment’ and a relation of forces: ‘dual power is always an absolutely momentary and transitory phase’.²¹

The extent of workers’ struggles and militancy in that period, the occupations of factories, forms of workers control, experiments in self-management, raised again the question of what were the strategic implications of this new dynamics in social contestation. The very emergence of social movements in that period (from the feminist movement to strong struggles around housing and the first forms of a radical ecological movement) raised the question of how they can be incorporated into a more strategic approach.

The Portuguese Revolution with its particular characteristics and dynamism seemed at least initially to justify again the possibility of revolutionary sequences and the question of dual power, along with important dynamics of both self-management but also workers’ control.²²

The notion of dual power was part of the debates around Eurocommunism. Although its proponents insisted on the acceptance of bourgeois parliamentarism combined with forms of mass participation, thinkers such as Christine Buci-Glucksmann spoke about a potential ‘dual power of long duration’²³ as part of a strategy for hegemony.

Nicos Poulantzas would propose such a conception of a ‘democratic road to socialism’ that could combine forms of representative democracy with forms of direct democracy from below as a divergence of what he thought was the ‘classical’ strategy of dual power, which he associated with a strategy of a frontal attack to the state. However, what he actually proposed as a strategy for a ‘democratic road to socialism’ has common elements with the strategy of ‘dual power of long duration’.

Transformation of the state apparatus tending towards the withering away of the State can rest only on increased intervention of the popular masses in the State: certainly through their trade-union and political forms of representation, but also through their own

²⁰ Negri, Antonio 2005, *Books for Burning*, edited by Timothy Murphy, translated by Translated by Arianna Bove, Ed Emery, Timothy S. Murphy & Francesca Novello, London: Verso, p. 35.

²¹ Negri, Antonio 2014, *Factory of Strategy. Thirty-Three Lessons on Lenin*, translated by Arianna Bove, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 214.

²² Varela, Raquel 2019, *A People’s History of the Portuguese Revolution*, London: Pluto. See how Vaquela points to how it was workers’ control more rather than self-management that pointed towards a dual power dynamic.

²³ Buci-Glucksmann, Christine 1977, ‘Eurocommunisme et problèmes d’Etat’, *Dialectiques* 18-19 : 137-153, p. 153.

initiatives in the State itself. This will proceed by stages, but it cannot be confined to mere democratization of the State.²⁴

Daniel Bensaïd was more critical of such conceptions of a ‘dual power of long duration’. Bensaïd was aware of the complex temporalities involved in any revolutionary strategy, but he insisted on the strategic importance of rupture.

A long process? Yes, if it is about underlining with this the battle during which the proletariat accumulates experiences, develops its conscience, elevates itself to be a virtually dominant class, as candidate for power; this was the process that Trotsky was thinking when he was saying that power will be more difficult to take and easier to keep in the developed capitalist countries. But this decisive process does not erase the moment of rupture, what Lenin designed as revolutionary crisis. This rupture does not principally concern the political apparatuses but mainly a profound division of the social consensus itself. It is a necessary strategic moment in relation to the specific structural conditions of the proletarian revolution.²⁵

In the revolutions of the 20th century the question of dual power, or of the duality of powers, constantly returned, despite the fact that the ‘rapid’ sequence of the Russian Revolution did not manage to have a successful ‘repetition’, whereas strategies of ‘prolonged people’s war’ proved to be more effective. Daniel Bensaïd encapsulated this tension between these two revolutionary ‘hypotheses’ (the insurrectionary and that of a ‘prolonged people’s war’):

For the hypothesis of the insurrectional strike, the duality of power assumes a principally urban form, of the Commune type (not only the Paris Commune, but the Petrograd Soviet, the Hamburg insurrection, the Canton insurrection, those of 1936 and 1937 in Barcelona...). Two opposed powers cannot exist for long in a concentrated space. A rapid dénouement is imposed, which can lead on to a prolonged conflict: civil war in Russia, war of liberation in Vietnam after the insurrection of 1945 ... For this hypothesis, the work of organising soldiers and demoralising the army (in the majority of cases, conscripts) plays an important role.

For the hypothesis of prolonged popular war, dual power assumes a more territorial form (self-administering liberated zones), which can

²⁴ Poulantzas, Nicos 2000², *State, Power, Socialism*, London: Verso, p. 261.

²⁵ Bensaïd, Daniel 1977, ‘Eurocommunisme, révisionnisme et austromarxisme’, *Critique Communiste* 18-19, p. 193.

coexist for a longer period of time in conflict with the established order.²⁶

More recently, George Ciccariello-Maher has suggested that we can find elements of a dual power dynamic in aspects of the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela:

Here, dual power refers not only to the unstable situation of tense equilibrium between this alternative structure and the traditional state but also to the second, nonstate, dual power itself. It is the condensation of popular power from below into a radical pole that stands in antagonistic opposition to the state but functions not as a vehicle to seize that state (unlike Lenin's initial formulation), but instead as a fulcrum to radically transform and deconstruct it.²⁷

Dual Power and social movements

What do all these have to do with contemporary social movements? I believe that the notion of dual power or of duality of powers can describe the dynamics, or the historical horizon we can see in social movements. I am not suggesting that social movements *are* forms of dual power. Dual power indeed refers to a revolutionary situation combining a crisis of hegemony with a crisis of the State. However, it can be helpful to understand the social and political potential that we can see in movements.

In particular I am referring to a series of movements from the 2010s onwards, from the movements that were emblematic of the 'insurrectionary cycle of 2011',²⁸ to the grand cycle of movements in the 2010s up to the Gilets Jaunes insurrection, impressive labour struggles, the 2019 popular rebellion in Chile. These movements emerged in the context of a broader and deeper social and political crisis or even a crisis of hegemony, which was also grounded on economic crisis of 2008, and the exhaustion of the neoliberal paradigm.

Although many of them did not have the typical form of a working class strike, they were based upon the contemporary condition of labour, and in particular increased precariousness. The social coalitions around these movements were formed around labour and not some fragmented and atomized version of the 'people'.

²⁶ Bensaïd, Daniel 2018, 'Strategy and Politics: From Marx to the Third International', *Historical Materialism*. 28:3, p. 253.

²⁷ Ciccariello-Maher, George 2013, *We created Chávez. A people's history of the Venezuelan Revolution*, Durham: Duke University Press, p. 240

²⁸ Khatib, Kate, Margaret Killjoy, and Mike McGuire (eds.) 2012, *We Are Many. Reflections on Movement Strategy from Occupation to Liberation*, Oakland: AK Press.

These movements went beyond simple demands, particular or sectoral, but represented a broader protest against authoritarian neoliberalism. This made them more political even if they declared to be ‘anti-political’, and they included increased politicisation even in cases that were far from ‘insurrectionary’.²⁹ Their repertoire of struggle included the reappropriation of public space, including occupying the public infrastructure they were defending or looking for spaces that could be used as strategic points of protest, deliberation and debate. They placed great importance on direct democracy and political participation. They declared to represent some form of popular power or counter power. They reclaimed popular sovereignty or even declared that they were practicing real popular sovereignty. They included attempts towards a ‘constituent process from below’.

Also important in these cycles of protest were large networks of solidarity, from networks against evictions to social pharmacies and self-managed clinics,³⁰ to soup kitchens and markets without intermediaries, initiatives of solidarity to migrants,³¹ and experiments in self-management of indebted or closed businesses.³² They were also learning processes. The experience of the profound changes induced by the crisis enabled the more open discussion of alternatives. In the Greek experience this was very obvious in the ways that after 2011 for many persons, some of them without any militant background, getting involved more in collective practices, from protests, to solidarity networks became an existential choice, dedicating time and energy, something that even after 2015 took the form of strong engagement in grassroots movement of solidarity to refugees and migrants.

Collective problem solving as social experimentation emerged in various forms within contemporary movements: innovative forms of coordination and communication, including ingenuous use of existing infrastructure such

²⁹ Eric Blanc has offered an exciting overview of how the teachers’ strikes in the US also induced an impressive process of repoliticisation (Blanc, Eric 2019, *Red State Revolt. The Teachers’ Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics*, London: Verso).

³⁰ Rakopoulos, Theodoros 2014, ‘The crisis seen from below, within, and against: from solidarity economy to food distribution cooperatives in Greece’, *Dialectical Anthropology* 38: 189-207; Rakopoulos, Theodoros 2016, ‘Solidarity: the egalitarian tensions of a bridge-concept’, *Social Anthropology*, 24:2:142-51; CareNotes Collective 2020, *For Health Autonomy: Horizons of Care Beyond Austerity—Reflections From Greece*, Brooklyn: Common Notions.

³¹ Lafazani, Olga 2018, ‘Homeplace Plaza: Challenging the Border between Host and Hosted’, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117(4):896–904; Tsavdaroglou Charalampos and Maria Kaika 2022, ‘The refugees’ right to the centre of the city: City branding versus city commoning in Athens’, *Urban Studies*, Vol. 59(6) 1130–1147.

³² Barrington-Bush Liam 2017, ‘The solidarity ecosystems of occupied factories’, *ROAR*, <https://roarmag.org/essays/worker-control-viome-greece/>

as social networks; collective expertise in dealing with logistical questions, while at the same time maintaining some form of democratic process; coping with shortages.

A conception of politics as collective inventiveness and ingenuity stresses the fact that emancipation as transformation can only be thought of as a way to liberate antagonistic social practices by means of collective research, learning and experimenting with new forms of social organization. The emergence of alternative social configurations, antagonistic to the logic of capital can only be the result of a long process of social experimentation. This is a politics of a radical democratisation which is not limited to the political sphere but also has to penetrate the realm of the economy, in the form of a repoliticization and thus transformation of the supposedly socially neutral terrain of social production and reproduction.

This is already echoed, in the *prefigurative* potential that Althusser stressed in the 1970s when he insisted on the traces of communism in contemporary capitalist societies, a *leitmotiv* of his work in the 1970s. For Althusser ‘The increased collectivisation of capitalist production, the initiatives of the popular masses, and, why not?, certain bold initiatives by artists, writers and researchers, are from today the outlines and traces of communism.’³³

However, in order to read these traces of communism in contemporary struggles, in experiments in self-management, in the defence of public goods and public spaces, in new forms of participative democracy of struggle or in the gestures of solidarity, we must be able to hear what the masses are doing and saying,

*opening one’s ears to them, studying and understanding their aspirations and their contradictions, their aspirations in their contradictions, learning how to be attentive to the masses’ imagination and inventiveness.*³⁴

In such a perspective movements do not only represent a dynamic of antagonism but also have the potential to be the sites of the emergence of alternative, non-oppressive and non-exploitative social forms and relations.

The prefigurative marks that moment when movements seek to actualize that promise, to materialize faith in an otherwise and

³³ Althusser, Louis 2014 ‘Conférence sur la dictature de prolétariat à Barcelone. Un texte inédit de Louis Althusser’, *Période*, <http://revueperiode.net/un-texte-inedit-de-louis-althusser-conference-sur-la-dictature-du-proletariat-a-barcelone>.

³⁴ Althusser, Louis 1977, ‘On the Twenty-Second Congress of the French Communist Party’, *New Left Review*, I, 104, p. 11.

transform personal subjectivities, interpersonal relations and structures of power.³⁵

Ana Cecilia Dinerstein has attempted to link the notion of prefigurative politics with the Blochian conception of the concrete utopia but also with Marx's critique of political economy:

The prefigurative critique of political economy is itself a process of theoretical prefiguration that follows the movement of autonomous organising, the forms of which depend on the movements' struggles.³⁶

Moreover prefiguration is 'an embodied process of reimagining all of society' and that points to left wing politics that 'rejects the idea of revolutionary change guided by a vanguard as well as the idea of a transition in which the revolutionary goal is deferred to an unspecified moment in the future'.³⁷ But this does not preclude its articulation with the strategic:

The promise of the prefigurative depends on its articulation with the strategic. The prefigurative can give us hope and nourishment, a sense of what we are fighting for, and the will to go on, while the strategic can provide a way forward, forging the path that will transform the whole.³⁸

The prefigurative dynamic of the new forms of direct democracy, self-management and collective ingenuity, does not represent a denial of the necessity for a process of revolutionary rupture. Rather, it points to more 'continuous' – yet not less 'ruptural' – process during which the experiences of movements, including their prefigurative practices, do not create 'islets of communism' but point to a hegemonic political practice that is not based on the simple enunciation of discourses but on the concrete experimentations, the collective experiences and the accumulation of knowledge during movements, in a 'war of position' which has all the characteristics of a 'prolonged people's war'.

Dual power becomes a way to think the extent of the emergence of a potential working class hegemony, an indication not only of a relation of forces, but

³⁵ Brissette, Emily 2016, 'The Prefigurative Is Political: On Politics Beyond "The State"', in Dinerstein, Ana Cecilia (ed.) 2016, *Social Sciences for an Other Politics. Women Theorizing Without Parachutes*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 116.

³⁶ Dinerstein, Ana Cecilia, 2015, *The Politics of Autonomy in Latin America' The Art of Organising Hope*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 204.

³⁷ Maeckelbergh, Marianne 2016, 'The Prefigurative Turn: The Time and Place of Social Movement Practice', in Dinerstein, Ana Cecilia (ed.) 2016, *Social Sciences for an Other Politics. Women Theorizing Without Parachutes*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 122.

³⁸ Brissette, Emily 2013, 'Prefiguring the Realm of Freedom at Occupy Oakland', *Rethinking Marxism* 25:2:218-227.

also of an active potential for transformation. It refers not only to the possibility for the seizure of power, but also for the liberation of the various forms of collective ingenuity of the subaltern masses. It is evidence not only of a catastrophic equilibrium of forces but also of the emergence of a collective intellectuality in active rupture with dominant ideology.

The challenge of power

Thinking of social movements as potential laboratories of dual power can also help us deal with the challenge of political power. In most cases this is presented as the possibility of a progressive or left-wing government. However, with the exception of the Latin American experiments – and even in those cases with serious contradictions and shortcomings at least in Europe the results of the attempts towards ‘left-governance’, either in the form of SYRIZA’s government or of Unidos-Podemos participation to a government with the Socialists, can only be described as a defeat. This was particularly evident in Greece where we ended up with a supposedly left-wing government implementing the neoliberal policies of the EU-IMF-ECB ‘Troika’. I suggest that the only way of avoiding another spectacular defeat is incorporating into strategy the ‘dual power’ dynamic that we can see in movements.

Poulantzas’s insistence that the state is the material condensation of a relation of class forces is important. However, we should not read this as suggesting that the state can be easily transformed on the basis of the presence of the subaltern classes and their struggles in its interior, or/and of their representation by some form of ‘left governance’. The State is a *material* condensation, i.e. a materialized, solidified and institutionalized relation of forces manifest in the class character of its apparatuses, practices, discourses, and knowledges it produces and codifies. The State represents an *excess of force* from the part of the ruling social bloc. Even if we follow an ‘enlarged’ conception of the ‘integral state’, following Gramsci’s definition, a definition that would indeed ‘interiorize’ social movements in the broader framework of the integral state, we would still need to pay attention to the fact that the different practices ‘interiorized’ are neither symmetrical nor even. The extent of the fortification and insulation of decision processes makes necessary a reverse excess of force from the part of the subaltern classes. This has exactly to do with strength of the movement, the radicalism of demands, the extent of the politicization of the subaltern classes, the degree of programmatic preparation, and the extent of forms of self-organization, self-management and self-defence.

However, there is another dimension to the dual power dynamic of social movements. Attempts towards social transformation have faced the persistence of capitalist social forms in particular those that have to do with the persistence value-form and the fetishistic character of the market, even under public ownership or substitution of the market by the plan. Transforming the relations of production (and not just ownership) requires a process of experimentation with alternative forms of social organization of production, self-management, and socialization of knowledge. It also means a process of attempting to revolutionize forms of socialization of private labours by means of non-commercial networks, new forms of distribution and new forms of participatory democratic planning. It also requires a cultural revolution, new forms of mass social and political intellectuality, a new ethos of mass participation, a revolutionizing of social norms, gender roles, family practices. Transcending the market is not easy since it is not only an economic practice, but also a form of perceiving the world. Non-market distribution of goods and services, including adjusting production to actual social needs is a very complex. It can be to some extent facilitated by algorithmic processes, but algorithmic processes also entail the danger of mystification, which means the transformation required in collective practices cannot be simply treated as a technical exigency. And there are goods and services that are still being perceived as at least partially beyond the market despite extensive privatization: health, education, public safety, care, basic infrastructure. Moreover a series of challenges, from climate change to socially – in the last instance- produced public health emergencies (such as the pandemic) also point to the need for planned allocation of resources and the planned prioritization of activities and production processes.

All these point to the full spectrum of the need to rethink social transformation as experimentation. These processes require mobilization, participation, initiative from above and from below, and a commitment that goes beyond simple following rules and regulations. They also need to overcome the element of ‘alienation’ from these processes: consumers wanting to have a say about the products they consume, students and parents about schooling, patients about the health system, and above all workers about production processes. Dual power can describe exactly this democratic process and impulse that can help deal with these challenges and offer ways to actually deal with them – and the movements I am referring to included such dynamics

Does this mean relying only on the creative potential unleashed in protests, contestation and solidarity? Do we just rely on forms of democracy ‘from below,’ as suggested by other currents from the municipalist anarchism of M.

Bookchin³⁹ to all the currents that centre on the commons and horizontalist conceptions?⁴⁰ Do we abandon the question of the State?

No! It'd be impossible to initiate real ruptures, which also means confrontation with capital in regards to measures such as forced nationalizations, rationing of resources, capital controls and increased worker/s' rights, without an almost 'exceptional' use of state power and on the basis of social mobilization creating the conditions of a 'constituent process'. However, a strong state is not all it takes. We need to move beyond the fetishism of the market and the fetishism of the State, which represent the double process of mystification of social relations of domination and exploitation. This is the only way to enhance the emergence of antagonistic social practice, relations and forms. If we try and think the main challenges facing us to today, from the pandemic to Climate Change and the need to make again pertinent the need for a non-capitalist organization of the economy, the necessity for a perspective that moves beyond the call for a 'Strong State' becomes evident. In the case of the pandemic and the failure of the 'lockdown strategy' to deliver, it became obvious that the challenge has been not of suspending social life, but of collectively inventing ways and practices that make it safer, by redesigning production and reproduction on the basis of solidarity and collective mobilisation and not coercion enhanced surveillance. In the case of Climate Change, the extent of the need for changes in productive and consumer paradigms and the increased need for decentralization and collective use of limited resources also entails a very wide spectrum of collective redesigning of production that goes beyond the scope of state coercion and have more to do with collective initiative and self-management. And similar challenges emerge in any attempt to reclaim sectors of the economy from market forces.

Consequently, I think the idiosyncratic Leninism of using the notion of dual power to describe such challenges is to a certain extent justified. By pointing to both collective ingenuity and the question of political power dual power maintains the link between social experimentation and the 'art of the insurrection,' and points not only to some future insurrectionary 'war of movement,' but also to the contemporary 'war of position.' Moreover, it links contemporary movements with a conception of socialist transition as process of intensified struggle and conflict between a capitalist and a non-capitalist logic. And it also points to a conception of the political organization as a

³⁹ Bookchin, Murray 2014, *The Next Revolution. Popular Assemblies and the Promise of Direct Democracy*, edited by Debbie Bookchin and Blair Taylor, London Verso.

⁴⁰ Sitrin, Marina and Dario Azzellini 2014, *They Can't Represent Us! Reinventing Democracy From Greece To Occupy*, London: Verso.

laboratory for unleashing what Josep Maria Antentas has described as ‘strategic imagination’, namely

thinking strategically from a self-reflective and permanently innovative point of view, and having an indomitable and insatiable will to search for new possibilities to transform the world. In that sense, all strategy for revolution also has to be a revolution in strategy.⁴¹

The trace of dual power

What I have described as potential dual power in the context of movements, is something that emerges in the context of very strong movements, almost insurrectionary cycles of protest and contestation and in periods of acute social crisis that also induce some form of collapse of functions of the state (evident in the importance of solidarity movements). Such a ‘dual power’ approach offers a way to think of social movements in a strategic manner: treating them not as pressure groups but as collective processes that study their terrain, produce alternatives, and create forms of counter-power; creating conditions of a democratic participation that breaks down traditional hierarchies and enhances mass politicization; using them as terrains where political currents are educated in the experience of the struggle and the knowledge coming ‘from below’; realizing that they can be experimental sites for the elaboration of programmes, alternatives, forms of self-management and fully endorsing their prefigurative potential; and incorporating them in the political process and conflict, while at the same time respecting their autonomy.

Consequently, social movements with the rooting, the capacity and the collective ingenuity that point to a ‘dual power horizon’ remain the necessary condition for any political project that could point beyond the strategic impasse of the contemporary Left.

⁴¹ Antentas, Josep Maria 2017, ‘Strategic Imagination and Party’, <https://urpe.org/2017/06/14/josep-maria-antentas-strategic-imagination-and-party/>.

Between steel and fire: The 2011-12 nine-month-long strike of the metalworkers at Hellenic Steel

Theodore Nikias

Introduction

The 9-month-long strike of Hellenic Steel was the longest strike in the modern history of Greece. It was an attempt of the workers in one of the largest steel factories in the country to protect their labour rights during the period of the capitalist economic crisis that began in 2011.

The steel industry in Greece started to develop after WWII. The 1970s and 1980s were marked by an increase in workers' trade union organization in the steel factories as well as very rough struggles against the employers, several of which ended victorious for the workers. From the mid-1980s however workers' participation in the unions' collective processes decreased. This was a general phenomenon in the Greek labour movement following the Social Democratic Party's (PASOK) rise to power. This was due, partly to the labour and welfare legislation adopted by the new government, as well as its wider effort to incorporate and control the trades unions through various means.

In 2006, the factory of Hellenic Steel in Aspropyrgos, outside Athens, was taken over by a new owner, the industrialist Manesis, who also owned another steel factory in Central Greece, in Volos.¹ In the period before the strike, Hellenic Steel was the largest supplier of major Greek public infrastructure works and a major supplier of the private construction sector not only in Greece but also abroad, especially in the Balkan market.²

The company's production increased year after year and overtime work in the industry was multiplied, while workers' wages for overtime work were reduced by law.³ Characteristic of the labour intensity was the fact that from the 1990s to 2010 labour productivity doubled (from 4 to 8 foundries per shift) without any maintenance or renewal of the machinery, the material

¹ <https://www.hlv.gr/index.php/el/company/history/> .

² <https://www.hlv.gr/index.php/el/company/projects/> ; *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, Athens: ΝΟ Βιομηχανίας της ΚΟΑ, 2012, pp. 7-8.

³ 273+ ημέρες, *Ο ιστορικός αγώνας των Χαλυβουργών*, Athens: Διεθνές Βήμα 2020, pp. 57-59, 61-62.

equipment and the facilities.⁴ As workers had pointed out, the machines were working non-stop and breakdowns were frequent.⁵ That situation led to the death of two workers in the factories of Volos and Aspropyrgos, both due to improper maintenance of the machines.⁶ These incidents led the workers of the Aspropyrgos factory to improve their bonds with their trade union and taking action.

Workers' participation in the union assemblies increased from 30-40 people to 150-200 people (out of a total of 350 employees).⁷ The factory's union Administrative Workers' Council had a great part in this. The majority of the council members were affiliated to the ESAK faction, a faction supported by PAME, a trades unions' front, where the members of the Communist Party (KKE) participated. These council members had been long warning and preparing the employees for the attack that they were about to face by the company. Hence, before the strike, a dynamic core of workers had already been formed around the trade union leadership. The president of the union was a member of the KKE.

The strike

In the first half of 2011, the year of the strike, Greek workers were already experiencing the severe consequences of the financial crisis that broke out in 2008. However, according to steel workers' testimonies, the company had major orders from Algeria and Israel.⁸ Despite that, on the 17th October the factory owner called the union's Administrative Council and announced that "due to the difficult financial situation", as he characteristically said, he had to reduce working hours from 8 to 5 as well as cut wages by 40%.⁹ The employer also made clear that this decision had already been taken, that those measures had already been imposed in the Volos factory and that any

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 34-36, 67.

⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 33-41, 57-60; Statement of the Administrative Council of the Hellenic Steel's trade-union «*H ENOTHTA*», Aspropyrgos: 21/11/11.

⁶ Bulletin of EKE-ΔΑ Trade Union Center, Elefsina: 13/10/10; Declaration of Executive Committee of PAME, Athens: 13/10/10; «Θάφτηκε στα απόβλητα 29χρονος εργάτης», *Πιζοσπάστης*, n. 9558, p. 15, 22/08/06.

⁷ 273+ ημέρες, *Ο ιστορικός αγώνας των Χαλυβουργών*, *ibid*, pp. 44, 66.

⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 58, 78; The production of the company increased from 196.000 tons in 2009 to 231.000 in 2010 and 266.000 tons in 2011. Resolution of the General Assembly of the Hellenic Steel's trade union «*H ENOTHTA*», Aspropyrgos: 15/11/11; «Εργαζόμενοι Χαλυβουργίας Ελλάδας: Αποφάσισαν απεργία διαρκείας», *Πιζοσπάστης*, n. 11101, p. 17, 02/11/11.

⁹ Resolution of the General Assembly of the Hellenic Steel's trade-union «*H ENOTHTA*», Aspropyrgos: 15/11/11 and 30/11/11.

employees' disagreement would lead to 180 dismissals as of November 1st.¹⁰ The Administrative Council rejected the ultimatum and decided to bring the employer's proposal before a General Assembly so that the workers would decide. The General Assembly, attended by almost 300 employees (out of 350), decided to reject the employer's proposal and called for an immediate strike in case of any dismissals.¹¹ So, when the first 18 dismissals occurred on the 31st October, a 48-hour strike was unanimously declared by a new General Assembly.¹² So a 48-hour strike started – that would eventually last 273 days.

During this 9-month-long strike, a total of 21 general assemblies were held (one every two weeks, more or less), where the course of the negotiations, the future of the strike, and other matters were openly discussed.¹³ No employee was ever excluded from these assemblies, even if they belonged to the scabbing group created by the employer following the first months of the strike.

Organization:

Throughout the strike, the main orientation of the union and a basic condition for the successful outcome of the struggle, in its view, was the daily mobilization of as many workers as possible. At first, the response was great. A lot of people, strikers and supporters, were at the front of the factory gates every day. Their numbers declined as months passed by, and the fatigue due to the long-term struggle increased. However, in moments of rising tension or in crucial events, solidarity and popular support re-ignited.

In order to be more effective in the long term, strikers organized teams with specific responsibilities. These groups were the Organization Team, the Guarding Team, the Food Committee, the Committee of Action & Propaganda, the Health and Safety Committee, the Dismissed Committee, the Women's Committee.¹⁴

¹⁰ 273+ ημέρες, *Ο ιστορικός αγώνας των Χαλυβουργών*, *ibid*, pp. 68-69, 71-72; *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, *ibid*, pp. 19-20, 22.

¹¹ *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, *ibid*, p. 19; 273+ ημέρες, *Ο ιστορικός αγώνας των Χαλυβουργών*, *ibid*, pp. 70-74.

¹² Resolution of the General Assembly of Hellenic Steel's trade-union «*H ENOTHTA*», *Aspropyrgos*: 31/10/11.

¹³ *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, *ibid*, p. 21.

¹⁴ 273+ ημέρες, *Ο ιστορικός αγώνας των Χαλυβουργών*, *ibid*, pp. 90-107; *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, *ibid*, p. 21.

The Organization Team's task was to plan the daily guarding shifts. The Guarding Team was responsible for the safekeeping of the facilities. In some cases, they prevented provocations against the strike. The workers, throughout the strike, never forbade an employee of the company to enter the factory, although they decided that the Guarding Team would accompany any officer or manager in order to avoid damages or thefts that could then be blamed on the strikers. Managers refused to enter the plant accompanied by guarding workers and accused the strikers of barring them from entering.¹⁵ The Food Committee was another important committee that was set up when livelihood problems started to become intense.

The country's working class embraced the strikers with an unprecedented wave of solidarity and aid was sent daily to the steelworkers. The Food Committee was responsible for receiving the aid and then for distributing it. The products of solidarity were distributed to every worker, even to those who were recruited in the company's scabbing mechanism.¹⁶ The Committee tried to take into account the different needs of each employee (for example whether one was married or had children) in order to cover, as best as possible, the needs of the entire worker's family. The Committee of Action & Propaganda undertook one of the most complex tasks. They spoke in workplaces, factories, schools, universities and generally in every place they were called to in order to talk about their struggle. Most of them had been active members of the factory's trade union before the strike, so they had some, albeit small, union experience. That was important, because they had to explain the demands of the steelworkers to audiences which, in some cases, were sceptical or even hostile to their struggle. So, they had to be able to think fast, to avoid pitfalls and to explain their cause in an understandable and convincing way. The Health and Safety Committee was responsible for keeping the factory's facilities clean during the day.

Another important committee was the Women's Strike Committee. It started as a supporting team for their husbands' struggle, but month after month it upgraded its activities and role. Indeed, the Women's Strike Committee managed to turn the factory's yard into a meeting point for people who lived in the area and a special playground for the children. Also, as the strike continued, problems begun to accumulate regarding family expenses, bills, rents and debts.¹⁷ So, the Committee started intervening with the various

¹⁵ 273+ ημέρες, *Ο ιστορικός αγώνας των Χαλυβουργών*, *ibid*, pp. 90-91, 135-137.

¹⁶ Chasapopoulos, Nick, «ΠΙΑΜΕ για διάσπαση στη Χαλυβουργία», *Το Βήμα*, 24/03/2012.

¹⁷ *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, *ibid*, pp. 21, 34-35, 42-44, 46, 60, 76-77, 89; «Χριστούγεννα στη Χαλυβουργία με τα παιδιά τους», *Ριζοσπάστης*, n.11135, p. 11, 13/12/11.

agencies (such as the electric or water companies) trying to gain favourable terms for the steelworkers. The results of this action were admirable in many cases. It is no exaggeration to say that without the efforts of these women the strike might not have lasted that long. In addition, they filled their husbands with courage, especially when the fatigue from the many months of struggle became apparent.

The Dismissals Committee was formed during the second month of the strike, when dismissals began to multiply (exceeding 50 workers). The Administrative Council set up this committee because it wanted the fired workers to remain active next to their colleagues. The issue of workers' unity remained crucial throughout the strike. The strikers tried to strengthen this bond, while the employers did everything they could to undermine and break it.

Negotiations and manoeuvres

Of course, while dealing with the practical requirements of organizing their strike, workers were also looking for a solution to their situation. At first, they looked to the tripartite meetings between the government, the company and the employees, for such a solution.¹⁸ However, when these meetings proved fruitless by the end of 2011, the strikers focused their efforts in convincing their colleagues at the Volos factory to also go on strike. For that reason, they organized many delegations to the Volos factory and city. Nevertheless, they encountered significant difficulties in their objective, since the Volos factory trade union was under the leadership of DAKE (a trade union faction influenced by the liberal ruling party New Democracy – ND) and it was in direct dealings with the employer himself. With the help of the police, the Volos factory trade union prevented the strikers from even approaching the workplace and discussing with other steelworkers.¹⁹ For many strikers in Aspropyrgos the non-participation of the Volos factory in the strike was a decisive factor for the final outcome of the struggle, because that allowed the employer to keep production going.

The steelworkers also tried to mobilize the workers of the largest metallurgical plants located in the surrounding area of Aspropyrgos.

¹⁸ At the first three months of the strike, four different tripartite meetings took place at the Ministry of Labour, on 9/11/11, 18/11/11, 21/12/11 and 3/01/12.

¹⁹ «Στάση εργασίας από τους Μεταλλεργάτες», *Ριζοσπάστης*, n. 11121, p. 9, 25/11/11; 273+ ημέρες, *Ο ιστορικός αγώνας των Χαλυβουργών*, *ibid*, pp. 170-175.

Nevertheless, they failed in that goal too, as the workers were afraid to risk their jobs by participating in a supportive strike.

Solidarity. The contribution of PAME & KKE

The endurance of the strike, apart from the determination of the workers and good organization, was due to an unprecedented wave of solidarity. The whole local community of the area of Aspropyrgos actively supported the strike. But even beyond the boundaries of the local community, thousands of people supported the steelworkers nationwide throughout this period, either individually or collectively through their unions.²⁰ Their solidarity was expressed in every way by people of all kinds, workers, farmers, university and high school students and unemployed, with money, food, or keeping guard outside the plant alongside its workers. At this point it is very important to underline that the strike began at a period when the first austerity measures had already been adopted in the country. Gradually, that led to the rise of the degree of the organization of the mass movement. More strikes, demonstrations and trade unions' actions, with the participation of much more people and sometimes more violent than in the past, were creating a relative degree of radicalization, an effort of the people to defend their rights against the austerity policies. This played a role in how the strike was perceived. Common people would see in the faces of the steelworkers a piece of themselves during the difficult years of the economic crisis. And steelworkers themselves would constantly strive for the generalization of their struggle, pointing at its wider significance. As their most popular motto read: "Make the whole Greece one Hellenic Steel."

After a few weeks, the strike became more widely known in Greece, as well as in Europe and the world. During the strike, more than 40 solidarity events were organized by unions nationwide, mainly by PAME [trades unions federation] and the unions that supported it.²¹ Major such events were organized in Christmas of 2011 and Easter of 2012, when crowds celebrated these days together with the strikers in the factory. Another major such event

²⁰ Resolution of the General Assembly of the *Hellenic Steel's* trade-union «*H ENOHTHA*», Aspropyrgos: 04/12/11.

²¹ *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, *ibid*, 2012, p. 22.

occurred during the May Day demonstration organized outside of the gates of the factory.²²

Fundamental in all of these was PAME's campaign to spread awareness of the strikers' struggle and demands – as did many other trades unions. Although the solidarity was wider and not limited to the actions of PAME, the front played a decisive role in the organization of the solidarity. Pivotal was the role of the Communist Party of Greece, whose newspaper and radio had daily reports on the strike. On the contrary, the rest of the mass media reported on the issue only from time to time, portraying the steelworkers as the ones responsible for the deadlock. According to them, the workers did not realize the difficulty of the moment and demanded too much. As time went by, they started talking more and more about a communist-led strike aiming at creating social and political unrest. In some cases, they even called for the government to take more drastic measures to “put an end to the hostage situation imposed on the workers who wanted to work”.²³

Two different strategies in the trade union movement

The strike in the Hellenic Steel factory was not only a conflict between employers and workers but also a conflict between the different currents in the Greek labour movement. One of them followed a strategy of supporting the government's policy in the years of crisis. Its advocates argued that all employees should help in those difficult times of crisis and not make “excessive demands”. They argued that this was not the right period for strikes and “maximalist” demands.²⁴ The trade unionists that advocated this strategy had connections and organizational ties with the liberal-right party ND and the Social Democratic Party, PASOK. They usually did not favour nor participate in mass labour processes, but they did have the control of the largest trade union federations in Greece as well as the General Greek Confederation of Labour (GSEE), by using various methods of state incorporation, collaboration with the industrialists, and even election fraud.

Opposed to that strategy, which was considered to be against workers' interests, were the unions that adhered to the principles and struggle

²² «Χιλιάδες εργάτες έσμιξαν με τους απεργούς Χαλυβουργούς», *Ριζοσπάστης*, n. 11246, p. 20, 02/05/12.

²³ <https://www.skai.gr/news/greece/gia-tromokratia-kataggellei-to-pame-ergazomenos-sti-xalyourgia> ; Chasapopoulos, Nick, «Ο ανένδοτος οδηγεί σε λουκέτο τη Χαλυβουργία», *Το Βήμα*, 15/07/12, <https://www.tovima.gr/2012/07/15/finance/o-anendotos-odigei-se-loyketo-ti-xalybourgia/>.

²⁴ *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, *ibid*, p. 271.

framework of PAME. PAME is a class-orientated militant front of the trades unions movement in Greece, with substantial strength in a number of cities with large working-class concentration (such as Athens and Piraeus), as well as certain parts of industry.

Contrary to PAME, which helped the steelworkers' strike from day one, the General Greek Confederation of Labour and the Metal Federation opposed and undermined the strike.²⁵ Not directly, but indirectly, accusing the workers of being unwilling to compromise or characterizing their strike as party-instigated, turning the workers into hostages for political purposes. The workers could not count on the support of their federation, which, during the whole nine months of their struggle carried out only one 24-hour solidarity strike in the area of Aspropyrgus, under pressure from other unions.²⁶

The strikers did, however, have widespread support from dozens of trades unions, many of which not affiliated to PAME, or of PAME majority.

The opponent

Throughout the strike there was tremendous intransigence shown by the employer. One of the main reasons for this was that the factory indeed had to forego these reductions in wages and personnel in order to continue to operate with profit under market conditions. The company's Board of Directors had already intensified production to a maximum, at a time when they had new orders, because they knew that later on, they would enter in a new situation where production would decrease. Nowadays, ten years later, with all other Greek steel companies closed, we can conclude that, since then, the international division of labour had changed unfavourably for the Greek metallurgical industry and Hellenic Steel was the first victim of that change.

So, the employer tried to deal with the strike by going to extremes on the conflict. In the first period, every week, and then every month, new dismissals were added, reaching eventually some 180.

²⁵ The General Greek Confederation (GSEE) refers, during these 273 days, only two times to the strike with official declarations. First during December against the dismissals and second after the intervention of the police inside the factory in July. No other effort to support the strike was attempted by the GSEE leaders, who condemned the intransigence of the strikers to the newspapers and to their interviews.

²⁶ *Πιζοσπάσης*, n.11135, p.11, 13/12/11; Statement of the President of Metal Federation (POEM), Giannis Stefanopoulos, 12/2011; Interview with Charis Manolis, member of the trade-union of the factory and responsible for the Health Committee, <https://alterthess.gr/mia-synenteyxi-sti-chalyvoyrgia/>.

His second aim was to divide the workers. The culmination of this tactic came on 21 December 2011. In one of the many tripartite meetings at the Ministry of Labour, the employer, while promising to cancel the reduced working hours and the wage cuts, at the same time refused to take back the dismissed workers, hoping to create a crack in the unity amongst workers.²⁷ When the General Assembly asked for the return of the dismissed, the employer withdrew his proposal altogether and refused to meet with the employees again, accusing them of intransigence. From that point onwards, he began to set up the scabbing mechanism.

The scabbing group numbered about 20 people for as long as the strike continued. Its leading team consisted of 3-4 members, one manager of the company, a female telephonist who was a member of ND and one canteen employee. None of them was in the production line. The group of scabs appeared every day in front of the factory's gate attempting to create trouble and to provoke incidents that would justify an intervention by the police.²⁸ They also filed numerous lawsuits against workers. These lawsuits were filed alternately by the same people against the same people, with the same accusations, in a copy-paste manner (they even had the same spelling mistakes).²⁹

At the beginning of 2012, a more organized attack by the company began. The official announcements made by the company talked about a group of trade-unionists who wanted to close down the factory and were using the strike as a weapon for that end. They also portrayed the strike as a partisan action guided by the communists, who kept the factory closed against the will of the vast majority of the workers who wanted to work.³⁰ The same arguments appeared simultaneously in the press and the other media, in different sites on the internet, made by GSEE executives or the scab group, giving the impression of a coordinated attack – as it probably was.³¹ All of

²⁷ *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, *ibid*, p. 45.

²⁸ «Απάντησαν με ατσάλινη ενότητα στην επίθεση της εργοδοσίας», *Ριζοσπάστης*, n. 11258, p.15, 16/05/12; «Απεργούν εδώ και 200 μέρες», *Ριζοσπάστης*, n. 11259, p. 21, 17/05/12; «Η επίθεση στους απεργούς ξεσήκωσε την οργή εργατών από κάθε κλάδο», *Ριζοσπάστης*, n. 11275, p. 19, 07/06/12; «Οργανωμένο και τραμπουκικό χτύπημα της εργοδοσίας», *Ριζοσπάστης*, n. 11288, p.3, 22/06/12; Declaration of the Administrative Council of the Hellenic Steel's trade-union «*H ENOTHTA*», 21/06/12.

²⁹ Sifonios, George (Trade-Union's President), Speech at General Assembly of the metalworkers, Aspropyrgos: 17/05/12; 273+ *ημέρες, Ο ιστορικός αγώνας των Χαλυβουργών*, *ibid*, pp. 193-205, 211-214.

³⁰ Statement of the scabbing group, called as “Steelworkers’ committee”, 09/12/12 and 21/07/2012;

³¹ Samaras, Antonis (leader of New Democracy, Prime Minister), Speech to the National Electoral Conference of the party of New Democracy, 26/05/12; Tsitsas Nick, Nanos Kostas,

them tried to cultivate the false impression that a small portion of 50-60 workers were terrorizing the majority. At the same time General Assemblies were held in the factory almost every other week with the participation of 100-200 employees.³²

In the end, however, none of the above-mentioned tactics paid off. So, nine months later, on July 20th, at 4 am, police forces surrounded the factory by order of the Prime Minister of Greece himself,³³ arresting the workers that were on guard on that day. Clashes between the police and supporters of the strike, who immediately gathered there, also broke out. Despite that and the fact that the police remained in the facilities, the strike lasted one more week.³⁴ There were three General Assembly meetings held in that week and on July 28th the steel workers finally decided to suspend the strike following a proposal made by the Administrative Council. The factory's management demanded that the steelworkers enter the workplace one by one, after being body searched and forced to show their identity cards to the police forces. The steelworkers rejected those demands and stated that they would enter the factory all together and only after all police forces had been removed from the premises, which finally happened.

Apostolou Makis, «Το μάθημα της Cosco και το πάθημα της Χαλυβουργίας», *Έθνος της Κυριακής*, pp. 22-25, 15/07/12; *Καθημερινή*, n. 28107, 12/07/12; Chasapopoulos, Nick, «Ο ανένδοτος οδηγεί σε λουκέτο τη Χαλυβουργία», *Το Βήμα*, 15/07/12, <https://www.tovima.gr/2012/07/15/finance/o-anendotos-odigei-se-loyketo-ti-xalyboyrgia/> ; «Γιατί πάγωσε η τσιμινιέρα της Χαλυβουργίας», *Πρώτο Θέμα*, 17/07/12, <https://www.protothema.gr/economy/article/211018/giati-pagose-h-tsiminiera-ths-xalyboyrgias/>.

³² It is characteristic that on 28/05/2012, seven months after the beginning of the strike, at another general assembly, the question about the continuation or not of the strike was posed to a secret voting. The final results were 204 votes in favour of the strike and 42 against. *Το χρονικό του ηρωικού αγώνα των Χαλυβουργών, Οκτώβριος 2011- Ιούλιος 2012*, *ibid*, p. 106.

³³ Antonis Samaras elected Prime Minister few days before the intervention of the police. He had stated before the elections: “A person who violates somebody’s right to work cannot be called a trade-unionist [...] That person is not a trade-unionist, he is a tyrant, a dictator [...] Law and order will prevail”. Speech of Antonis Samaras at Lavrio 01/05/12. Furthermore, after intervention of the police, he stated: “We showed in the courtyard of “Hellenic Steel” that we mean what we say. A group of trade unionists had shut down a factory for months, blocking those who wanted to work and leading to the unemployment of hundreds of workers. The factory was going to close. We stopped that”. Speech to the parliamentary group of New Democracy, 24/07/12; Ravanos, Aris, «Μήνυμα Σαμαρά σε Αριστερά-συνδικαλιστές η παρέμβαση στη Χαλυβουργία», *Το Βήμα*, 30/07/12, <https://www.tovima.gr/2012/07/20/politics/minyma-samara-se-aristera-syndikalistes-i-parembasi-sti-xalyboyrgia/>.

³⁴ In the General Assembly of the next day (21/7) out of the factory (the gates were blocked by the police forces), the strikers decided to continue the strike with 164 votes in favour and only 5 against.

Conclusions

The steelworkers' 9-month-long struggle did not bring to the workers the expected results. The anti-labour measures were implemented, and there were more than 200 redundancies. However, in those 273 days of struggle most workers remained united. The wave of solidarity and support to the strikers was unique in the history of the Greek labour movement. What was extremely special was not only the qualitative characteristics of that solidarity but also its duration. After the first few months, the daily maintenance of the families was the result of this wave of solidarity. The fatigue expressed did not come about as a result of the struggle, but mainly as a consequence of not obtaining any solution, of the prolonging of an unchanging situation for months.

The strike also shown the various tools and methods used by the employers to create division between the employees who worked in different units and departments. The scabbing group was set up by people who did not work in the production line but took advantage of the strikers' weakness to divide them. The role of the state and the courts as defenders of the interests of the bourgeoisie was also highlighted. The protagonists of the strike have been dragged to court for years (until two years ago) in an effort, not only to punish them, but also to set an example for others in the future.

Of course, nothing was able to put a stop to the de-industrialization of that sector in the country. Today, both factories, in Aspropyrgos and in Volos (where the workers accepted the anti-labour changes from day one), are closed. The same thing happened to all the big steel factories in the country. Looking at things today, a decade later, we can assume that the strikers' struggle was a difficult one to win, since, due to the changes in the international division of labour, the shrinkage of the steel industry and the shift of the industrialists to other more profitable businesses was a strategic choice. Nevertheless, back in 2012, if the strike had spread to the factory in Volos, as well as the other large factories in Aspropyrgos, then surely it would have been fought under better terms.

In any case, the final outcome of the strike showed the limits of economic struggle itself. The bargaining power of a strike derives from its impact upon the surplus value extracted by the employer. If the employer doesn't gain from continuing production, then a strike cannot be as effective as a means of putting pressure on him.

Despite the outcome, the different stance of the workers in the two factories in Athens and Volos was unbreakably linked to the different orientation, strategies and generally the role of the two different trades unions. In the case of the Aspropyrgos trade union, the majority of the Administrative Workers'

Council was trying to prepare and mobilize the workers before the crisis on every issue that concerned them. Its actions were upgraded shortly before the strike due to the tragic death of a worker, but it did have the “grounds” for such an intensification of struggle. On the contrary, the Volos factory trade union was effectively controlled by the employer. Its Administrative Council subordinated workers’ needs to the employer’s interests. The employer controlled the employees through the trade union and connections with local institutions and political figures of the local community. The attitude of the GSEE and the Metal Federation majorities points out that a trade union’s victory, a workers’ victory in the economic struggle, is much more difficult to be accomplished if there is no change in workers’ orientation vis-a-vis the degenerate and compromised trade union leaders whose practice is class cooperation and not class struggle.

Finally, one last remark. The strike ended unsuccessfully for the workers, the dismissals were not cancelled and the factories in both Athens and Volos finally closed. So, what’s the gain? Why was that strike so important? I’d point out two things. The first is that a new generation of workers who struggle today in the workplace may draw inspiration from that struggle. Due to the nation-wide dissemination of the strike, many lessons could be learned on how a strike can be organized, how to organize popular solidarity, etc. Several victorious contemporary strikes are the best proof of that – such as the most recent strikes in Cosco’s dockworkers or efood delivery workers have shown. Another lesson can be described better by an incident that occurred during the last General Assembly of the steel workers in Aspropyrgos. There, many fired strikers voted in favour of suspending the strike so that their colleagues could work, while at the same time many workers voted against the suspension until the dismissed workers returned. This, the sacrifice for your fellow worker, this class solidarity is perhaps the most important lesson strikers taught in their 9-month-long fight.

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Abstracts

Ralph Darlington

Working Class Women's Active Participation in the 1910-14 British Labour Revolt

The 'Labour Revolt' that swept Britain in the years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War between 1910 and 1914 was one of the most sustained, dramatic and violent explosions of industrial militancy and associated social conflict the country has ever experienced. Yet remarkably, beyond some single-case studies, little detailed attention has been given within the fields of industrial relations and labour history to the active and prominent role played by women workers and non-working women to this strike-wave revolt and social confrontation. This paper attempts to fill the gap by drawing on both a range of secondary literature and new archival material to focus on 19 different strikes across a variety of industries in which women were directly involved as workers (in both non-unionised and unionised contexts), as well as 11 other strikes in which they were externally involved en masse in supporting predominately male strikers. In the process, the paper explores the causes, features, limits and potential, and broader consequences of this activity.

Dave Lyddon

Three Hundred Years of British Strikes: Contours, Legal Frameworks, and Tactics

Britain has the longest continuous history of striking, which is explored in three aspects. It experienced the first industrial revolution from 1760, cotton being the pre-eminent industry, but pre-industrial skilled trades had already developed traditions of association and strikes. Strike waves (as in several other countries) from the 1870s to the early 1920s saw new groups unionize. Coal miners dominated the typical small-scale short unofficial strikes from the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s when engineering became the prime site. After the 1968–74 strike wave, participation peaked in 1979. *Mass Workers of the World*, vol. 1, no. 11, June 2023

unemployment, an employers' offensive, and industrial restructuring, saw unofficial strikes collapse by the early 1990s. Strikes are now mainly in the tertiary sector. Criminal sanctions, used tactically by employers, had lasted until 1875 but failed to stop most strikes. Judges then developed tort law against unions (facilitating court injunctions and damages), but unions won a wide freedom to strike in 1906, which has been incrementally eroded by Conservative governments since 1979. Widespread pay strikes in 2022–23, particularly in public services, dominated by women, overcame the most recent anti-strike barriers. Long-established strike patterns and strike laws have been historically transitory, with no obvious long-term trajectory, being buffeted by the winds of class struggle. There are, though, strong continuities in strike conduct: picketing and strike pay, strike-breaking and victimization. Some strike tactics have changed, reacting to employers' behaviour and legal constraints. The survey provides data sources for further study.

Denise Vesper and Cornelius J. König

Differences in strike attitudes and behavioural reactions among British, German, and French samples

Strikes are an important work phenomenon. However, research on third-party strike attitudes has been limited. In this study, we used a dataset that was previously collected for other purposes to assess strike attitudes and behavioural reactions and their relations to willingness to strike, union membership, and previous strike participation in samples from the United Kingdom (n = 444), Germany (n = 454), and France (n = 463). We used multivariate analyses of covariance to assess differences between the three samples. Between the British, German, and French samples, we found significant differences in their strike attitudes and willingness to strike. Finally, we found support for the assumptions that union members and people with a strike history evaluate strikes more positively than people who are not union members and without strike history.

Panagiotis Sotiris

Social movements as laboratories of dual power

Dual power has been associated with a historically specific conception of revolutionary strategy that for many is now outdated. In contrast I think that its strategic scope is broader and that it does not refer to just a specific

‘moment’ but rather to a dynamic that can emerge within prolonged struggles and confrontational social movements within conjunctures characterized by crisis of hegemony or at least elements of a hegemonic crisis. Consequently, movements need to be considered as ‘strategic instances’ in the elaboration of a social and political dynamic for social change.

Theodore Nikias

Between steel and fire: The 2011-12 nine-month-long strike of the metalworkers at Hellenic Steel

In October 2011 Greece was in the midst of an economic crisis. The first austerity measures had already been adopted and the International Monetary Fund and the Greek government were planning further burdens to the economic and social life of the people as a means to overcome the bad situation for the Greek economy. These changes were actually overturning basic labour rights which had been gained for the employees as a result of the trades unions’ struggles and the political decisions of the previous decades, especially during the 1970s and the 1980s. Redundancies, wage reductions, streamlining of labour relations against the workers were common strategic solutions for the employers during the years of economic crisis. All these were accompanied with provocative and cynical blackmail towards employees to accept the changes in order to retain their jobs. In this framework, the same dilemmas were posed in the metal factory Hellenic Steel in Aspropyrgos. From 31st October, a massive strike had started in the factory. Lasting nine months (273 days), it was the longest strike in the history of modern Greece and probably one of the longest generally in the history of the working-class movement. Here, I examine the strike, the tactics of both employers and employees and its impact. Through these questions, other aspects will emerge, such as the development of class solidarity by other workers to the strike, the evolution of the workers’ demands, the fatigue of the long-term struggle, the role of the other trades unions. Finally, the influence of the strike over the workers and the trades unions nowadays.