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8.3. Strikes, Lockouts, and Informal Resistance*

If rebellious workers set themselves to obtain a larger share of the national product or start a revolution to overthrow capitalism, they need some means – and perhaps weapons – to achieve their goal. The best known and most studied of those means is most probably strike action, and this chapter will present an insight into the withdrawal of work as a weapon in the hands of workers struggling for a better life. I shall give a glimpse into the logic of the strike and its history from classical times until the present. To strike is not always either permitted nor is it always even an intelligent thing to do in view of what employers or the state might do to counteract it. I shall therefore describe alternative options open to employees to see that their demands are met. The end of this chapter offers a brief insight into strike statistics, together with a view of international waves of strike action. But let us begin with the simple question, “What is a strike?”

What is a strike?¹

Ever since politicians, economists, and social scientists began to study strikes, they have been trying to define what a strike is. Most of the earliest definitions include the idea that strikers stop work with the intention of restarting it once their demands have been met. So a “strike” means that workers voluntarily and temporarily stop work because there are certain requirements they wish to have fulfilled. While it is true that that is a rather sterile definition, certainly during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the concept of industry as a battleground was clearly understood by students of strike action as a social phenomenon. In an 1889 overview of strikes and lockouts in the United Kingdom one author wrote: “It is certain that all such industrial struggles represent the conflict of employers and workmen upon mat-

* In writing this chapter, I owe a debt to Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays Toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden and Boston, 2008), especially ch. 9.

1 The English word *strike* was probably used for the first time during a conflict in 1768, although it only gradually replaced the term *turnout* during the late nineteenth century. Sailors in Sutherland struck the sails to stress their demands to the sailing company, and from that day onwards the word *strike* was used with regard to labour conflicts. See *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles* (Oxford, 1919). The English word, which is derived from the Indo-European *streig* (= stroke), found its way into other languages, including German (*Streik*) and Swedish (*strejk*), but some languages used their own word for this relatively new event. It is probably related to the French *tric*, a word used before *grève* came in use.

ters which one or both consider to be vital to their interests, and, while engaged in them, the parties concerned are really in a state of moral if not actual warfare.”²

The author of the overview clearly understood that there is an element of struggle or “warfare” in a workers’ strike. He also separated strikes from lockouts, which are in fact the opposite of a strike, for during a lockout an employer temporarily prevents workers from working. However, both those opinions, widely supported at that time, have been slowly eroded. Labour activists saw strikes from the perspective of class struggle in which, according to Friedrich Engels, striking workers “endanger social order” and can end the “whole Political Economy of today”.³ According to that view striking workers would eventually bring capitalism to its knees, while in the meantime going on strike over points of contention.⁴ However, mainstream social scientists and statistical investigators developed more neutral views on strikes. In 1994 the *Bulletin of Comparative Labour Relations (BCLR)* defined the strike as “a collective and concerted withholding of labour in pursuit of specific occupational demands exercised peacefully”.⁵ The strike thus moved from conflict – even perhaps the prelude to revolution – to become a peaceful undertaking intended for occupational ends. However, while a peaceful character might be intrinsic to most present-day strikes in industrialized countries, it is most certainly not so for many strikes in developing countries, and, indeed, we need not go a long way into the past to encounter violence in many strike movements in Western countries.⁶

Because strike statistics collected by the International Labour Organization (ILO) are most generally used in comparative strike research, we shall restrict ourselves to their rather neutral definition: “A *strike* is a temporary work stoppage carried out by one or more groups of workers with a view to enforcing or resisting demands or ex-

² *Report on the Strikes and Lock-Outs of 1888* by the Labour Correspondent to the Board of Trade, presented to both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty (London, 1889), p. 3.

³ [“And precisely because the Unions direct themselves against the vital nerve of the present social order, however one-sidedly, in however narrow a way, are they so dangerous to this social order. [...] The moment the workers resolve to be bought and sold no longer, when, in the determination of the value of labour, they take the part of men possessed of a will as well as of working-power, at that moment the whole Political Economy of today is at an end.”] Frederick Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England: From Personal Observation and Authentic Sources*, in: Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 4 (Moscow, 1975), p. 507. Note that the Soviet translator changed the original “Reich des Besitzes” (Empire of Property) into “the whole Political Economy of today”. See Friedrich Engels, *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England. Nach eigener Anschauung und authentischen Quellen* (1845), reprinted in: Marx and Engels, *Werke*, vol. 2 (Berlin, 1974), p. 436.

⁴ Eduard Bernstein, *Der Streik. Sein Wesen und sein Wirken* (Frankfurt am Main, 1906), p. 7.

⁵ Roger Blanpain and R. Ben-Israel (eds), *Strikes and Lock-Outs in Industrialized Market Economies* (Deventer and Boston, 1994), p. 10.

⁶ Peter Hain wrote, “Violence is a normal part of the history of strikes in Britain” (*Political Strikes. The State and Trade Unionism in Britain* (Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 13), and the title of the 1931 study by Louis Adamic speaks for itself: *Dynamite. The Story of Class Violence in America* (New York, 1931).

pressing grievances, or supporting other workers in their demands or grievances”.⁷ Aspects of conflict and violence have been removed from that definition, but it is good to keep in mind that both might play a role. Besides that, compared with the *BCLR* definition, in the view of the ILO solidarity with other workers is an integral part of the goals pursued by striking workers. That is true of all demands that transcend the sphere of “occupational demands”, such as political, judicial, and other general aims striven for by strikers.

What is not incorporated into most definitions, including that of the ILO, is the diversity of strikes. A strike might last two minutes or several years. The longest strike in history was probably the lost struggle by 130 employees of the Congress Hotel in Chicago (USA) who between 2003 and 2013 fought management’s decision to cut wages and hire subcontracted workers. Strikes differ in scale too. A single company or a whole country might be affected by a conflict between labour and capital. There might be two workers on strike, or two million. Does an entire workforce join the struggle, or only part of it? And does partial participation occur on purpose because the unions want to fight at minimal cost, or does a large proportion of the workers oppose the strike and refuse to join the action? Questions like those arise when looking at bare statistics that indicate only the number of conflicts.

Paid workers are not the only ones who might resort to going on strike, for slaves, indentured workers, and even convicts can do so too. Here, however, I shall focus on strikes organized by wage earners.

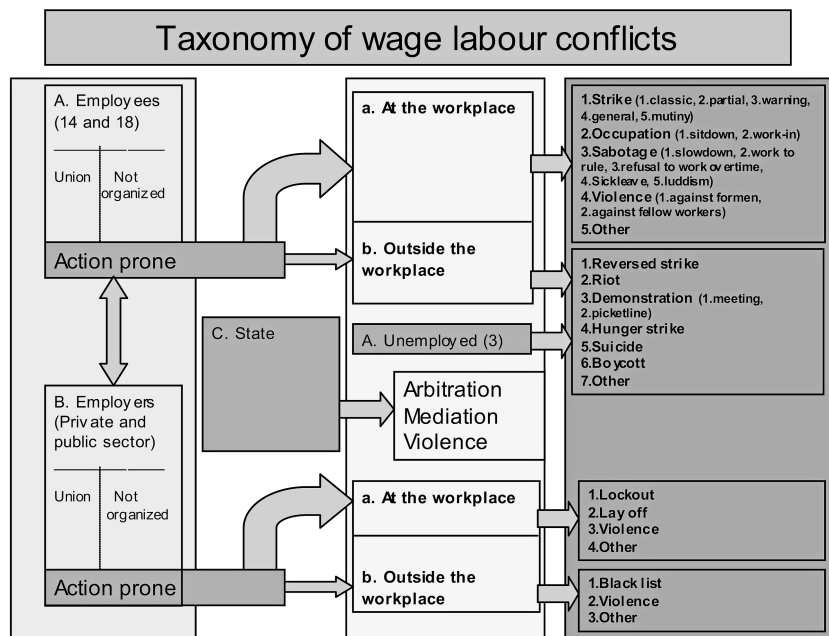
Taxonomy of labour conflicts

Although the strike is probably the best known form of resistance by workers in the modern capitalist system, other forms of resistance are available to wage earners. However, despite the ILO’s still valid recommendation in 1993 to “also cover other action due to labour disputes”, statistical bureaus hardly ever do.⁸ In fact all forms of wage-labour conflict can be summarized in a single taxonomy.⁹

⁷ http://www.ilo.org/ilostat-files/Documents/description_IR_EN.pdf. The ILO also defines the lockout: “A *lockout* is a total or partial temporary closure of one or more places of employment, or the hindering of the normal work activities of employees, by one or more employers with a view to enforcing or resisting demands or expressing grievances, or supporting other employers in their demands or grievances.”

⁸ Fifteenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians, Geneva, 19–28 January 1993.

⁹ The taxonomy is taken from the project Global Hub Labour Conflicts initiated in 2014 and supported by the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam. See <https://datasets.socialhistory.org/dataverse/National>.



That taxonomy shows how labour (employees) and capital (employers) are able to embark on a number of types of conflict depending on the chosen arena, inside or outside the workplace. Note that both parties might try to strengthen their positions by building or joining more permanent organizations such as trade unions and employers' associations, but that is not a necessary precept for involvement in labour conflicts.

In many labour conflicts some third party might become involved, especially when such conflicts are regarded as threatening normal labour relations or even public order. Then the state can interfere, and sometimes does so, perhaps by mediating to help the two parties end the conflict. In many cases, the state effectively takes sides by using violence to try to force workers to end their action and resume work. Much less often does the state take the side of striking workers.¹⁰ In many cases the state is itself an employer, and in that guise might be expected to act like other employers in reaction to strike action.

Before we consider forms of collective action that are alternatives to the strike and lockout, let us look more closely at what strikes are.

¹⁰ During his first term (1916–1922), Argentine President Hipólito Yrigoyen prevented the police from intervening if the workers concerned were potential voters for his own Radical Party: “Yrigoyen supported strikers not because of his ideals but in hope of winning votes”. Joel Horowitz, “Argentina’s Failed General Strike of 1921: A Critical Moment in the Radicals’ Relations with Unions”, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 75, 1 (1995), pp. 57–79, at 60.

A short historical and thematic overview of strikes

Because of a lack of source material it is hard to be certain when wage earners stopped working for the first time because they had grievances, nor do we really know where they did so, although it is commonly agreed that the first strikes occurred in ancient Egypt. The best-known example is the strike of tomb builders in Deir el Medina in 1155 BCE on the 21st day of the 29th year in the reign of Ramses III.¹¹ Unrest actually began a year earlier when the workers' pay was late and a representative, one Amennakht, persuaded local officials to hand over forty-six sacks of corn to restore peace. But the problems were not over yet.¹² The strike proper commenced when the craftsmen "downed tools", complaining: "We are hungry, for 18 days have already elapsed in this month". Two days later the strikers stated: "The prospect of hunger and thirst has driven us to this; there is no clothing, there is no ointment, there is no fish, there are no vegetables. Send to Pharaoh, our good lord, about it, and send to the vizier, our superior, that we may be supplied with provisions."

That strike was of course a very early one and might seem difficult to compare with strikes that take place nowadays. The idea of the Pharaoh as an omnipotent deity is strange to most modern people, and those workers' relationship with their superiors is practically unknown to us, as are such things as the fact that the positions of craftsmen were hereditary. But otherwise the comparison is striking. People in a subordinate position took their fate into their own hands and resisted existing circumstances. That may well be a common reaction of the subordinate, or as Michel Foucault remarked: "Where there is power, there is resistance."¹³ We might therefore conclude that although both the duration of that ancient strike and the number of participants are unclear and the outcome foggy, the fact that the workmen resisted makes the Deir el Medina strike comparable to modern labour conflicts and it can therefore justly be described as the first strike in history.

Other events, too, have been labelled strikes, such as the *secessio plebis*, or withdrawal from society of ordinary people in the Roman Empire, which probably occurred five times between 494 BC and 287 BC. Because a *secessio* was performed by an entire stratum (the *plebs*), including soldiers many of whom owned land, that action, impressive as it might have been to contemporaries, can hardly be termed a strike in the modern sense. However, in Ancient Rome there were strikes that resembled modern work stoppages.¹⁴

¹¹ Paul J. Frandsen, "Editing Reality: The Turin Strike Papyrus", in: Sarah Israelit-Groll (ed.), *Studies in Egyptology*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1990), pp. 166–199.

¹² Toby Wilkinson, *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt: The History of a Civilisation from 3000 BC to Cleopatra* (London, 2010), p. 358. This author dates the actual strike to 1558 BCE.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1. *La volonté de savoir* (Paris, 1976), p. 125.

¹⁴ Bernstein, *Streik*, p. 9; Ramsay MacMullen, "A Note on Roman Strikes", *The Classical Journal*, 58, 6 (1963), pp. 269–271.

Only during the early stages of modern capitalism did strikes become a regular feature of society. First as rare interruptions of normal relations, such as in strikes by textile workers in late-medieval Italy, Flanders, and Holland,¹⁵ and in a few other early cases like the 1539 strike by typographers¹⁶ in Lyon in France. There was, too, an uprising by Genovese silk workers in 1675, while occasionally during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Dutch textile workers in Leiden organized illegal *uutgangen* (walkouts). The textile workers then left Leiden and moved to another city because they found their labour relations unacceptable. Their exit was essentially performed, done in order to renegotiate from a safer place because sometimes a royal decree or in many cases the local authorities forbade the leaving of a city precisely to forestall the interruption of normal production.¹⁷ Because guild regulations in the period meant workers were not free in the modern sense, *uutgangen* lie somewhere between exoduses by plantation slaves and strikes as carried out by free labour. Both sorts of action show that subordinate workers could find ways to resist in their everyday working lives. The same was true for sailors who undertook many mutinies to escape from the strict regimes under which they worked, regimes that might include corporal punishment and the death penalty. Perhaps the best-known mutiny is the one that took place on the British HMS *Bounty* in 1789.

Both the leaving of plantations by slaves and mutinies at sea were manifestations of resistance by workers who had few rights. Another example is the strike in America by Polish craftsmen demanding greater civil liberties. That action occurred in 1619 and is considered the first strike in American history.¹⁸ However, it was not until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that strikes by truly legally free labourers became regular events in Europe. Strikes became more frequent in the colonies, too, but until now they have been too little studied. Early examples include the cessation of work by silver miners in Chihuahua in Mexico. As early as the 1730s, they protested against the termination of their work contracts by the owners of the mine where they worked, while in India there were strikes at a huge gunpowder factory in about 1800 and by brickmakers on the Ganges Canal in 1848–1849.¹⁹

15 See, for example, Samuel Kline Cohn, Jr., *The Laboring Classes in Renaissance Florence* (New York, 1980); Marc Boone and Hanno Brand, "Vollersoproeren en collectieve actie in Gent en Leiden in de 14de-15de eeuw", *Tijdschrift voor sociale geschiedenis*, 19, 2 (1993), pp. 168–192.

16 Known as "le grand Tric". Georges Dangon, "Orages sur l'imprimerie: le grand tric de Lyon (1539–1544)", *Le Courrier graphique*, 84 (February–March 1956), p. 7, and 85 (April–May 1956), p. 17.

17 Rudolf Dekker, "Labour Conflicts and Working-Class Culture in Early Modern Holland", *International Review of Social History*, 35, 3 (1990), pp. 377–420, at 387–391.

18 James S. Pula, "Fact vs. Fiction: What Do We Really Know about the Polish Presence in Early Jamestown?", *The Polish Review*, 53, 4 (2008), pp. 477–493.

19 Cheryl English Martin, *Governance and Society in Colonial Mexico: Chihuahua in the Eighteenth Century* (Stanford, CA, 1996), p. 51; Jan Lucassen, "Working at the Ichapur Gunpowder Factory in the 1790s", *Indian Historical Review*, 39, 1 (2012), pp. 19–56, and 39, 2 (2012), pp. 251–271; Jan Lucassen, "The Brickmakers' Strikes on the Ganges Canal in 1848–1849", *International Review of Social History*, 51 (2006), Supplement, pp. 47–83.

Regarding Europe it is important to note that strike action was forbidden in most countries, although almost everywhere the number of strikes increased. Only slowly did national parliaments repeal laws prohibiting free association by workers demanding higher wages, fewer working hours, or less work. It was only then that a more specific word for such stoppages came into existence. People then began to refer to *strikes*, already mentioned, and in French *la grève*, a word loaned to Portuguese and Turkish too. The Spanish used their word *huelga*. Large-scale strikes that affected an entire industry or region occurred for the first time in the nineteenth century, examples being the general strike of 1842 in the North and Midlands of the UK and the Pullman strike of 1894 in the USA. In August 1842 a general strike commenced in protest at wage reductions and it “spread like wildfire”.²⁰ The strike soon assumed a political flavour when the Chartist movement intervened and received support for its campaign for general suffrage. The 1842 strike is sometimes called “The Plug Plot” after strikers who roamed the country bringing mills to a standstill by removing the plugs from their boilers. Despite political support the strike failed and hundreds were arrested. Another famous strike took place in 1894 in Chicago, Illinois, when the workers of the Pullman Palace Car Company faced wage cuts and protested. When three members of the workers’ committee were laid off, the local unions issued a strike call. The strike began on 11 May, and although there was no violence nor destruction of property soldiers were sent to the factory. From 26 June railroad workers went on strike in sympathy and boycotted Pullman cars.²¹ But it was all in vain. The thousands of soldiers who were sent in drenched the strike in blood, leaving thirty strikers dead and fifty-seven wounded.

The beginning of the twentieth century saw strikes as a regular response by workers spread from the core countries of capitalism in Europe and America to other regions. Of course resistance was already known to people like slaves and contract workers who were forced into coerced labour. Some of the revolts by slaves have become iconic. Although we know of only a few slave revolts in Greek and Roman antiquity, one of the best-known examples in history occurred in that era. The “Spartacus” revolt by tens of thousands of Roman slaves in 74–71 BC has been the subject of commercial films and lent its name to a number of left-wing groups such as the German *Spartakusbund* (Spartacus League) founded by Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg. Because slavery in Europe had ceased to be regarded as acceptably normal, the status of people forcibly transported from Africa to the Americas required a race-based justification. Despite the idea that it was for the good of the world that supposedly superior white Europeans should govern “black” people, many enslaved Africans nonetheless fought against their situation so that the newly established slave societies on the American continent were under constant and real threat of

²⁰ G.D.H. Cole, *A Short History of the British Working-Class Movement, 1789–1947* (London, 1947), p. 113.

²¹ United States Strike Commission, *Report on the Chicago Strike of June-July 1894* (Washington, DC, 1895), pp. xxxvii–xl.

slave revolt. Revolts sometimes erupted so violently that the concept of a slave society was seriously endangered. In 1526 slaves rebelled in San Miguel de Guadalupe, part of what is now Florida in the United States. That was perhaps the first slave revolt in the Americas, but a long list followed it. Among instances of revolt was the rebellion on Saint-Domingue (1791–1804), which was a success and led to the departure of the planters. However, I prefer here to limit consideration to “free” wage earners, so I shall say no more about slave revolts, even though in certain important respects they do resemble strikes.

As I have stated, from about 1900 large-scale strike action by free labourers spread all over the world, including general strikes in Argentina in 1902, 1904, and 1907,²² and a spectacular general strike in St Petersburg in Russia on 22 January 1905 when a demonstration by 200,000 Russians in support of political reforms ended in a massacre that left at least 200 demonstrators dead. In response the strike movement that had been gathering pace since December 1904 exploded, culminating in January 1905 in general strikes in Russian Poland and other parts of the Russian Empire. Unrest continued after that wave of strikes ended, and a new general strike was called in October over the eight-hour working day in St Petersburg. The succession of general strikes and the Russian Revolution of 1905 ended with a third general strike, this time in Moscow, but the strikes of 1905 had an international impact. Similar things have happened in more recent times too. For example, in India strikes became numerous in the 1920s and 1930s.²³ In Ceylon (now called Sri Lanka) on 12 August 1953 a so-called *hartal* was organized. It took the form of a nationwide demonstration of civil disobedience and strike action against the government, and resulted in the resignation of the prime minister.²⁴ In Egypt, “From 1998 to 2010, well over two million workers participated in at least 3,400 strikes and other collective actions – the largest social movement in the Arab world in six decades, except for the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962)”.²⁵ In the People’s Republic of China the turn to capitalism has led to a huge number of mostly illegal strikes since the 1990s.²⁶

In many countries socialists and anarchists discussed the use of the general strike as the ultimate means to overthrow capitalism with a single push. Of course most so-called general strikes have not been truly general because, despite the

22 Agustín Santella, *Labor Conflict and Capitalist Hegemony in Argentina: The Case of the Automobile Industry, 1990–2007* (Leiden and Boston, 2016).

23 Susan Wolcott, “Strikes in Colonial India, 1921–1938”, *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 61, 4 (2008), pp. 460–484.

24 Wesley S. Muthiah and Sydney Wanasinghe, *We Were Making History: The Hartal of 1953* (Colombo, 2002).

25 Joel Beinin, “Workers and Egypt’s January 25 Revolution”, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 80 (2011), pp. 189–196, at 191.

26 Ching Kwan Lee, *Against the Law. Labor Protests in China’s Rustbelt and Sunbelt* (Berkeley, CA, 2007); Chris King-Chi Chan, *The Challenge of Labour in China: Strikes and the Changing Labour Regime in Global Factories* (Abingdon, 2010).

mass participation of many strikers, many companies, and sometimes many regions, they have rarely involved the whole of the working class. Socialist authors in those days often therefore preferred the term “mass strike”.²⁷ We can define a general strike as one in which a substantial portion of the employees of a given country, industry, region, or city participate. More recent history has seen general strikes in Nigeria in 1964, France in 1968, Senegal in 1968, Spain in 2010, and Argentina in 2014. In India, on 2 September 2016 between 150 and 180 million public-sector workers went on strike for twenty-four hours in protest at plans to increase privatization and other economic policies. Ramen Pandey of the Indian National Trade Union Congress spoke of “the world’s largest ever” strike.²⁸

Apart from small one-off strikes and general or mass strikes, workers on strike can use different forms of strike action.²⁹ During a classical strike all employees, or the majority of them, stop work with the intention of going back to work only once their demands have been met. Workers and their unions can, however, decide to use other ways to show their strength, without recourse to a classical strike. To spare costs to the unions they might institute a partial strike, in which a limited number of workers walk out. Another option is the selective strike, another partial action but one in which the section chosen to strike is vital to the entire production process, so that the employer comes under pressure at the most vulnerable point. It can also be decided to start a rotating strike. In such an action there will be a plan for several or perhaps even all departments to stop work one after the other and then in turn resume work. The final type of strike to mention here is the symbolic strike, a mere show of force to make clear to an opponent that the workers are ready and willing to join battle. It really amounts to a warning (*Warnstreik* in German) and might be carried on for just a very limited time, perhaps only an hour or so – even as little as fifteen minutes.

A strike has thus been defined here as a cessation of work; but there is a specific form of strike action in labour conflict whereby workers instead of stopping all work do actually continue production. This is a special case called a “sit-down strike”. During a sit-down strike – sometimes called a sit-in, a stay-in, or an occupation – the strikers refuse to leave the plant and sometimes even prevent the owner from entering the premises. There are a few early examples of this rather revolutionary action, such as the case in 1873 of a group of Polish miners who were removed by the police with the help of the army.³⁰ Sit-ins or occupations were a weapon in the

27 Rosa Luxemburg, *Massenstreik, Partei und Gewerkschaften* (Hamburg, 1906); Leon Trotsky, 1905 (Harmondsworth, 1971; originally published in 1922); Gerald D. Surh, “Petersburg’s First Mass Labor Organization: The Assembly of Russian Workers and Father Gapon” (Part I), *The Russian Review*, 40, 3 (1981), pp. 241–262.

28 www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/09/millions-indian-workers-strike-wages-160902131706206.html, last accessed 13 October 2016.

29 Gérard Dion, *Dictionnaire canadien des relations du travail* (Quebec, 1986).

30 J.C. Visser, *Bedrijfsbezetting. Het verleden van een nieuw actiemiddel* (Amsterdam, 1986), p. 33.

hands of both Russian and German workers during their early twentieth-century revolutions. Workers in revolt occupied factories, pushed their bosses around in wheelbarrows, and formed committees that attempted to take over management.³¹ Real “work-ins” or the continuation of production under workers’ control occurred similarly in the *Biennio Rosso* strikes during the “two red years” in Italy from 1919–1920. The 1930s, too, witnessed waves of factory occupations notably in France and the USA. The best-known examples of this kind of action are the Flint strikes at General Motors in 1937³² and the actions in France in 1936. They were mainly defensive moves because the workers involved were resisting cutbacks and layoffs, and so were in a position where a normal strike would by definition have been in vain. In the first few years after World War II more work-ins followed, for example at the Japanese newspaper *Yomiuri Shinbun* in October 1945.³³

The late 1960s and early 1970s, too, witnessed a wave of factory occupations, once again during an economic downturn when workers were forced to resist layoffs or face unemployment. In Argentina, factory sit-ins occurred during protest waves in Córdoba in 1969 and in Villa Constitución in 1975 among a good number of other cases.³⁴ Then, during the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, thousands of Argentinian workers took over bankrupt factories and put them back to work.³⁵

A few factory sit-ins became headline news, like the work-in at the Upper Clyde shipyard in Glasgow, Scotland. That action lasted fourteen months, ending in 1972, and was led by a group of young communist shop stewards who received support from all over the country. During a demonstration 80,000 marched and the workers even received a financial donation from Beatle John Lennon, together with a telegram from “John and Yoko”. The work-in was intended to prove that the workers were not “work-shy” but were in fact standing up for the “right to work”.³⁶

31 Uwe Brüggemann, *Die russischen Gewerkschaften in Revolution und Bürgerkrieg 1917–1919* (Frankfurt am Main, 1972).

32 Sidney Fine, *Sit-Down. The General Motors Strike of 1936–1937* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1969).

33 Joe Moore, *Japanese Workers and the Struggle for Power, 1945–1947* (Madison, WI, 1983).

34 James P. Brennan, *The Labor Wars in Córdoba, 1955–1976. Ideology, Work, and Labor Politics in an Argentine Industrial City* (Cambridge, MA, 1994); Agustín Santella, “Workers’ Mobilization and Political Violence: Conflict in Villa Constitución, Argentina, 1970–1975”, *Latin American Perspectives*, 35, 5 (2008), pp. 146–157.

35 Graciela Monteagudo, “The Clean Walls of a Recovered Factory: New Subjectivities in Argentina’s Recovered Factories”, *Urban Anthropology and Studies of Cultural Systems and World Economic Development*, 37, 2 (2008), pp. 175–210; Alice Rose Bryer, “The Politics of the Social Economy: A Case Study of the Argentinean *Empresas Recuperadas*”, *Dialectical Anthropology*, 36, 1 (2012), pp. 21–49; Natalia Vanesa Hirtz and Marta Susana Giacone, “The Recovered Companies Workers’ Struggle in Argentina: Between Autonomy and New Forms of Control”, *Latin American Perspectives*, 40, 4 (2013), pp. 88–100.

36 Alasdair Buchan, *The Right to Work. The Story of the Upper Clyde Confrontation* (London, 1972).

The occupation at the works of watchmaker Lip in Besançon, France, is another iconic example of a work-in from the same period. The workers in action continued production for ten months between June 1973 and April 1974, selling the watches themselves to sympathizers and organizing a constant flow of propaganda to point out the importance and justice of their struggle. The occupation ended successfully with an assurance that most jobs would be retained.³⁷

One key element of factory occupations is that they are illegal. In a way they endanger existing property relations and therefore there has always been a certain tension between the activists and labour unions, which by their nature perform within the boundaries of any legal system of proprietary rights, which rights during numerous occupations police have tried to defend by force. A good example of that is the “Battle of the Running Bulls” in 1937, when workers at the General Motors plant in Flint, Michigan (USA), were able to rout police who tried to take over the occupied factory. At the cost of fourteen colleagues wounded by police gunfire, workers were able to gain union recognition from their employer.

We have now seen that the “strike” is not a simple monolithic category but might take many forms, from simple demonstrative action to near-revolutionary attacks on the “political economy of today”. In the next section we shall consider the general course of strikes.

The course of strikes

Strikes have been of many forms with as many histories. But to understand the phenomenon it is nevertheless desirable to describe a general pattern along which most strikes develop, so I hope it will be illuminating to offer such a schedule here. First, before a strike breaks out there will probably have been a whole development of causes and triggers. In most cases there are underlying causes perhaps not mentioned by the strikers as explicit demands but which are detectable by observers. These might include poor social conditions, fatigue, frustration at work, and the inferiority of the workers’ position.³⁸ Such underlying causes are of a very general character and refer to the essence of labour in subordinate conditions or capitalism in general. Here we are reminded that strike action has often been regarded as a temporary escape from every day conditions; indeed the Spanish word *huelga*, used to mean “a strike”, can also mean rest or recreation. There are similar analogies in other languages and countries.

Immediate causes of strikes might occur within the framework of the sort of underlying causes mentioned above. Immediate causes might be about wages, working

³⁷ François-Henri de Virieu, *Lip: 100.000 montres sans patron* (Paris, 1973); René Lourau, *L'analyseur Lip* (Paris, 1974).

³⁸ K.G.J.C. Knowles, *Strikes: A Study in Industrial Conflict, With Special Reference to British Experience Between 1911 and 1947* (Oxford, 1952), pp. 212–219.

hours, disciplinary regulations, or an employer's reluctance to recognize a union. There might be some event that triggers an existing willingness to go on strike, such as an announcement of reduced pay, dismissal of a colleague, or whatever might arouse feelings strong enough for action. Such triggers can cause workers to stop work immediately, or they might ask their union to take action. Immediate causes are of the type to be translated into demands made during collective negotiations between unions and employers. In the case of refusal to negotiate with a union official, workers might take their demands directly to their employer. If a union is involved, a negative response might then lead to the suggestion of strike action. It is common practice, especially in countries where labour relations are highly institutionalized, to ballot union members, something that is actually required by law in the UK. If a ballot then confirms that workers wish to go on strike under the leadership of the union, then the union will issue an ultimatum and set a date for action.

Of course, there is a whole range of possible ways for strikes to develop. As van der Linden has noted, "willingness to stage a strike depends on an intricate complex of factors, including whether or not a grievance procedure exists, the ease of forming a group identity, and the general political and economic circumstances".³⁹ Once a strike starts it is important for the strikers that they continue to support each other while ostracizing strike-breakers, and find sources of financial support such as is available in a number of countries from union strike funds. Public support is sometimes sought by requesting a boycott of the company involved, and strikers will want to try to negotiate with their employer to find a solution. If a strike has consequences for public life the state may be expected to take a hand in matters, perhaps in mediation or arbitration; in fact, arbitration has been compulsory in Australia since 1906. More familiar state interference has been the use of force, seen in many cases. An upsetting recent example of state violence was the Marikana massacre of 16 August 2012, when South African police opened fire on striking miners, injuring 112 workers, thirty-four of them fatally.⁴⁰ The shooting might seem reminiscent of police violence during the Apartheid era, but now it was black government agents against black workers, a fact that caused much disbelief. However, the state is not the only player that can intervene with violence, and both workers and employers can use violence – examples of which we have seen before.

Violent or not, with or without outside arbitration or mediation all strikes come to an end. The employer can decide to institute a lockout or can dismiss all the strikers if legally possible. In most cases, however, a strike ends with an agreement, which might be complete victory or defeat for either party, or anything in between. In any event, the workers go back to work.

As it is, a sort of format for strike action has come to exist and seems to be used by many strikers when initiating a conflict, but we should not forget that real life

³⁹ Van der Linden, *Workers of the World*, p. 188.

⁴⁰ Peter Alexander et al., *Marikana: Voices from South Africa's Mining Massacre* (Athens, OH, 2013).

often has surprises in store. Strikes might come out of the blue without prior negotiation, nor any preparations to come out; there might have been no firm indications that workers had had any grievances. Despite many studies of strike behaviour and of reasons why strikes occasionally erupt among seemingly docile employees, it is still impossible to predict strikes. No model nor any statistical calculations have enabled management to prevent social outbursts, and even in periods of social peace managers ought to be aware of that. Apart from their wish to gain support for their own position, employers often resort to conspiracy thinking in which “communist agitators” induce workers to go on strike – workers whom managers had supposed to be satisfied employees. In 1948 retail workers in New York went on strike against Openheim Collins. “In perhaps the most controversial strike in retail workers’ history, workers stayed out on the picket line for weeks on end without result, and the mainstream press responded with vicious attacks that were largely false: the strike, the *Daily News* reported, was the work of outside communist agitators rather than retail workers themselves, and all the supporters of the strike were communists.”⁴¹ During earlier times under colonialism that attitude to strikers might well have had a racist connotation, such as became clear during the 1939 strike in Kenya. There, casual labourers went on strike in July in Dar es Salaam, Mombasa, Kilindini, and Tanga, although, for example, the port manager of Kilindini was convinced that labour was “contended [sic] and had no desire to strike”. The strike was not peaceful everywhere and in Tanga especially riots, as well as shots fired by police, caused six deaths. In general the strike was regarded as caused by political interference from outside. When managers were interviewed after the strike, Mr Norton of the railways was sure of his ground. “I do not think the boy is ready for a trade union, he is still in a very primitive form.” If unions were to be set up, it must be under the guidance of a “white Chairman”.⁴²

The frequent accusation by employers and the mainstream press that striking workers had been provoked by outsiders obliges historians to look more closely at who were the leaders and who the followers in labour conflicts. That is especially so when many union officials themselves, perhaps feeling let down by wildcat strikers, blame agitators, agents provocateurs, communists, and the like.⁴³

Leaders and followers

Most strikes do not begin overnight, as it were, but are prepared systematically by unions that use them as a show of force or as a real weapon to bring about changes

⁴¹ Aaron Brenner, Benjamin Day, and Immanuel Ness, *The Encyclopedia of Strikes in American History* (Armonk, NY, 2009), p. 628.

⁴² Anthony Clayton and Donald C. Savage, *Government and Labour in Kenya 1895–1963* (London, 1974), pp. 222–225.

⁴³ Knowles, *Strikes*, p. 39.

in labour conditions. It may even be said that in many countries the history of the trade union movement is closely connected to the history of strikes. Indeed, it is not easy to say which came first, strikes or unions. In general, however, we might say that workers went on strike before they had unions, especially if we take into account the very early strikes referred to at the beginning of this chapter. Nevertheless, it is true that under modern capitalism the formation of unions in certain industries has sometimes preceded the occurrence of strikes. Even then the histories of both are closely related, which is not to say that all strikes are initiated and led by unions. There have been quite a number of spontaneous or “wildcat” strikes, especially when the union movement has been under siege or even forbidden. In such situations workers sometimes walk out despite there being no real organizing body to lead them and offer financial support. Strikes have occurred under authoritarian regimes, too, although on a limited scale because there striking workers have often faced severe punishment. According to the regime’s own records⁴⁴ there were wildcat strikes in Nazi Germany between 1936–1937 and in the German-occupied Netherlands between 1940 and 1945. For example, in 1941 a strike of tens of thousands in the Amsterdam area was called to oppose the maltreatment of the Jewish population, while hundreds of thousands went on strike in 1943 to resist the conscription of former prisoners of war. Not long after the war, in 1953, strikers in Berlin protested against the communist regime in the GDR, and more recently mainland China has seen hundreds of strikes. None of those strikes was either called or led by unions, so they may be described as wildcat strikes.

Conflicts of that type developed in countries where there was no freedom of speech nor an independent union movement, although spontaneous strikes happen in democratic countries, too, where unions are an integral and sometimes even thoroughly appreciated part of the system of industrial relations. Strikes might occur in resistance to some collective agreement endorsed by a union but not approved by the rank and file, in most cases because they had been demanding higher wages. A wave of such strikes hit many Western countries in the 1960s, for example during the German *Septemberstreiks* of 1969 and the *autunno caldo* in Italy. The French general strike of 1968 belongs under this heading because the divided union movement had been unable to lead workers. The French action began spontaneously, sparked off by the student movement, and almost resulted in the resignation of President de Gaulle, with the unions only later gaining any grip on events. During the well-known *mouvement de mai* many factories were occupied by workers, so that it was effectively a repetition of the 1936 occupations and the precursor of the Lip occupa-

⁴⁴ Doris Kachulle, “‘Arbeitsniederlegungen in Betrieben’. Ein Bericht des DAF-Geheimdienstes über eine Streikbewegung im Jahre 1936”, 1999. *Zeitschrift für Sozialgeschichte des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts*, 6, 4 (1991), pp. 85–109; Tim Mason, “The Workers’ Opposition in Nazi Germany”, *History Workshop Journal*, 11, 1 (1981), pp. 120–137.

tion.⁴⁵ To a lesser extent the same happened in the US, too, where wildcat strikes were a feature of the 1960s and 1970s. One good example from America is the Dodge Trucks strike of June 1974 that followed wildcat action and factory occupations that took place during the summer of 1973.⁴⁶

Most of those movements eventually faded away without making any dramatic change to labour relations nor state policy. However, things went quite differently in South Africa, where the end of the Apartheid regime was signalled by a wildcat strike in Durban in 1973 that surprised the country and indeed the world. There is no indication that any of the existing unions played a decisive role in the outbreak of those strikes, and South Africa had seen no such labour trouble for decades. But the unrest in combination with many other forms of revolt continued until the end of Apartheid in 1990.⁴⁷

Striking electrical and oil workers in Iran (October and November 1978) are another good example of workers who were able to change the political landscape by force. After “months of paralyzing nationwide strikes” they “hammered the final nail into the coffin of the Pahlavis”. And just as during the constitutional crisis of 1905, the strikers were supported by the merchants in the bazaar and shopkeepers.⁴⁸

Another noteworthy example of a large strike movement that eventually led to regime change is to be found in Poland. There spontaneous strike movements in 1970, 1976, and 1980 led to the formation of the independent union “Solidarity”, which was finally recognized by the Polish government in August 1980.⁴⁹ In Brazil in the late 1970s extensive strikes by metal workers of the so-called ABC region around São Paulo led to the birth of a strong new union movement that ultimately resulted in the founding of the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores) in 1980.⁵⁰

Of course, it is not always a straightforward task to categorize a strike with reference to its leaders. Clearly, a strike declared by a union official and under the guidance of the union until it ends is unquestionably a union-led strike, but with spontaneous strikes matters tend to be more complicated. It seems that in August 1766 the miners in Real Del Monte in Mexico downed tools without any leaders, or as Noblet

⁴⁵ Jacques Pesquet, *Soviets at Saclay? The First Assessment of an Experiment in Setting up Workers' Councils at the Atomic Energy Commission Centre for Nuclear Research, Saclay* (London, 1976).

⁴⁶ Millard Berry et al., *Wildcat: Dodge Truck, June 1974* (Detroit, 1974).

⁴⁷ Gerald Kraak, *Breaking the Chains. Labour in South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s* (London, 1993); Gay W. Seidman, *Manufacturing Militance. Workers' Movements in Brazil and South Africa, 1970–1985* (Berkeley, CA, 1994).

⁴⁸ Mohsen M. Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution* (Boulder and London, 1988), p. 204.

⁴⁹ *The Birth of Solidarity: The Gdańsk Negotiations, 1980*, translated and introduced by A. Kemp-Welch (New York, 1983); Agnieszka Dębska (ed.), *A Carnival under Sentence: Solidarność 1980–81* (Warsaw, 2006).

⁵⁰ John D. French, *The Brazilian Workers' ABC. Class Conflict and Alliances in Modern São Paulo* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1992); Margaret E. Keck, *The Workers' Party and Democratization in Brazil* (New Haven, CT, 1992).

Barry Danks puts it, it was “a clear example of the spontaneous leaderless revolt”.⁵¹ The same could be true of the great labour uprising of 1877 in the United States, but in most cases there is probably no real spontaneity involved. Small groups of radical workers or even an individual will often impose his or her leadership at the beginning of the conflict, and as it continues. In South Asia, for example, men from the upper castes were strike leaders for decades,⁵² while in other situations workers who were members of left-wing groups took the same role. Strikers need spokesmen and negotiators, and in many cases people, too, who are able to speak to the group to sustain their willingness to go on with the struggle and encourage their endurance.

It is therefore better to speak of wildcat strikes instead of spontaneous strikes if we wish to refer to the absence of a labour union involvement. Even that distinction might hide what really happened in a given instance, such as when a Dutch judge forbade the metalworkers' union from going on strike in 1972. Almost 30,000 ship-builders walked out for three weeks in a strike action that seemed to have been spontaneous. However, many commentators discerned the influence of shop stewards. In Vietnam, after its initial years of transition from a state-driven to a market economy, a typical wildcat strike there developed as follows. The strike

[...] would start with the dissemination of strike calls. A few days before the strike, the call for strike can be found on toilet walls, in leaflets scattered around the company, or simply a spread of word. Workers would suddenly stop working and gather outside the enterprise facility. Strike leaders do not show up. Informed by the employer concerned, the district labour authority official, often accompanied by the district union, rushes to the enterprise. They talk to workers on strike to gather workers' grievances and demands. The police often appear at the strike scene but take no suppressive action. The labour and union officials (or the strike taskforce) would negotiate with the management on the demands. Once the management accepts a part or all of the “legitimate” demands of workers presented by local labour official (on behalf of workers on strike), workers would go back to work – often being paid for their time off during the strike – and the strike situation would end.⁵³

In the Vietnamese situation the unions were still operating under the leadership of the Communist Party, so although not independent they did act as negotiators in wildcat strikes. But an important question remains, “Who posted the leaflets?”

In many countries workers taking part in wildcat strikes do not enjoy the same legal protection as they might have had during official strikes. All the same, from time to time workers decide they have no option but to walk out without the support of unions. A wildcat strike is therefore a clear manifestation of unrest among workers

51 Noblet Barry Danks, “The Labor Revolt of 1766 in the Mining Community of Real Del Monte”, *The Americas*, 44, 2 (1987), pp. 143–165, at 155.

52 Dilip Simeon, *The Politics of Labour under Late Colonialism. Workers, Unions and the State in Chota Nagpur 1928–1939* (New Delhi, 1995), p. 73.

53 Quynh Chi Do, “The Challenge From Below: Wildcat Strikes and the Pressure for Union Reform in Vietnam”, available at <https://web.warwick.ac.uk/russia/ngpa/ChallengefromBelow.doc>, last accessed 28 October 2016.

and, just as with union-led strikes, shows that workers wish to show their power and that they dare to do so. Such shows of force are directed towards one or more goals, so we should now be wondering “For what reasons do workers walk out, and what are the results of their actions?”

Demands and outcome

Workers go on strike when they wish to emphasize their demands but intend to resume work once their employer has met those demands. In the cases of political strikes, the workers’ opponent is the state, which is expected to meet their demands. However, in many cases there are really multiple demands from which one is selected as the most important, perhaps even only the most eye-catching one. During the conflict the relative importance of different aspects might change so that in the cases of many strikes it can be difficult to put them under one heading. The main matter might be wages, but it could perhaps turn out that respect – or more probably disrespect – shown by employers or foremen is equally important to the individual strikers. In general we may, however, state that most strikes are over questions of wages, benefits, and working conditions.

The outcomes of strikes are similarly difficult to classify. The three categories – victory, defeat, and compromise – very often remain a part of the struggle. What one party calls a victory might, from the perspective of the other party, too, be hailed as a victory for the sake of immediate interests. Unions tend to call a strike victorious to make it clear to their members that they, the union, have done a good job. Independent observers on the other hand might regard the same outcome as a compromise. At the same time, it is possible that what seemed to be a lost strike might in the end turn out to be a compromise. It is very difficult to classify labour conflicts by their outcomes, and that is why since 1943 British statistics have provided no information on strike outcomes – annoying, of course, to researchers who need then to refer to the sources in particular cases.

While it is difficult then to classify strikes by reference to demands and outcomes, it is even harder to do so when we look at other forms of labour conflict, to consider the invisible or informal signs of unrest that are hardly ever collected in official statistics.

Informal resistance

Although the strike is probably the best-known manifestation of labour conflict, as we can see from the ILO definition the designation “strike” does not cover all conflicts. First of all the initiative might be in the hands of an employer, as it is in the case of a lockout. In such cases, too, employees clearly stop working for a limited period of time – obviously not of their own volition, but because of “employer mil-

itancy". Many lockouts are in fact instituted in reaction to a strike, but the lockout can be used as a weapon against union power. Infamous examples of that are the Homestead lockout of 1892 in the USA and the Dublin lockout of 1913–1914.⁵⁴

A more recent example is the Nigerian lockout of April 2016. In Abuja workers were locked out by the Transmission Company of Nigeria over a disagreement with the management and the Federal Ministry of Power. When the workers turned up for work they were denied entry to the TCN's headquarters. Armed mobile police had taken over the premises to prevent a strike called in protest against the sacking of 400 workers from the plant.⁵⁵ The lockout is in fact still an important aspect of labour relations in countries like Canada, Denmark, Germany, and India, to mention only a few.⁵⁶ Strikes and lockouts are of different characters because the initiative comes from opposites in class relations, but in practice they often tend to cross-fertilize each other. A strike might provoke an employer to lock other, non-striking workers out of the same plant. A single strike might provoke other employers in the same branch to send their workers home as a clear sign of employers' power. Conversely lockouts might be answered by other workers choosing to take voluntary strike action. In such cases it is never easy to see what exactly has occurred and identify who really started things. The nineteenth-century writer F.S. Hall⁵⁷ regarded it as unfair to even consider that point because workers would be blamed for most labour conflicts even if in effect they had been forced by their employers into going on strike. According to Hall the lockout was developed among employers as an act of solidarity earlier than the sympathetic strike was. That, he argued, was a demonstration of the disparity of resources between labour and capital, a disparity reflected in the legislation of industrialized countries, where the lockout is rarely mentioned while the right to strike has clearly needed a legal basis.⁵⁸

There are circumstances in which the desire to strike is there among most workers but the power of their opponent is so overwhelming that they refrain from doing so openly. Then they can resort to other weapons or manifestations of discontent. In his 1952 study on strikes Knowles wrote "in industry, as not in politics, a cold war may sometimes be more damaging than a hot one. Even if men could be successfully inhibited from taking strike action, lost confidence in their Trade Unions, and resorted to ca'canny and absenteeism on a big scale, the price would be greater than the

54 Paul Krause, *The Battle for Homestead, 1880–1892: Politics, Culture, and Steel* (Pittsburgh, 1992); David P. Demarest, *The "River Ran Red": Homestead 1892* (Pittsburgh, 1992); Pádraig Yeates, *Lockout: Dublin 1913* (New York, 2000); Francis Devine (ed.), *A Capital in Conflict: Dublin City and the 1913 Lockout* (Dublin, 2013).

55 Okechukwu Nnodim, "Nationwide Blackout Looms as TCN Locks Out workers", *Punch*, 20 April 2016, available at <http://punchng.com/nationwide-blackout-looms-as-tcn-locks-out-workers/>.

56 See, for example, K.R. Shyam Sundar, "Lockouts in India, 1961–2001", *Economic & Political Weekly*, 39, 39 (25 September 2004), pp. 4377–4385; Ruddar Datt, *Lockouts in India* (New Delhi, 2003).

57 F.S. Hall, *Sympathetic Strikes and Sympathetic Lockouts* (New York, 1898).

58 Blanpain and Ben-Israel, *Strikes and Lock-Outs*.

benefit bought”.⁵⁹ On page 210 of the same study, and in a later contribution to the subject, he added a number of other signs of industrial unrest to the list. They included a high rate of labour turnover, absenteeism, sickness, and accidents, sabotage, and addiction to drink or the cinema. Intensive political activity and habitual pilfering, too, were regarded as signs of “unrest among industrial workers”.⁶⁰ Expressions of unrest of that type come to the fore when, because of lack of social cohesion and tradition, strike action is hardly an option. Then, workers resort to more individual expressions of unrest or dissatisfaction. To the modern Western reader it might appear rather an exaggeration to regard industrial accidents as signs of unrest, but studies have shown that there is a negative correlation between accidents and sick leave on the one hand and open forms of unrest or strike action on the other. In the late 1950s German dockworkers whose attitude to their work was negative proved more liable to accidents than their more positive colleagues.⁶¹ In fact, in the absence of strike action most worker reactions of this type to the inconvenience of wage labour are by their very nature individual manifestations of unrest. Knowles showed, for example, that voluntary absenteeism among miners was higher when there were fewer strikes,⁶² and the fact speaks for itself that in Germany the word *Krankfeiern* (“enjoying poor health”) exists and some even promote it.⁶³ Other forms of what may be labelled informal resistance are likewise individual, although a certain amount of solidarity between the “offenders” and their colleagues is essential, especially so when we consider the matter of theft. One manager of a German shipyard once remarked about his employees: “they steal everything; they would even have taken the ships had they not been too tall and too heavy”.⁶⁴ It is noteworthy that some of the signs of industrial unrest mentioned here were also seen in labour relations in classical times. In Roman antiquity slaves only rarely went into open revolt, but flight, theft, sabotage, inefficiency, and even killings of owners were common reactions to their everyday lives.⁶⁵

There exists an abundance of literature on what Knowles called the other signs of unrest, but their relation to individual circumstances makes it less important to go

⁵⁹ Knowles, *Strikes*, p. xii.

⁶⁰ K.G.J.C Knowles, “‘Strike-Proneness’ and its Determinants”, in: Walter Galenson and Seymour Martin Lipset (eds), *Labor and Trade Unionism: An Interdisciplinary Reader* (New York and London, 1960), pp. 301–318, at 301.

⁶¹ Horst Jürgen Helle, *Die unständig beschäftigten Hafenarbeiter in den nordwesteuropäischen Häfen* (Stuttgart, 1960), p. 61.

⁶² Knowles, *Strikes*, p. 225.

⁶³ <http://www.krankheit-simulieren.de/wie-krank-feiern/>, last accessed 25 October 2016.

⁶⁴ Karl Heinz Roth, *Die “andere” Arbeiterbewegung und die Entwicklung der kapitalistischen Repression von 1880 bis zur Gegenwart. Ein Beitrag zum Neuverständnis der Klassengeschichte in Deutschland* (Munich, 1974), p. 222.

⁶⁵ M.I. Finley, “Slavery”, *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 14 (1968), p. 311; E.M. Staerman, *Die Blütezeit der Sklavenwirtschaft in der Römischen Republik* (Wiesbaden, 1969), pp. 238–242.

deeper into those in a chapter on strike action, so from now on the focus will be on collective informal resistance instead of individual signs of labour unrest. Some resemble strikes, but others differ enormously from the simple strike. At the beginning of the nineteenth century when strikes became more common in Great Britain, Luddism, or machine-breaking, was violently repressed. Luddites resisted modern developments by smashing up the machines that were seen as the root of all evil. Luddism has often been judged a “blind, unorganized, reactionary, limited and ineffective upheaval”,⁶⁶ but it can also be seen as an appropriate reaction given the circumstances. In fact, so much of it went on that in 1812 machine-breaking was made a capital offence and troops were called in to put a stop to the movement’s activities. Workers in other European countries like Germany, Bohemia, Austria, and France used machine-breaking as a means to express grievances, but it occurred in China, the Ottoman Empire, and Brazil too.⁶⁷

In the United Kingdom almost sixty years after the Luddite movement a type of what might be called “Luddism-lite” appeared in the form of sabotage as a weapon used by a labour union. Of course forms of sabotage have been used by subordinate workers since time immemorial,⁶⁸ but now a labour union made it official policy. After the Glasgow dock strike of 1889 workers were forced back to work because a large number of strike-breakers had taken over their jobs. Their employer stated that they could have managed without the men who had gone on strike because the strike-breakers had worked as well as the original dockers, so the dockers decided to go “ca’canny”⁶⁹ or “go slowly”.⁷⁰ The idea was that they would work according to the productivity of the strike-breakers, and a few days later the original strike demand of a wage raise was fulfilled after all. That union tactic became popular among the more radical syndicalist unions in France and the US. It was in fact a form of sabotage and was promoted in a pamphlet written by Emile Pouget in 1909. He wrote “Sabotage is in the social war what guerrilla is in national wars: it flows from the same feelings, responds to the same necessities and has identical consequences in workers’ minds.”⁷¹ The act of sabotage was even heralded in a song by Joe Hill published in a songbook by one of the few US unions in favour of sabotage, the Industrial Workers of the World: “Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay! It made a noise that way, And wheels and bolts and hay, Went flying every way.”⁷²

⁶⁶ John Zerzan, *Elements of Refusal* (Seattle, 1988), p. 91.

⁶⁷ Van der Linden, *Workers of the World*, p. 174.

⁶⁸ According to the Roman writer Columella, slaves needed constant overseeing and, as noted before, M.I. Finley mentioned sabotage as one of the weapons used by slaves in antiquity. Lucius Junius Moderatus Columella, *Rei Rusticae* [On Agriculture], Book I, ch. 7, 6.

⁶⁹ Ca’canny is a compound word comprising “call” (drive, arrive) and “canny” (gentle).

⁷⁰ Geoff Brown, *Sabotage: A Study in Industrial Conflict* (Nottingham, 1977).

⁷¹ Translation by Brown, *Sabotage*, p. 386.

⁷² Joyce L. Kornbluh, *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1972), p. 144.

In more recent times *ca’canny* has been used in many places as a less confrontational way to express grievances than striking, such as in Nigeria in 1946. Miners in Enugu launched a “*ca’canny*” under their leader Isaiah Okwudili Ojiyi, who “indigenized the term by calling it ‘*welu nwayo*’ in Igbo”.⁷³ In 2011 a very specific form of go-slow was played out by Australian engineers at Qantas, when right-handed engineers vowed to use only their left hands for screwdrivers and spanners as a form of industrial action by the Aircraft Engineers Association in order to gain a wage increase.⁷⁴

Another thing workers can resort to when they have grievances but are unwilling to go on strike is demonstration, to make clear that they have reached the limits of their patience. Sometimes they adopt that tactic in the hope of gathering support from the wider public. In southern Europe, Greece, Portugal, and Spain witnessed such demonstrations during the anti-austerity campaigns of 2011–2013 when millions of workers and others took to the streets. In the history of the labour movement May Day has since 1890 been a day to demonstrate for all kinds of demands, originally the eight-hour working day. A demonstration is thus not only a show of grievance but also a show of strength. If a demonstration is not accompanied by a riot it is a rather gentle show of force, but one that can serve as the first step towards actions that could affect employers or the state more severely. An even softer form of protest is the petition, although there are circumstances when even that kind of action might endanger job security. European workers often therefore resorted to the “round robin”, a written demand for improvements with signatures presented in a circular form. The circular layout is intended to prevent the employer from knowing who was the first to put his name on the list. The habit probably comes from the *ruban rond* (round ribbon) in seventeenth-century France. There, government officials signed their petitions on ribbons attached to the documents in a circular form so that it was unclear who had signed first and should therefore be sent to the executioner. In English the *ruban rond* became “round robin” and the first of the British to use it were sailors of the Royal Navy. Examples from elsewhere show that employees in other countries, too, used it as a safe way of petitioning.

Why do workers strike?

Striking workers often have demands over wages, working hours, and so on, but as Bentley and Hughes stated, “Strikeable issues, however, do not always ignite

⁷³ Carolyn A. Brown, “*We Were All Slaves*”. *African Miners, Culture, and Resistance at the Enugu Government Colliery* (Oxford, 2003), p. 295.

⁷⁴ Gabriella Costa, “Qantas Engineers Pledge Whacky, Wrong-Handed Strike Action”, *Traveller*, 13 July 2011, available at www.traveller.com.au/qantas-engineers-pledge-whacky-wronghanded-strike-action-1hcxy#ixzz4ONgc3px, last accessed 25 October 2016.

strikes".⁷⁵ So the question remains: "under what circumstances will workers translate their demands into strike action?"

Since the beginning of academic research into strikes an impressive number of studies of strikes have been written. One of the first was the institutional theory by Ross and Hartman, who constructed typologies based on the institutional settings in different countries.⁷⁶ They looked at variables such as the organizational stability of unions, the presence of a worker's party, and the involvement of the state in labour relations. Their conclusions were that there are patterns of strike behaviour in different countries, such as the Mediterranean-Asian pattern of large numbers of union members involved in short-duration strikes. In reaction to Ross and Hartman's classification and especially their prediction that strike action will wither away, other researchers similarly developed their own categorizations.⁷⁷ The models others developed became ever more complicated and therefore harder to execute, while the result was still open to a great deal of criticism. In his 1995 study Roberto Franzosi mentioned five theoretical approaches.⁷⁸ First came the business-cycle approach suggesting that the state of the labour market changes the bargaining position of employees. Then came the economic hardship approach, which suggested that workers are likely to strike when hardship becomes unbearable for them. Third was a political-exchange theory positing that welfare policies of social democratic governments reduce the incidence of strikes. Fourth were institutional theories supposing that institutionalization of collective bargaining causes a specific duration of strikes, which itself depends on the duration of contracts. Franzosi's fifth theory concerned resource mobilization, which suggests that workers organized into unions are more likely to go on strike. All Franzosi's approaches can explain some part of the development of strike activity, as can the Marxist class-struggle approach, which sees strikes as an integral part of capitalist labour relations. Nevertheless they all have their limitations because they can set in place only one piece in the puzzle of strikes. To overcome their limitations Franzosi added a new approach in which strike action is more than a dependent variable but becomes an independent variable explaining itself.

So far, the development of theories was almost exclusively based on post-World War II data from Western countries; one can imagine that in developing countries other mechanisms are at work.⁷⁹ Another problem that cannot be solved by all

⁷⁵ Philip Bentley and Barry Hughes, "Cyclical Influences on Strike Activity: The Australian Record 1952–68", *Australian Economic Papers*, 9, 15 (1970), p. 154.

⁷⁶ A.M. Ross and P.T. Hartman, *Changing Patterns of Industrial Conflict* (New York, 1960).

⁷⁷ Douglas A. Hibbs, "On the Political Economy of Long-Run Trends in Strike Activity", *British Journal of Political Science*, 8, 2 (1978), pp. 153–175; Walter Korpi and Michael Shalev, "Strikes, Industrial Relations and Class Conflict in Capitalist Societies", *British Journal of Sociology*, 30, 2 (1979), pp. 164–187.

⁷⁸ Roberto Franzosi, *The Puzzle of Strikes. Class and State Strategies in Postwar Italy* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 10–12.

⁷⁹ The first explorations in this field include Y.R.K. Reddy, "Strikes in India: Verification of Ross and Hartman's Conclusion", *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, 17, 2 (1981), pp. 239–248; R. Bean and

these theoretical approaches is that, partly as a consequence of the availability of data, measures of the motivation of workers to go on strike are based on highly aggregated datasets.

Strikes under modern capitalism have been the subject of study since the impact of them was first felt as the sign of industrial conflict. Because in several countries, including Germany, going on strike was considered illegal, the police were actually the first to collect data on strikes. Strikes also being a clear expression of the “social question”, economists, historians, politicians, and national statistical bureaus soon followed suit. Labour unions and socialist parties regarded strikes as a means to achieve power for the working classes and their organizations. They, too, therefore published data and reports of strikes.⁸⁰ Since 1927 the ILO has been compiling international data on strikes and lockouts, which data, aggregated on a yearly basis per nation state and economic sector, have been published in the *Yearbook of Labour Statistics*. For each country that collects data on labour conflicts the ILO charts per economic sector the yearly totals of the number of labour disputes, the number of workers involved, and the number of working days lost as a result of disputes. These data are available online for 1969 onwards at www.ilo.org/ilostat/.

In January 1993 the Fifteenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians adopted guidelines for the collection and publication of data on labour disputes, but the guidelines have not been adopted by all statistical bureaus, hence the difficulty of using ILO data for proper comparative research.⁸¹ The main problem facing the ILO in compiling and publishing data on strikes and lockouts is the availability and comparability of national data. For example, postwar German statistics have never supplied the number of conflicts, despite repeated requests from the ILO. A second problem is that because of the high level of data aggregation cross-tabulation is impossible between time series. In the past, national bureaus published data at the micro level, but for various reasons – not least cost – they have stopped doing so. In the recent past, privacy regulations, too, have made it almost impossible to publish such labour conflict information.

Alongside the official publications by the ILO and the national statistical bureaus, historians and social scientists have compiled, analysed, and published data on strikes and lockouts. A good example of such datasets is the publication by Bevan, who as long ago as 1880 used paper clippings to tabulate strikes in the

K. Holden, “Determinants of Strikes in India: A Quantitative Analysis”, *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations*, 28, 2 (1992), pp. 161–168; and James W. McGuire, “Strikes in Argentina: Data Sources and Recent Trends”, *Latin American Research Review*, 31, 3 (1996), pp. 127–150.

⁸⁰ Franzosi, *Puzzle of Strikes*.

⁸¹ Igor Chernyshev, “Decent Work Statistical Indicators: Strikes and Lockouts Statistics in the International Context”, available at <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/download/articles/2003-3.pdf>.

UK.⁸² Data published annually by the ILO therefore forms only a small proportion of the data collected and published by national bureaus. Moreover, there have been many inconsistencies in the data because bureaus very often refuse to collect information in accordance with ILO recommendations. An infamous example is the change in the USA when it was decided to publish information only on strikes with more than 1,000 participants. Problematic, too, is that a single number appearing in the data might refer to a combination of strikes and lockouts. Despite ILO recommendations most countries deliver a set of data which is no more than an aggregate figure for both forms of labour conflicts in which employees are the instigators of strikes and employers order lockouts. Of course it is often true that both are intertwined, but there are a great many conflicts in which they are not. Aggregate data for the USA show that the development of the numbers of strikers and locked-out workers do not always go in the same direction.⁸³

Consistency of the time series is altogether a problem.⁸⁴ Intensive strike research cannot rely on data published by the ILO because of collection differences and gaps in the statistics. Extraction of information from digitized newspapers is one possibility that might be expected to increase in the near future as new techniques are developed. Software can identify terms in digitized newspapers and other digital sources, and can then connect what it finds to create a structured dataset that will transcend the simple search term now so familiar to all. A few efforts have been made, with promising results, so we must continue the approach of searching for micro data to improve our insight into why workers go on strike.⁸⁵

Strike waves

Ever since the collection of strike statistics began, researchers have looked for patterns. The first extensive statistical study of strikes was published in 1939 by John I. Griffin. He relied exclusively on data from the USA, but his findings are still worth reading. He made calculations and drew a graph showing the growth in the number of workers involved in strikes from 1880–1937.⁸⁶ Griffin's graph shows yearly

⁸² G. Phillips Bevan, "The Strikes of the Past Ten Years", *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, 43, 1 (1880), pp. 35–64. Another useful dataset is Charles Tilly and David K. Jordan, "Strikes and Labor Activity in France, 1830–1960", ICPSR08421-v2. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2012–08–15.

⁸³ John I. Griffin, *Strikes: A Study in Quantitative Economics* (New York, 1939), p. 207.

⁸⁴ Dave Lyddon, "Strike Statistics and the Problems of International Comparison", in: Sjaak van der Velden *et al.* (eds), *Strikes Around the World, 1968–2005: Case-Studies of 15 Countries* (Amsterdam, 2007), pp. 24–39.

⁸⁵ Kalliopi Zervanou *et al.*, "Documenting Social Unrest: Detecting Strikes in Historical Daily Newspapers", in: A. Nadamoto, A. Jatowt, and A. Wierzbicki (eds), *Social Informatics*, vol. 8359 (Berlin, 2014), pp. 120–133.

⁸⁶ Griffin, *Strikes*, p. 45.

fluctuations, overall growth, and peaks especially in the period just after World War I and at the end of the 1930s. Data from other countries show similar developments. What we can now with hindsight see was in fact a minor peak around 1890 for England, France, and Germany,⁸⁷ and although the union movements involved in those strike movements differed in character Friedhelm Boll concluded that they were similar in scope and strengthened collective interest organizations. State intervention meant that social conflicts became more politically controllable, and politics in general became more open to the public.⁸⁸

The second and bigger strike wave occurred at the end of World War I, and another upsurge took place at the end of World War II. Although at the end of the 1950s there was a feeling among researchers that the strike as a phenomenon was on the wane,⁸⁹ experience proved that belief to have been mistaken. The late 1960s and the 1970s witnessed strike movements, such as Paris 1968, the *autunno caldo* in Italy in 1969, and the *Cordobazo* in Argentina. There was a general strike in Senegal,⁹⁰ and the so-called “Winter of Discontent” of 1978–1979 in the United Kingdom. Researchers were keen to understand those new and unexpected developments,⁹¹ but again history took another course. Strike activity in the West promptly went into a decline from which it has not recovered, so that again we might well wonder if there will be another reversal in the future or if we are now really seeing the final withering away of the strike. On a global scale certainly, the almost disappearance of strike activity in the West might be countered by a rise in developing countries. ILO data indeed show a rise in workers’ participation in labour conflicts, and recent unofficial data for China have indicated that workers there are still going on strike.⁹² However, there is simply too little data to make a sound judgement on the question. The Chinese data also include informal forms of labour conflict, while the ILO data is formed purely from the sum of strikes and lockouts.

The bigger question is whether or not related movements of class conflicts exist globally or regionally. Can we predict strike waves from existing data for the past 150 years? In the past researchers primarily used Western data to look for strike

⁸⁷ Friedhelm Boll, *Arbeitskämpfe und Gewerkschaften in Deutschland, England und Frankreich* (Bonn, 1992).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 17, 628.

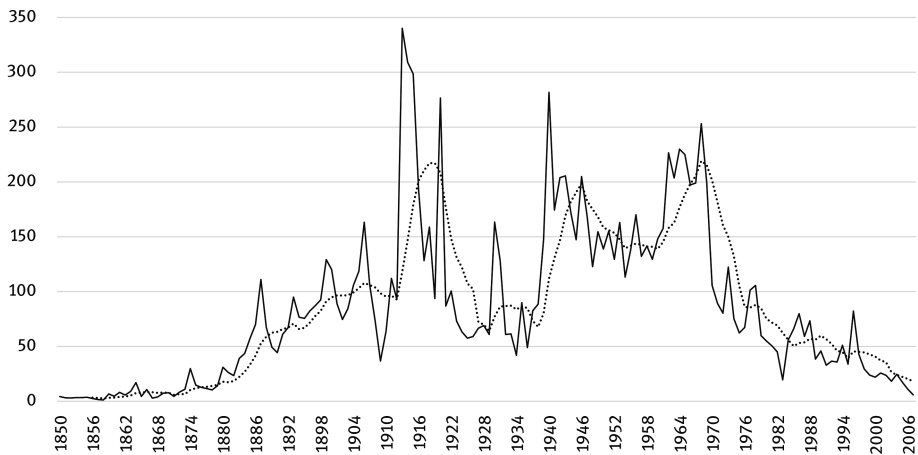
⁸⁹ Ross and Hartman, *Changing Patterns*. Their idea has been widely cited, but their relativization that the strike would not wither away in the US as it had done in Northern Europe (p. 181) was mostly neglected.

⁹⁰ Françoise Blum, “Sénégal 1968: révolte étudiante et grève générale”, *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 59, 2 (2012), pp. 144–177.

⁹¹ Solomon Barkin (ed.), *Worker Militancy and its Consequences, 1965–1975: New Directions in Western Industrial Relations* (New York, 1975); Colin Crouch and Alessandro Pizzorno (eds), *The Resurgence of Class Conflict in Western Europe since 1968*, 2 vols (London, 1978).

⁹² <http://maps.clb.org.hk/strikes/en>.

waves⁹³ and identified three big international strike waves over the long twentieth century, those being in the early 1870s, then from 1910–1920, and finally from 1968–1974.⁹⁴ Can we find those waves in the available data? To investigate that question I have used an index that connects the three labour conflict indicators – the number of conflicts, the number of workers involved, and the number of days lost – to the size of the labour force.⁹⁵



Source: <https://datasets.socialhistory.org/dataverse/labourconflicts>

Figure 1. Strike index for sixteen countries, and seven-year moving average (dotted line), 1856 to 2012

We can indeed see minor peaks in 1886 and 1893, but the real peaks were in 1912, 1920, 1936, 1946, and 1974. The seven-year moving average indicated by the dotted line indicates three real peaks, in the mid-1920s, the mid-1950s, and the late 1970s and early 1980s. Minor peaks then indicate lesser strike activity around 1910 and 1940, after which strike activity really plummeted from the peak of the 1970s back to the level of the 1870s, a development not unnoticed in many studies. Unlike the “withering away” of the strike mentioned by Ross and Hartman in 1960, which

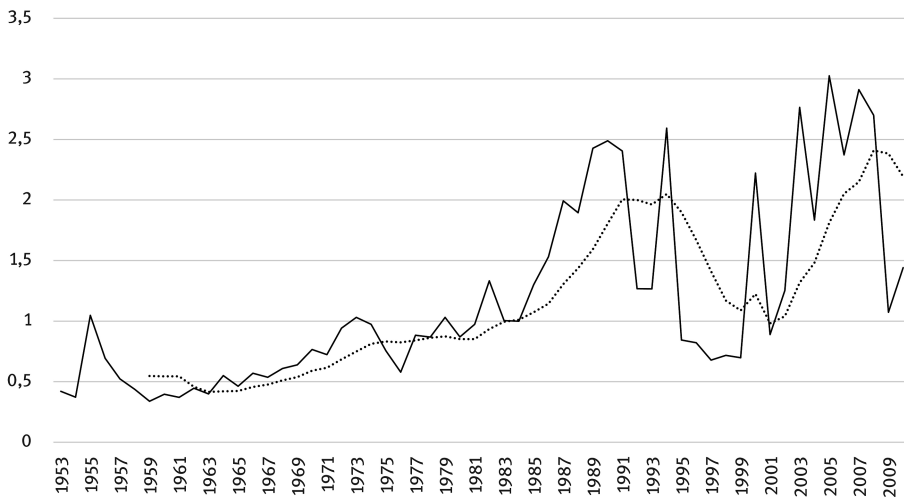
⁹³ Ernesto Screpanti, “Long Cycles in Strike Activity: An Empirical Investigation”, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 25, 1 (1987), pp. 99–124; Beverly Silver, *Forces of Labor. Workers’ Movements and Globalization since 1870* (Cambridge, 2003); Sjaak van der Velden, “Strikes in Global Labor History: The Dutch Case”, *Review Fernand Braudel Center*, 26, 4 (2003), pp. 381–405.

⁹⁴ John Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations: Mobilization, Collectivism and Long Waves* (London and New York, 1998), p. 87.

⁹⁵ The index has been calculated for sixteen countries: USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, France, UK, Italy, Norway, Austria, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Japan. Sjaak van der Velden (ed.), *Striking Numbers: New Approaches to Quantitative Strike Research* (Amsterdam, 2012), p. 168.

was immediately followed by impressive growth, the current downward trend has continued for more than thirty years.

Looking at Figure 1 we come to the seemingly unavoidable conclusion that in the developed countries strike activity reached fluctuating heights after rapid growth, with rapid decline completing the picture. But what about other regions? Did developing countries take over the lead in strike activity, or is the decline there the same? Again, those who would calculate a comparable index are hampered by lack of data. The ILO has tried to collect for all other parts of the world data similar to the data they have for Western countries, but that has proved difficult. There is a Dutch saying that “if you cannot turn the wind, you must turn the sails of the windmill”, so I have calculated an index for twenty-seven non-Western countries for a shorter period of time, with the number of countries involved fluctuating between twelve and twenty-seven.



Source: <https://datasets.socialhistory.org/dataverse>

Figure 2. Strike index for twenty-seven countries from Africa, Asia, Central America, and South America, and seven-year moving average (dotted line), 1953–2010⁹⁶

This index shows a different pattern from that in the Western index. While an initial downward movement since the mid-1970s is discernible, strike development recovered from the early 1980s until 1990. Then the index fell again, to recover after

⁹⁶ From the ILO data only those years were used for which information for more than ten countries was available. The countries are in alphabetical order: Algeria, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Chile, Egypt, Ghana, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Malawi, Mali, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Singapore, South Africa, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, Uganda, Venezuela, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. For only a few of these countries are the time series complete.

2001. In short, strike development in those twenty-seven countries differs from what happened in the West. And then there is the observation that in the biggest country on earth strikes have become an increasingly prominent feature of society since the 1990s.⁹⁷ Unfortunately no reliable data are available for China, despite the efforts of independent researchers.⁹⁸

The question of whether or not there will be a future resurgence of strikes in Western countries like the ones before is one for future historians to try to answer. But given the history of the strike, which dates back thousands of years, we may expect that as long as subordinate labour exists people will look for ways to improve their circumstances in regard to it. If the strike does indeed go right out of fashion workers will no doubt look for other ways to assert themselves, perhaps ways we cannot even imagine now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It is possible that in the meantime there will be a growth of strike activity in developing countries, although there the rebellious attitude might also find expression in informal resistance too.

⁹⁷ John Pomfret, "China Reports Big Surge in Labor Unrest during 1999", *San Francisco Chronicle*, 24 April 2000, available at <http://www.sfgate.com/news/article/China-Reports-Big-Surge-in-Labor-Unrest-During-2763108.php>.

⁹⁸ <http://maps.clb.org.hk/strikes/en>.

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