

Strike statistics and their calculation. Remarks on a new data collection project¹

Paper to be presented at the IV conference of the International Association Strikes and Social Conflicts (Sao Paulo, 11 July 2018)

Sjaak van der Velden (International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam-Netherlands)

Most Western countries witnessed a steady decline in strike activity since the late 1970s² , an impression supported by many researchers. Of course there are differences between countries and regions but the general trend is clear. And moreover, this trend seems to continue. When on February 9 of this year the *Bureau of Labor Statistics* published data on 2017 it was the second lowest figure since 1947.³ Only 7 (Seven!) strikes with more than 1,000 workers involved were recorded for that year in the United States. Although the US is not the entire Western world, this figure may serve as an indication that the before mentioned decline has not stopped and the end is perhaps not in sight yet.

In this paper I will not try to explain the ongoing almost complete disappearance of the strike. Nor will I go deeply into the cycles of strike activity of which the recent decline although very persistent may be an expression. The aim of this paper is to show how a new data collection project is going in at the IISH. Preliminary results will also be presented to show if there is a difference in the development of strike activity in the developed countries and the developing world. I will start with a short overview of strike theories. Nearly an entire library has been

¹ This paper is an elaboration of earlier work and especially my chapter ‘Strikes, Lockouts and Informal Resistance’, in: Karin Hofmeester and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *Handbook Global History of Work*, De Gruyter Oldenbourg 2017, pp. 521-550

² Heiner Dribbusch & Kurt Vandaele, ‘Comprehending divergence in strike activity. Employers’ offensives, government interventions and union responses’, in Sjaak Van der Velden (et al.) (eds.). *Strikes around the World, 1968–2005. Case-studies of 15 Countries*. Amsterdam: Aksant 2007, p. 368

³ www.bls.gov/news.release/wkstp.htm

written on the topic of the fluctuations of workers' resistance. Authors have tried to explain the growth and decline of strike activity from a number of indicators. The level of unemployment has been among the most often mentioned explaining indicator but as often has also been denied to play that decisive role. Other explaining variables mentioned are the political atmosphere and the level of consumer prices. And there are more. All these variables fit in one of the five approaches mentioned by Roberto Franzosi in his 1995 study.⁴ The five approaches categorized by Franzosi are the Business-cycle explanation (the state of the labour market modifies the bargaining position of the workers), the Economic hardship theories try to explain strikes from the level of grievances. Next to these two economic approaches we find the Political-exchange and Institutional theories. These theories try to explain strikes from the duration of collective agreements or the position of labour (parties) in the power structure. Advocates of the fifth approach try to explain strikes as a result of workers' capacity to found and maintain stable unions. Franzosi's contribution to the theory of strikes is the notion that strikes are not only a dependent variable but also an independent variable (strikes explain strikes).

But apart from the cycles, what about the ongoing downward slope that is visible in strike statistics? The decline in recent times (there have been earlier periods of plummeting strike activity in the 1920s and 1950s) can perhaps be explained from a much broader perspective. Kerr et al.⁵ concluded that during industrialization there was an early pattern of intense worker protest against the hardships of life, followed by a decline in intensity when labour had earned a more equal place in society. On a level of aggregation between the Kerr hypotheses and the business and political cycle explanations it may be that strike activity follows a pattern similar to the economic Kondratieff long wave. During an upswing one can expect more strikes because there is a lot to be got while during a downswing chances have

⁴ Roberto Franzosi, *The puzzle of strikes. Class and state strategies in postwar Italy*, Cambridge 1995, pp. 10-12
⁵ 1973: 218

turned. To this relationship between strikes and economics can be added the expectation expressed in 1997 by J. Kelly.⁶ He wrote that the most intense periods of strike activity would occur at the turning points of the Kondratieff when insecurity about the future is at its top.

If it is true that strike activity or in general labour activism are a phenomenon of early industrialization we may expect strike activity to grow in the developing countries at the moment they hook up with the development of industrial capitalism. Does strike activity grow in those countries in a period that the strike as a feature of life declines or is even close to extinction in the developed countries? The recent conclusion by Middlebrook that the strike is also disappearing in Mexico contradicts this general idea and is an indication that the developing countries also have their own characteristics and cannot be considered equally.⁷

As stated before I will not go deeper into the theories of strike behaviour. What I want to do is analyse strike statistics looking for an answer to the question if there really are different time paths in the West and the developing countries. Let us start with examining what strike information is available needed to compare global strike activity in time and space.

Strike data

Strikes in modern capitalism have been the object of study since the impact of this sign of industrial war grew. Because striking was often considered a breach of law, the police were the first to collect data on strikes. Strikes also being a clear expression of the 'social question' that drew public interest in the nineteenth century economists, historians, politicians and national statistical bureaus soon followed suit. Labor unions and socialist parties on their part

⁶ J. Kelly, 'Long waves in industrial relations: mobilization and counter-mobilization in historical perspective', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, no. 4, 1997, pp. 3-35

⁷ Kevin J. Middlebrook, 'Economic Stabilization, Electoral Democratization, and the (Virtual) Disappearance of Labor Strikes in Mexico', *Trabajo*, vol. 9, No. 13, January-June 2017, pp. 99-132

regarded strikes as a means to achieve power for the working classes and their organizations. To strengthen the feeling of class consciousness and the willingness to go on strike among the workers they also published data and the stories of strikes.⁸ Since 1927 the International Labor Organization (now Office, ILO) has been compiling national data on strikes and lockouts for many countries. These aggregated data on a yearly basis per nation state and economic sector have been published in the *Yearbook of Labor Statistics*. For each country where an official statistical bureau collects data on labor conflicts the ILO maps, per economic sector, the yearly totals of the number of labor disputes, the workers involved and the working days lost as a result of these conflicts. From 1969 these data are available online at [Ilostat](#).

If possible the ILO also calculates the number of working days lost per thousand employees. This fourth indicator of labor conflicts enables us to compare countries in a relative way. We must realize though, that the incidence of conflicts and the number of striking workers is left out of this indicator. The reason why they were left out is the economic focus adopted since the 1920s on the effects labor conflicts have on society. What does it cost to the economy is the only question that can be answered by looking at the working days lost. From this perspective it is by the way understandable that statistics in the USA have been subject to a threshold of 1,000 participants. When this criterion was entered in 1982 the number of strikes plummeted enormously but the level of strike days remained relatively high. To give an example, in 1974 the 424 strikes that met with the new threshold accounted for almost 70% of the working days lost that year if we take all the occurring 6,074 strikes into account. So, by omitting 93% of the actual number of conflicts we lose only 30% of the number of working days lost. It may be clear though that we do lose a lot of information on the social behaviour

⁸ Franzosi, *The puzzle of strikes*.

of American workers. This problem is not only a US topic but arises in other countries as well.⁹

The ILO has been struggling with the fact that it is dependent on the information sent by the national bureaus. In January 1993 *The Fifteenth International Conference of Labor Statisticians* adopted a ‘Resolution concerning statistics of strikes, lockouts and other action due to labor disputes’ in which guidelines were set for the collection and publication of data regarding labor disputes. The main problem facing the ILO in compiling and publishing strike and lockout related data, is the availability and comparability of national data. Despite the existence of international statistical standards on labor disputes and efforts to promote best practices, many countries do not strictly follow these recommendations in practice or do not publish data at all. Post-war German statistics have – to give an example – never supplied the number of conflicts, despite recurrent requests by the ILO. Because of this and similar national peculiarities, Igor Chernyshev concluded in 2003: ‘while statistics of strikes and lockouts are useful for showing relative levels of working days lost through disputes in each country and how they change over time, an exact comparison between countries is not possible.’¹⁰ This warning has been issued by the ILO itself since 1927 to this day.

The data are compiled by the ILO annually through questionnaires sent to national authorities (ministries responsible for labor, central statistical services, etc.) or official national publications or Internet websites. Governmental institutions like for example Statistics Netherlands or Statistics Japan often publish more detailed data than the ILO. These bureaus also present information on the demands, the outcome, the role of labor unions, the regional distribution or the difference between strikes and lockouts. Cross tabulation is in most cases however only possible at a national level of aggregation. To give an example, we are

⁹ Linda Briskin, ‘From Person-Days Lost to Labour Militancy. A New Look at the Canadian Work Stoppage Data’, *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*, vol. 62, 2007, no. 1, pp 31-65 and South Africa!!!

¹⁰ Igor Chernyshev, ‘Decent work statistical indicators: strikes and lockouts statistics in the international context’, *Bulletin of labour statistics* no. 3, 2003, XIII–XIV

informed about the percentage of strikes in a given year which are initiated by labor unions and the percentage of strikes about wage issues. From this data it is not possible to calculate how many union strikes were on wages. In the past, most national bureaus did publish data on a micro level like in the UK the *Report on strikes and lock-outs and on conciliation and arbitration boards in the United Kingdom* published from 1888 to 1913. For several reasons, of which the costs of the publications were not the least, they have stopped publishing such detailed data. Privacy regulations in the recent past made this way of publishing labor conflict information almost impossible to perform. There are still bureaus that publish labour conflict data on a micro level (Argentina, USA!) but this not common use any more.

Apart from 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 MP Bevan who in 1880 tabulated strikes in the UK from paper clippings. And there is also the data collected by Tilly and Shorter on France 1830-1960.¹¹ Data published annually by the ILO therefore forms only a small proportion of the data collected and published by national bureaus. There have been many inconsistencies in this data because the bureaus very often refuse to collect data according the recommendations by the ILO. The already mentioned change in the USA also caused an inconsistency. Although a backward calculation from 1945 was performed the statistics are no longer consistent with pre-1945 data. Also problematic is the mixture of strikes and lock-outs in one number. Despite the already mentioned ILO recommendations most countries only deliver a set of data combining both forms of labor conflicts in which the employee is the offensive party in strikes while the lock-outs are initiated by employers. Of course both forms of labor conflict are often intertwined but there are also lots of conflicts in which they are not.

¹¹ G. Phillips Bevan, 'The strikes of the past ten years, read before the Statistical Society, 20th January 1880', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, Vol. 43, No. 1 (Mar., 1880), pp. 35-64; 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

Aggregate data for the USA show that the development of the numbers of strikers and locked-out workers not always move into the same direction.¹²

Consistency is a problem all together. For example until the 1920s most statistical bureaus calculated the numbers of strikers and working days lost per conflict. It is now common use to do the math per year. Some countries count political strikes, others don't. And there are more inconsistencies if one tries to compare strike levels in a number of countries.¹³ Intensive strike research cannot solely rely on the data published by the ILO because of the differences and gaps in the statistics. What we need is new datasets.

At the IISH we have therefore started an effort to collect as much existing strike datasets as possible. These are published at <https://datasets.socialhistory.org/dataverse/labourconflicts>.

So far we have collected over one hundred data sets and there are many more in the pipeline. Researchers are free to download the sets and use the data. These online data may also serve to do comparative calculations that have not been possible with the ILO data because we also collect data on a micro level.

At the IISH we also started collecting strike data from African newspapers published around 1900 hoping that this will lead to a more comprehensive view on strikes on the continent that suffers from a lack of reliable statistics more than any other continent. This project is still in its pilot phase but so far promising results have been found.

Digging information from digitized newspapers is another possibility that will develop in the near future. New techniques enable us to mine data from digitized publications. Software then identifies terms in digitized newspapers and other digital sources. This software also connects the findings in a structured dataset and transcends the simple term searching we are all

¹² John I. Griffin, *Strikes. A Study in Quantitative Economics*, New York: Columbia University Press 1939, p. 207

¹³ Dave Lyddon, 'Strike statistics and the problems of international comparison', in: Van der Velden et al., *Strikes around the world*, pp. 24-39

familiar with. A few efforts have been made with promising results so we must continue this line of searching for micro data in order to improve our insight in what striking is about.¹⁴ These projects are still work in progress, hence most strike research must rely on existing and publicly available data. This data enables us to study important issues like the question whether there exist patterns in the strike histories of certain countries or groups of them.

Patterns in strike history

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 drew a graph that shows the growth of the number of workers involved in strikes from 1880-1937.¹⁵

¹⁴ Kalliopi Zervanou (et al.), 'Documenting Social Unrest: Detecting Strikes in Historical Daily Newspapers', in A. Jatowt et al. (eds.). *1st International Workshop on Histoinformatics*, Kyoto, Japan 2013

¹⁵ Griffin, *Strikes*, p. 45.

Figure 1. Number of Workers in Strikes in the USA, 1880-1937 (x 1,000)

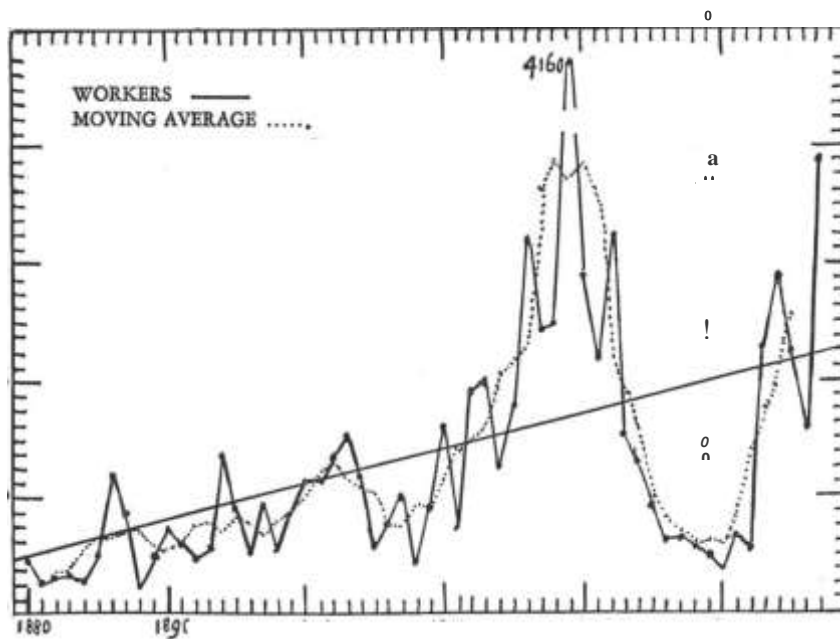


Figure 1 shows yearly fluctuations, an overall growth and especially peaks in the post WWI period and at the end of the 1930s.

Data from other countries show similar developments. The minor peak that occurred around 1890 was studied for England, France and Germany.¹⁶ Although the union movements involved in these strike movements were different in character Friedhelm Boll concluded that they were similar in scope. The strikes strengthened collective interest organisations, social conflicts became more politically controllable because of state intervention and politics in general became more open to the public.¹⁷

Another and much bigger strike wave occurred at the end of World War I while another upsurge took place at the end of World War II. Although at the end of the 1950s there was a

¹⁶ Friedhelm Boll, *Arbeitskämpfe und Gewerkschaften in Deutschland, England und Frankreich*, Bonn: Dietz Verlag 1992

¹⁷ Boll, *Arbeitskämpfe*, pp. 17, 628.

feeling amongst some researchers that the strike as a phenomenon was withering away¹⁸ reality proved this idea to be wrong. The late 1960s and the 1970s witnessed strike movements like Paris 1968, the *autunno caldo* (Italy 1969), the Cordobazo (Argentina), the general strike in Senegal,¹⁹ and the Winter of discontent (United Kingdom 1978-79). Researchers hastened to understand this new and unexpected developments²⁰ but again history took another course. Strike activity in the West started a decline from which it has not recovered since. We may wonder if this decline will be turned in the future or if we now really have entered the final withering away of the strike. And what does this mean for the future. As early as 1998 Western and Healy concluded that the weakening of labour (measured by the influence of social democratic governments and union density, but the decline of strike activity seems to go hand in hand with these two) led to a wage slowdown in OECD countries.²¹ Did the over-all weakness of labour²² cause the often concluded growing inequality in society? And if so will labour be able to turn the tide by using strikes or any other show of force? So far, there are hardly any signs for this in the West, but what about the Global South?

On a global scale the plummeting of strike activity in the west may be countered by a rise in developing countries. ILO data indeed show a rise in workers participation in labor conflicts and recent unofficial data for China have indicated that workers are showing their force there too.²³ But we actually lack sufficient data if we want to make a sound judgement on this. The

¹⁸ A.M. Ross and P.T. Hartman. *Changing patterns of industrial conflict*, New York: John Wiley 1960. Their idea has been widely cited but their relativisation that the strike would not wither away in the US as it had done in Northern Europe (p. 181) was mostly neglected.

¹⁹ Françoise Blum, 'Sénégal 1968: révolte étudiante et grève générale' *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 59, 2 (April-June 2012), pp. 144-177.

²⁰ Solomon Barkin, *Worker Militancy and its Consequences, 1965-1975: New Directions in Western Industrial Relations*, New York: Praeger 1975; Colin Crouch and Alessandro Pizzorno (eds), *The Resurgence of Class Conflict in Western Europe since 1968*. 2 volumes, London: Macmillan 1978

²¹ Bruce Western & Kieran Healy, *Explaining the OECD Wage Slowdown: Recession or Labor Decline?*, Princeton University, March 1998

²² Marcel Van der Linden, 'The Crisis of World Labor', *Solidarity* no. 176, May/June 2015 (

²³ <http://maps.clb.org.hk/strikes/en>

Chinese data also includes informal forms of labor conflict while the ILO data is just formed by the sum of strikes and lock-outs.

Figure 2. Striking workers and workers involved in other collective labour conflicts, China 2004-2015 (log-transformed)



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

Figure 2 makes it clear that both numbers have been rising, but also that the number of workers involved in conflicts not labelled as strikes has for some years been higher than the number of strikers. That may have been blockroads, demonstrations or sit-ins, a variety of forms. These high number are an indication that alternative actions are an important show of force by workers besides strikes and lock-outs. If I may also give an example from my own country. In 2004 workers demonstrated in big demonstrations that accompanied partly successful strikes but the 300,000 who took it to the streets are nowhere visible in official statistics publishes by Statistics Netherlands. Unfortunately this problem is not only Dutch. For most countries we don't have data at our disposal that contain more conflicts than strikes and lockouts.

Strikes in Western countries

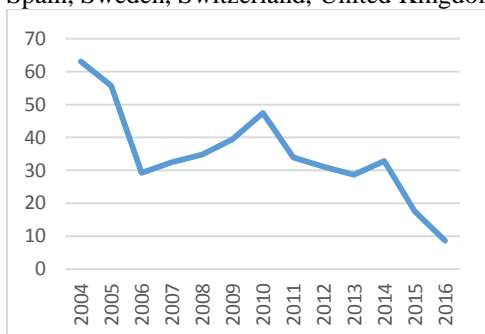
Let us return to the question whether or not there exist globally or regionally related movements of class conflicts. Can we deduct international strike waves from existing data? In the past researchers looked for strike waves primarily based on Western data.²⁴ Three big international strike waves have been identified over the long twentieth century (the early 1870's, 1910-1920, and 1968-1974.²⁵ Can we find these waves in the ILO data we have at our disposal? To investigate this I use an index that connects the three labor conflict indicators (number of conflicts, number of workers involved and days lost) to the volume of the labour force.²⁶ For this paper I calculated several indices but whatever the indicators used the outcome was always roughly the same.²⁷ At the end the index plummeted dramatically to the lowest level ever.²⁸

²⁴ Ernesto Screpanti, 'Long Cycles in Strike Activity: an Empirical Investigation', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1987, pp. 99-124; Beverly Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003; Sjaak van der Velden, 'Strikes in Global Labor History: the Dutch Case', *Review Fernand Braudel Center*, vol. 26, no. 4, 2003, pp. 381-405

²⁵ John E. Kelly, *Rethinking Industrial Relations: Mobilization, Collectivism, and Long Waves*, Psychology Press: vol. 87, nr. 13, 1998, p. 87

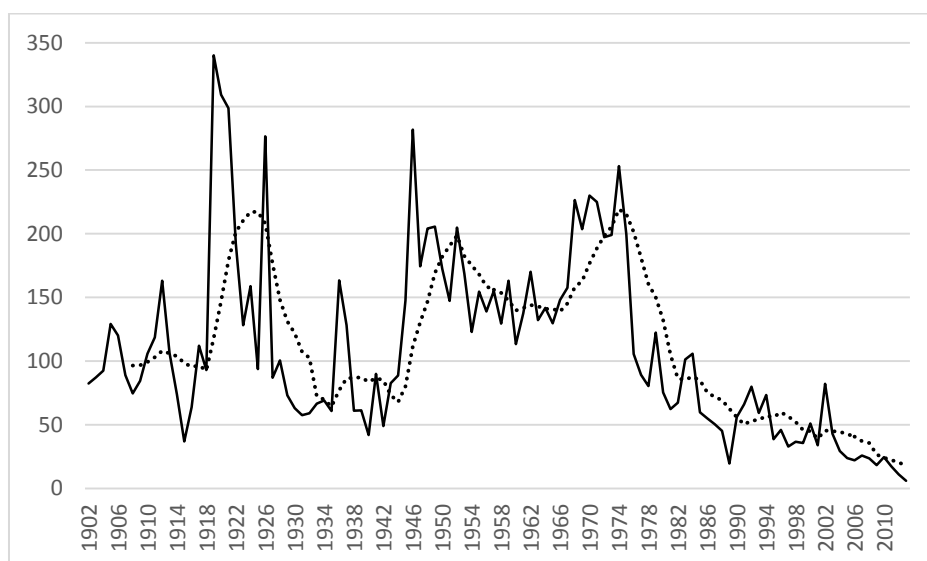
²⁶ The index is calculated for 16 countries: USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, France, UK, Italy, Norway, Austria, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Japan. See for the way the index is calculated Sjaak van der Velden (ed.), *Striking Numbers. New Approaches to Strike Research*, Amsterdam: IISH, 2012, p. 168. Only years with data for more than 10 countries were used.

²⁷ An index calculated with the ILO given 'Days not worked per 1000 workers due to strikes and lockouts' for the last decade in the Austria, Australia, Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and United States is shown in the following graph:



²⁸ An index that started in 1850 even showed a fall down to the level of 1870.

Figure 3. Strike index of 16 Western countries, seven-year moving average, 1902 to 2012



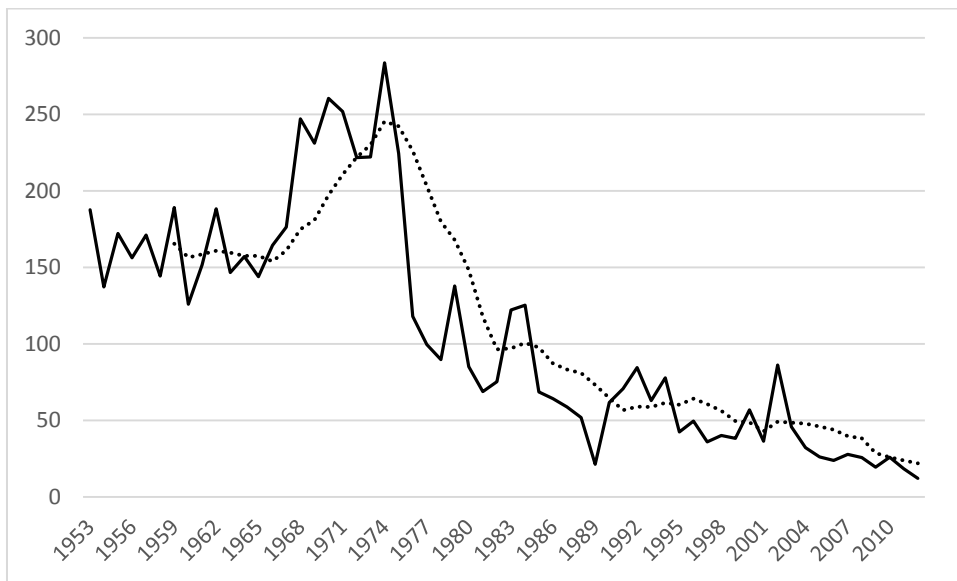
Source: <https://datasets.socialhistory.org/dataverse>

Peaks were reached in 1912, 1920, 1936, 1946 and 1974. The 7-year moving average trend indicates three real peaks (mid 1920s, mid 1950s and the late 1970s and early 1980s), while minor peaks indicate smaller strike activity around 1910 and 1940. Strike activity really plummeted from the peak of the 1970s back to the level of the 1870s (not visible here). A development not unnoticed in many studies. Unlike the ‘withering away’ of the strike mentioned by Ross and Hartman in 1960 which was soon followed by impressive growths, this time the falling down has continued till this day for more than forty years.

Looking at figure 3 the conclusion seems inevitable that in the developed countries strike activity reached fluctuating heights after a rapid initial growth while a rapid decline since the late 1970s concludes the picture.

In the next paragraph we will draw a similar figure for a group of non-Western countries that because of the availability of data only starts in 1953. For reasons of comparison a new figure for the 16 Western countries follows here.

Figure 4. Strike index of 16 Western countries, seven-year moving average, 1953 to 2012



Strikes in developing countries

What about other regions? What is the recent history of strikes in developing countries? Are they following the Western pattern of an immense growth of strike activity during the starting years of industrialization and capitalism? What is going on in this part of the world where the first strikes in history occurred? After all, the Western world only started to play a decisive role in world history in rather recent times. It is likely that the same is true for the history of strikes from which we can only know if written accounts exist. It is commonly agreed that the first strikes we know of occurred in Egypt in ancient times. The best known example is the strike of tomb builders in Deir el Medina in 1155 BCE on the 21st day in the 29th year of Ramses III's reign.²⁹ Unrest started a year earlier when payment to the workers was late. After a representative, Amennakht, persuaded local officials they handed over forty-six sacks of

²⁹ Paul J. Frandsen, "Editing Reality: The Turin Strike Papyrus", in: Sarah Israelit-Groll (ed.), *Studies in Egyptology*, Vol.1, Jerusalem: Magnes Press 1990

corn to restore peace. The problems were however not over yet.³⁰ The actual strike commenced when the craftsmen sat down, 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.’



Image of the papyrus on which the strike is described (Museo Egizio, Turin)

This strike is indeed a very early one but at the same time difficult to compare to strikes that take place nowadays. The role of the omnipotent deity is strange to most modern people and the workers had a relationship to their superiors unknown to us such as the fact that their craftsmanship was hereditary. But apart from these differences the comparison is striking. People in a subordinate position took their fate in their own hands and resisted existing circumstances. We may therefore conclude that although both the duration and the number of participants are unclear and the outcome foggy, the fact that workmen resisted makes the Deir

³⁰ Toby Wilkinson, *The Rise and Fall of Ancient Egypt. The History of a Civilisation from 3000BC to Cleopatra*, London: Bloomsbury 2010, p. 358. This author dates the actual strike in 1558 BCE.

el Medina strike comparable to modern labor conflicts and may therefore be labelled the first strike in history.

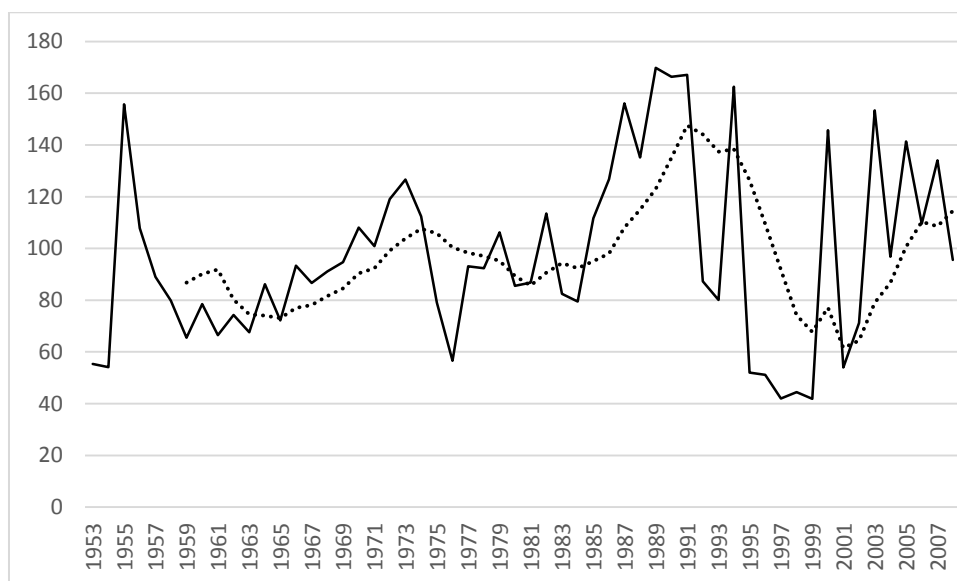
Since this first strike many years have elapsed. Strikes in early modern Italy, Holland and other European countries were noticed and studied.³¹ We know less of other parts of the world although some studies have been undertaken into strikes in e.g. imperial China.³² Early examples of strikes in regions under colonial rule are the silver miners' cessation of work in Chihuahua (Mexico), who protested as early as the 1730s against the termination of their work contracts by the mine owners, and strikes in India at a huge Indian gunpowder factory around 1800 and of brick makers on the Ganges Canal in 1848-1849.³³ These and other examples indicate that striking was just like in the West not uncommon in what is now often labelled the global South. But will they follow the pattern that is now endemic in the West where the strike seems to have lost its attraction to employees? Or will developing countries take over the lead in global strike activity? Calculating a comparable index as used for the developed countries is hindered by the lack of data. The ILO has tried to collect similar data as the existing ones for western countries for all other parts of the globe, but this has proved to be difficult. I nevertheless calculated an index for 27 non-Western countries. This can however only be done for a shorter period of time whereby the number of countries involved fluctuated between 12 and 27.

³¹ See e.g., Samuel Kline Cohn jr., *The Laboring Classes in Renaissance Florence* (New York, Academic Press, 1980); Marc Boone and Hanno Brand, "Vollersoproer en collectieve actie in Gent en Leiden in de 14de-15de eeuw", *Tijdschrift voor sociale geschiedenis*, 19, 2 (May 1993), pp. 168-192.

³² Linda Cook Johnson, *Cities of Jiangnan in Late Imperial China*. SUNY Series in Chinese Local Studies 1993, p. 228

³³ Cheryl English Martin, *Governance and Society in Colonial Mexico. Chihuahua in the Eighteenth Century*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1996, p. 51; Jan Lucassen, 'Working at the Ichapur Gunpowder Factory in the 1790s', *Indian Historical Review*, 39, 1 (June 2012), pp. 19-56, and 39, 2 (December 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.

Figure 4. Strike index of 12 to 27 countries in Africa, Asia, Central America and South America, 1953-2010³⁴



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

This index shows a pattern that differs from the western index in the same period. While an initial downward movement since the mid-1970s is also visible the strike development recovered from the early 1980s until 1990. Then the index plummeted again also to recover from 2001. In short the strike development in these 27 countries differs from what happened in the West. The index doesn't include conflicts in the biggest country on earth where strikes have also become an increasing feature of society since the 1990s.³⁵ Unfortunately no reliable

³⁴ From the ILO data the starting year used is the year when for the first time information for more than 10 countries were available. The countries are in alphabetical order: Algeria, Burkina Fasso, Burundi, Cameroon, Chile, Hong Kong, Egypt, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Malawi, Mali, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Singapore, South Africa, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, Venezuela, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. For only a few of these countries the time series are complete.

³⁵ John Pomfret, "China Reports Big Surge in Labor Unrest during 1999", *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 24, 2000.

data are available for China despite the already mentioned efforts undertaken by independent researchers.³⁶

Remarks for discussion

Whether or not there will be a future resurgence of strike activity in western countries like the ones before is for future historians to decide. The volume Heiner Dribbusch, Dave Lyddon, Kurt Vandaele and I edited more than ten years ago concluded with the ‘optimistic’ words ‘As long as there is wage labour the withering away of the strike will not happen because the refusal to work will remain the most direct, fundamental and straightforward action employees take towards ‘enforcing or resisting demands, expressing grievances, or supporting other workers in their demands or grievances’³⁷ So far these words have not proven to be a correct prediction, at least not for Western countries. Other countries and regions seem to show more worker radicalism. Both developments may support the theory that intense class war is mainly something of the beginning years of industrial capitalism. Will strike activity in the Global South also reach its zenith in the near future? Is the strike doomed to disappear? Given the history of the strike that dates back thousands of years we may still expect that as long as subordinate labor exists people will look for ways to improve their lives. If the strike might become out of fashion workers will no doubt look for other ways, perhaps even ways we cannot imagine at the beginning of the twenty-first century. And we may not forget that the economy has seen a period of restructuring recently. Tertiariation, feminization and precarization have gone hand in hand and may demand other forms of workers’ resistance whereby the generic term ‘Worker’ also needs a revision. No longer the male factory worker

³⁶ <http://maps.clb.org.hk/strikes/en>

³⁷ Heiner Dribbusch & Kurt Vandaele, ‘Comprehending divergence in strike activity. Employers’ offensives, government interventions and union responses’, in Sjaak Van der Velden (et al.) (eds.). *Strikes around the World, 1968–2005. Case-studies of 15 Countries*. Amsterdam: Aksant 2007, p. 379

with a steady job is the standard and thus it is possible that his historic weapon is also no longer the standard.