

IV. Refereed Papers

Labor Quiescence Continued? Recent Strike Activity in Western Europe

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Abstract

This paper begins by examining whether the downward trajectory in strike activity in seven of the main economies of western Europe has continued over the most recent period. It then moves on to consider the nature of the dominant forms of strike activity and how these relate to systems of bargaining and social pacts. The main finding of the paper is that while there has been a general decline in aggregate strike activity across the seven economies, the dominant nature of the strike activity has become increasingly concerned with mounting demonstrative collective mobilizations in the political, rather than industrial, arena. Consequently, much strike activity is increasingly being deployed as a tool of political leverage with governments rather than as a tool of industrial leverage with (private sector) employers.

Introduction

Notwithstanding substantial intercountry variation, the overall decline in aggregate strike activity across the economies of western Europe since the 1970s has been long established and widely acknowledged (see, for example, Aligisakis 1997, EIRO 2003a). Echoing the earlier and well-known characterization by Shalev (1992: 102), Piazza stated “The militant 1970s were followed by the quiescent 1980s and 1990s” (2005: 290), while Eaton, in his introductory text to comparative employment relations, stated of his three following pages

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of commentary on strikes that “In the not-too-distant past, this topic [international comparison of strike statistics] would have demanded a chapter to itself. . . . [I]nternational comparisons of strike activity used to be quite a popular research topic—until strikes declined internationally” (2000: 137–37). Despite this, there continues to be significant interest in pan-European strike activity, either as a subject itself or as part of a study of wider international trends in employment relations (see, for example, Aligisakis 1997; Bordogna and Cella 2002; EIRO 1998, 2000a, 2005a; Lesch 2002; Piazza 2005; Perry and Wilson 2003, 2004) and a maintenance of interest concerning strike trends within certain countries like Britain (Drinkwater and Ingram 2005, Arrowsmith 2003), Germany (EIRR 2005), Greece (EIRO 2003b), and Spain (Rigby and Marco Aledo 2001). Moreover, the European Commission issued a Communication in June 2001 on “Employment and Social Policies: A Framework for Investing in Quality,” which proposed to use working days lost in industrial disputes as an indicator to gauge the degree of social dialogue and worker participation as a measure of overall quality of working lives.

Measures of aggregate strike activity can be taken as indices of a number of social phenomena, most obviously collective discontent (whether viewed as “functional” or “dysfunctional”) within structures of corporate governance, challenges to authority (whether essentially the “economic” authority of employers or the “political” authority of governments), means of constructing social and economic societal justice, and economic and political voice mechanisms for nonelite groups in society. Additionally, social cohesion and harmony as well as social productivity can be inferred from aggregate strike activity. Nonetheless, mainstream political parties and commentators in liberal democracies usually conclude that low and declining levels of strike activity are positive and functional indications of growing social cohesion and political consensus at both micro and macro levels in society.

This paper examines the available data on the four standard measures of strike activity in Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain between 1997 and 2005. The four standard measures of aggregate strike activity are, by year, the number of strikes, the number of workers involved, the number of days not worked (or days “lost”), and the number of days not worked per thousand workers. The latter is a key measure of strike activity; because it is a relative measure, it allows for a standardized comparison across countries. The period and countries under study result from previous research, in this case, Gall (1999), examining the period 1986 to 1997, where there was incomplete data for four of the same countries for the last year, 1997. The secondary data sources for this paper comprise the European Industrial Relations Observatory’s *EIROOnline*; the monthly *European Industrial Relations Review* (EIRR), published by Indus-

trial Relations Services; the International Labour Office's *Yearbook of Labor Statistics* (Tables 9a, 9b, 9c, and 9d and available at <laborsta.ilo.org>); and annual review articles of international strike activity in *Labour Market Trends*, published by the Office of National Statistics in Britain.

Aside from examining what trends may be discerned in recent strike activity, the purpose of the paper is to contend that neither the absence nor presence of strike activity per se or the bald aggregate figures for strike activity can be used as tools to fully comprehend the complex macrosocial processes that strike activity represents, and of which it is part. Thus, quantitative measures on their own tell us relatively little about the qualitative nature of the strike phenomenon. The salience of this contention is the contemporary pan-European situation where, as trade union collective bargaining power with employers (particularly private sector employers) has declined over the last thirty years, strike activity as a political weapon vis-à-vis political parties and the state has come to play an increasingly important part in the armory of trade unionism in western Europe. This is because trade union, macropolitical action deploying the mass strike can be used to determine employment conditions across the economy, including those employed within the private sector, via influencing and affecting government action through the latter's roles as legislator, economic manager, and employer (directly and indirectly through being purchaser and trendsetter). The heightened relevance of this component of trade union political strategy, when contextualized in an epoch of social pactism with nominally corporatist-inclined governments, is that trade unions are waging defensive battles where nation state-based political parties have taken the lead in restructuring social and market relations along the lines of a globalized neo-liberalism. But before exploring the purchase of the contention that strike activity, and in particular its form and nature, are components in a complex, multifaceted series of processes, outcomes, and institutions of contemporary political exchange, developments in recent strike activity are examined.

Recent Strike Activity in a Larger Context

Table 1 presents the available data for strike activity for the nine economies under consideration by the four standard annual measures. Table 2 presents data based on the reporting of significant strikes by the EIRR and EIRONline. "Significant strikes" are defined as large strikes involving a significant number of days not worked either as a result of, at one extreme, a short strike involving large numbers of workers or, at the other extreme, a long strike by a relatively smaller number of workers (Gall 1999: 368). Taking the data presented in tables 1 and 2, strike activity between 1997 and 2005 can most appropriately be assessed through examining it within the wider setting of

TABLE 1
Strike Activity across Eight Western European Countries, 1997–2005

	Belgium	Britain	France	Germany	Greece	Italy	Netherlands	Portugal	Spain
1997									
N/S	17	216	1619	n/a	125	923	18	273	744
W/I	9,000	130,000	21,471	13,472	45,000	737,300	7,221	46,000	651,000
D/L	40,100	235,000	830,015	52,896	391,000	1,185,600	14,603	80,100	1,837,000
D/L/1,000/W	13	10	42	2	23	84	2	25	182
1998									
N/S	484	166	1,481	n/a	99	1,103	22	227	632
W/I	18,900	93,000	11,263	4,286	33,633	435,400	30,770	44,246	680,600
D/L	87,100	282,000	1,036,784	16,102	189,400	580,400	33,206	94,755	1,280,900
D/L/1,000/W	28	11	51	1	19	40	5	28	121
1999									
N/S	64	205	2,326	n/a	n/a	753	24	200	749
W/I	12,145	141,000	16,161	187,749	n/a	935,000	58,865	33,500	1,132,655
D/L	n/a	242,000	573,561	78,785	n/a	909,100	75,788	67,500	1,504,589
D/L/1,000/W	8	10	64	2		62	11	19	132
2000									
N/S	75	212	2,775	n/a	n/a	966	23	250	750
W/I	11,483	183,000	21,094	7,428	n/a	687,000	10,256	38,830	2,067,287
D/L	25,482	499,000	809,860	10,776	n/a	884,100	9,432	40,545	3,616,907
D/L/1,000/W	8	20	114	0		59	1	11	296
2001									
N/S	n/a	194	2,131	n/a	n/a	746	16	208	737
W/I	n/a	180,000	11,884	60,948	n/a	1,125,000	37,400	26,058	1,244,634
D/L	n/a	525,000	691,914	26,833	n/a	1,026,000	45,100	41,571	1,923,758
D/L/1,000/W	54	20	82	1		67	6	11	152

TABLE 1 (cont.)

Belgium	Britain	France	Germany	Greece	Italy	Netherlands	Portugal	Spain
2002								
N/S	n/a	146	1,924	n/a	n/a	616	16	250
W/I	n/a	943,000	66,662	428,283	n/a	5,442,000	29,600	80,0168
D/L	n/a	1,323,000	990,815	310,149	n/a	4,861,000	245,500	108,062
D/L/1,000/W	n/a	51	17	10		311	35	29
2003								
N/S	n/a	133	1,851	n/a	n/a	710	14	170
W/I	n/a	151,000	62,545	39,692	n/a	2,560,700	10,800	30,330
D/L	n/a	499,000	4,388,421	163,281	n/a	1,961,700	15,000	53,370
D/L/1,000/W	n/a	19	15	5		124	2	15
2004								
N/S	n/a	130	1,824	n/a	n/a	738	12	122
W/I	n/a	293,000	60,355	101,419	n/a	685,300	104,200	31,906
D/L	n/a	905,000	724,629	50,673	n/a	690,700	62,200	46,096
D/L/1,000/W	n/a	34	13	2		44	9	18
2005								
N/S	n/a	116	Data still to be filed by ILO		n/a	n/a	654	28
W/I	n/a	93,000		18,633	n/a	960,854	29,000	21,740
D/L	n/a	158,000		18,633	n/a	906,857	41,700	27,333
D/L/1,000/W	n/a	6		1	n/a	n/a	6	10

Source: ILO (2006), LMT (2006).

Note: N/S = number of strikes; W/I = workers involved; D/L = days not worked; and D/L/1,000/W = days not worked per thousand workers; n/a = not available

TABLE 2
Large Reported Strikes

Year/ Country	Belgium	Britain	France	Germany	Greece	Italy	Netherlands	Portugal	Spain
1997	Social services, vehicle plant	Airline company, banking	Civil service, health service, transport, vehicle plant	Air transport, construction, steel industry	Civil service, general strike (2), public sector, teachers	Air transport, general strike, postal service, rail transport	Ports, transport	Air transport	Civil service, transport
1998	Transport, vehicle plant		Air transport, rail transport, teachers		Air transport, banking, doctors, general strike (2)	Air transport, transport	Social services, teachers, transport	Doctors, road transport	Air transport, mining (3), postal service, rail transport, regional general strike
1999	Banking, metallurgy plant, railways, road transport	Higher education	Banking, petroleum, postal service, rail transport, retail	Insurance, manufacturing plant, printing, public sector, steel	Air transport, bus transport, construction, customs services, doctors, mining, rail transport	Banking, metal-working, transport	Rail transport, refugee collection, teachers, transport, trawler men	Doctors, public administration, rail transport	Regional general strike, mining, pilots (3), rail transport (2), shipbuilding, transport, vehicle plant, prisons, pilots (3)

TABLE 2 (cont.)

Year/ Country	Belgium	Britain	France	Germany	Greece	Italy	Netherlands	Portugal	Spain
2000	Bus transport, postal service, retail	Health service, local government, postal service, higher education	Metal-working, security guards, teachers, textiles	Metal-working, printing, retail, textiles	Banking, general strike (2), public sector, utilities	Journalists, metal-working, teachers	Education, manufacturing plant, ports	Civil service, transport	Bus transport, civil service (2), construction, general strike, manufacturing plant, pilots, retail
2001	Medical professionals, postal service, teachers	Fire service, postal service, rail transport	Civil service, general strike, rail transport	Airline pilots, public broadcasting, retail, vehicle manufacturing	Air traffic control, banking, doctors, general strike (2), media, ports	Air traffic control, airport workers, general strike (3), regional general strike, public sector general strike, journalists, metal-working industry (2),	Education, health, metal-working, ports, rail transport	Teachers	Airport workers, civil service, manufacturing plant (2), pilots, rail transport, regional general strike

TABLE 2 (cont.)

Year/ Country	Belgium	Britain	France	Germany	Greece	Italy	Netherlands	Portugal	Spain
2001 (cont.)						pilots, postal service, teachers			
2002	Air traffic control, ports, rail transport, retail	Fire service, local government, rail transport, teachers	Air traffic control, banking, food plants, ports, transport	Banking, construction, metal- working, ports	Civil service, education, health service, petroleum, public sector general strike	Airport, banking, general strike (3), regional general strike, metal- working industry general strike, transport	Childcare, construction	Civil service, doctors, general strike, public sector general strike, teachers	Air traffic, bus transport, general strike, nurses, rail transport
2003	Banking, ports, postal service	Fire service, airline company, postal service, rail transport	Banking, general strike, ports, refuge collection	Metal- working, ports, public sector, rail transport, retail, steel	Doctors, general strike (2), public sector general strike	Education, general strike (3), public sector general strike,	Health services, ports, public sector	Ports, public administration	General strike, manufacturing plant, ports, postal service, television

TABLE 2 (cont.)

Year/ Country	Belgium	Britain	France	Germany	Greece	Italy	Netherlands	Portugal	Spain
2003 (cont.)						metal- working, transport (2)			
2004		Civil service, manufacturing plant			General strike (2), public sector general strike, hotels	Banking, doctors (2), general strike (2), transport, public sector general strike			Airport workers, vehicle plant
2005	Vehicle plant, prisons, general strike (2)	Airport workers, colleges	General strike	Public sector general strike	General strike (3), media	General strike, public sector general strike, rail transport, metal- working (2), forestry, air transport, media (2)			Coal mining, vehicle plant, fishermen, farmers, road transport

Source: Compiled from "large" reported strikes found in the *European Industrial Relations Review* and EIRO reports.
Note: Where the generic term "transport" is used, this refers to bus and rail transport.

the period 1986–2005. Thus, this section begins by providing a description of overall movements in strike activity, then turns to consider individual countries and relates these to analyses of other authors.

Using the official data contained in table 1 and that contained in table 2 signifies two general points for the period of the last fifty years, 1955–2005 (see also Gall 1999). First, and notwithstanding substantial interyear variation, that overall levels of strike activity have continued to broadly follow the general pattern of relative decline and at the same overall pace as before. Second, within this downward trajectory, significant intereconomy variations continue to exist. For the period 1997–2005 and where data is available, overall strike activity levels, measured according to the most robust general measure of days not worked per thousand workers, has declined in the nine countries under study. This downward trend is broadly consistent with that identified in the earlier period of 1986–1996. In both periods, even where there are considerable fluctuations in this measure, as in the case of France, Greece, Italy, and Spain, these fall within the overall parameters of the trajectory of decline.

In Belgium overall strike activity in the period under study has remained at a broadly similar level to that found between 1986 and 1996, although a continuing fall in the number of days not worked is notable. The absence of data means that no definite judgment can be made here, although it can be suggested that the existence of two general strikes in 2005 would have led to a considerable upward “blip” for that year. Britain has experienced a continuing fall in the number of strikes and the number of workers involved between 1997 and 2005, but some recent relative increase in number of days not worked has been recorded due to the relative length of a small number of large strikes in the public sector. In France, the period 1997–2005 experienced an increase in the number of strikes with a continuing decline in the number of workers involved and an increase in the number of days not worked. This again results from the relative length of a small number of large strikes in the public sector.

By contrast, in Germany there has been a continuation of an overall low level of strike activity with some variation in the number of workers involved and the number of days not worked. The case of Greece provides an interesting dilemma, for no data exists for the period after 1998 following the discontinuation of data collection by the (Greek) state (Monger 2005: 160). Reports of aggregate strike activity (workers involved, days “lost”) on a year-by-year basis (see, for example, EIRO 2000b, 2002, 2003c, 2003d, 2004, 2005b) indicate that strike activity has probably remained relatively high by virtue of the continuing deployment of general strikes of a short duration against government policies. However, because this strike activity is difficult to quantify and reporting of other strikes is sporadic, there can no certainty given over to what is, in effect,

a speculative view. In Italy there has been a continuation of the relatively high overall level of strike activity but with not insignificant annual variation across the measures of number of strikes, workers involved, and days not worked. The Netherlands has experienced not only a continuation of its low overall level of strike activity but a relative fall in this level. Meanwhile, in Portugal there has been a continuation of a low level of overall strike activity but with declines amongst the three measures. Finally, in Spain overall strike activity has remained at a relatively high level, although there has been significant annual variation and a fall across the three measures. This is consistent with the view of Rigby and Marco Aledo (2001: 300, 302), who predicted a continuing decline in the level of strike activity in Spain after 1999 and cautioned against suggesting this would take the form of a steady and uninterrupted decline.

The sectoral location of strike activity in the nine countries continues to be heavily based in areas of the economy such as the public sector, transportation and communication, and metalworking. Within the public sector, the areas of health, education, the civil service, and (state-owned) transportation and communication are predominant. EIRO (2003a, 2005a) provided an assessment of the most affected sectors by industrial action (primarily strike action) between 1998 and 2004 for between seventeen and twenty-five countries, including in both surveys the nine countries studied in this research. Aside from the absence of including the prevalence of general strikes or broad sectoral strikes (along the simple public-private sector dichotomy), it conveys the same overall picture of the most strike-affected sectors as Table 2 does, these being manufacturing, transportation and communication, and various parts of the public sector.

For the period 2000–2004, EIRO (2005a: 7) identified Spain and Italy as the most strike-prone economies (where no data was available for Greece). This continues the pattern identified for the both the periods 1986–1996 and 1997–2005 above and suggests the broad continuation of the pattern found by Aligisakis (1997) in his survey of strike activity in eighteen European countries between 1970 and 1993. In particular, Aligisakis (1997: 86–87, 89, 91) defined Greece, Italy, and Spain in a group on their own in terms of a relative index of strike propensity as experiencing an “extremely high level of labour conflict . . . [where] the hard core of the European labour movement is to be found . . . [and where] the act of striking is considered to be a means of political protest.” But although the “southern European model” of generalized but short demonstrative strikes organized by trade unions as a weapon in public policy negotiations and where the government is the employer continued in France, Italy, Portugal, Spain, and Greece, their prevalence by workers involved and days not worked in all these countries, but particularly France and Portugal, has declined compared to their use in the 1980s and early 1990s. Thus, France, according to Bordogna and Cella, can no longer be found to

hold membership in the “elite Aligisakis” group by strike volume, for “[i]n the 1980s and 1990s . . . France departed sharply from the pattern of frequent, large and short strikes [like those found in Italy]” (2002: 598).

More generally, Aligisakis’s comment that “For a long time, the strike served as a warning prior to negotiations: now it is frequently a vehicle for general protest” (1997: 94) is a critical touchstone to understanding the decline and now notable infrequency of the private sector strike outside a few specific subsectors like transportation, vehicles, and engineering. Previously, and notwithstanding a small number of large sectoral strikes resulting from multiemployer collective bargaining arrangements, workers engaging in private sector strikes, whether at the establishment and/or employer level, in manufacturing provided the bulk of strikes by annual frequency or incidence. However, because these strikes were small, sharp, and short actions they contributed relatively little to the annual totals for the number of workers involved and the number of days not worked. In the period 1997–2005, the only traditional manufacturing private sector strikes of any significance outside the (privately owned) transportation and communication sectors have been a clutch of isolated rearguard actions against job cuts and plant closures. Strikes in the private services sector like banking and insurance and retail have not provided any fillip to the loss of strike activity from manufacturing. It is likely that the withering of this type of stand-alone private sector strike in manufacturing is reflective of both the decline in organized union presence in these workplaces and the weakened mobilizing power of remaining union organization there. Given the continued decline in this sort of strike, it remains the case that the influence of the variations between economies for the minimum inclusions is insignificant. Most likely, the remaining most strike prone industry in the private sector is that of transportation, reflecting a combination of extant grievances, high union densities, continued state regulation of the sector, and strategic power based on the perishability of the service and its wider importance for the economy. The airline industry is a case in point here, particularly concerning pilots and ground crews.

The Impact of Strike Data Exclusions

Gall (1999: 363, 371) argued that the exclusion of public sector and general strikes from the official strike data for the period 1986–1997 was likely to have had significant implications for several countries—Belgium, Greece, Portugal, France, and Germany—in terms of numbers of workers involved and days not worked. The salience of this exclusion continued into the period 1997–2005, albeit unevenly and at a lower level of overall significance than before. While Belgium continued to exclude public sector strikes from its strike statistics, this will have had potentially less impact than prior to 1997 for the number

of these types of strikes fell markedly there (see Tables 2 and 3). In the case of France, strikes in public administration were excluded until 1998 according to *Labour Market Trends* but not the International Labor Organization (ILO). According to the ILO (2004) data, from 2002 in France, a number of types of strikes are now no longer counted like generalized strikes—namely, those taking place in more than one establishment and those in the private sector. Strikes in Germany in public administration continued to be excluded. Furthermore, and according to EIROOnline (2005a: 2), in Germany the impact of the common usage of “warning strikes” within a highly structured sectoral bargaining process is not included with the strike statistics, and this would then lead to a further underestimation of strike activity. However, according to *Labour Market Trends* (see, for example, Monger 2005) in its annual review of international strike activity, this is unlikely given that the minimum inclusion threshold is ten workers involved and for one day’s duration unless there are one hundred days not worked. Finally, Portugal also continued to exclude national general strikes and strikes in public administration, but, like Belgium, this will have had less impact than prior to 1997, for the number of these types of strikes fell markedly there (see Tables 2 and 3). With the recording of the largest strikes in Table 2 indicating the continuing predominance of strike activity in the various parts of the public sector and in public administration, it is again likely that the impact of the exclusions in lowering the overall annual levels of number of workers involved and the number of days not worked has not been insignificant. Yet it remains unclear, as before (see Gall 1999), what the full import of this is. However, in the case of France, Goetschy and Jobert state that the general picture of fewer than 600,000 days not worked in the 1990s “does not change much when civil servants are included” (2004: 204).

Britain: Now the “Healthy Man of Europe”?

Some thirty to forty years ago, and as one of the major economies in Europe, Britain was known as “the sick man of Europe” because it was suffering from the “British disease.” A large part of this “malaise” was conventionally attributed to the high strike propensity of British workers. Standing this categorization on its head, now Britain, still as one of the major economies in Europe, can be deemed to have become the “healthy man of Europe” for over the last decade, for the potential for continental European, generalized, demonstrative strike activity has not materialized. For example, the strongest possibility of such a strike concerned a 2.6 million people strong public sector worker strike set for March 23, 2005, over the raising the age of retirement from sixty to sixty-five. This strike threat dissipated after a temporary climb down by the Labour government prior to the May general election of that year. The Labour government then reneged on its climb down but, under the threat of strike

action, was forced into a compromise in mid-October 2005 whereby existing civil servant (central government) public sector workers remain eligible for a full pension at age sixty. However, the threat of a further strike by 1.5 million local government public sector workers over their pensions in 2006 raised the prospect again of a mass strike, which did take place on March 28, 2006. Even if *both* strikes had taken place, it would have little altered the general pattern for Britain in the period under study.

Indeed, the absence of widespread strike action in the public sector on a par with that found elsewhere in continental European can be explained primarily by the impact of the growth of employment in the public sector alongside the growth in the value of public sector wages through annual wage increases relative to those awarded in the private sector. Thus, retrenchment in employment and stagnation in wages have not provided the widespread grievances that have existed in the many of the other eight economies. More generally, the higher degree of political and government stability in Britain by comparison to that found in many of the other eight economies has not provided the leverage for unions in Britain to so easily mount widespread strike action to oppose government policy.

Table 3 displays the number of general strikes, whether for the whole economy or just certain regions within it, and the number of generalized public sector strikes across the nine countries. Together, these strikes are characterized as mass strikes. A generalized public sector strike is defined as a strike involving more than a single part of the public sector. By contrast, a strike, say, in the civil service on its own is more comparable to an industry-wide strike in, say, the engineering industry. The primary purpose of the mass strike is not to impose economic costs on the employer (as a stand-alone strike with a private employer primarily does) but rather impose a political cost on the government. The political cost is orchestrated not just through the shutting down of services and thus large parts of the economic infrastructure but also through the use of the street demonstration as primarily a public massing together that picketing a multitude of workplaces cannot provide and as a way to bring the arteries of cities momentarily to a standstill, which in turn creates news stories.

In the eleven years between 1986 and 1996, the number of general strikes, whether for the whole economy or just certain regions within it, and the number of generalized public sector strikes across the nine countries, was found to total 51 (see table 3). In the nine years between 1997 and 2005, the number of the same type of general strikes across the nine countries was also found to total 51 (see table 3). In general terms, the number of these short, demonstrative and protestant strikes between 1997 and 2005 has remained at the level established in the period 1986–1996. However, although in proportional terms,

TABLE 3
Frequency of General Strikes and Public Sector Strikes, 1986–2005

	Belgium	Britain	France	Germany	Greece	Italy	Netherlands.	Portugal	Spain	Total
1986–1996	10	0	5	2	14	7	1	4	8	51
1997–2005	2	0	3	1	18	18	1	2	6	51

the annual frequency has risen from 4.64 per year to 5.67 per year, and the intercountry distribution has changed significantly. Britain, the Netherlands, and Germany continued to be little affected by these types of strikes and have now been joined in this by Belgium, France, and Portugal. Meanwhile, Spain has been relatively less affected by these types of strikes compared to the previous period, while Greece continues to be affected at a high level by, and Italy has witnessed a dramatic increase in, these types of strikes. Also of note is that whereas before the types of general strikes across the whole economy were for one or two days duration, they are now more commonly for half a day or a day's duration. Nonetheless, the maintenance (and relative growth) of short demonstrative strikes organized by trade unions as a weapon in public policy open-ended negotiations, and where the government is the one-step-removed direct employer, continues to indicate that in a number of counties, Greece and Italy in particular, that trade unions are being excluded from exercising effective influence within the political exchange process (see below).

What can we ascertain from the changing balance of these mass strikes? Inevitably and invariably, the picture is complex, particular where recognition is required of the different dynamics of sectoral, regional, and societal strikes. The decline in the use of mass strikes in Belgium, France, Germany, Portugal, and Spain could suggest, *inter alia*, the increased utility of social pacts for organized labor, governments being on the defensive after suffering from the political fallout of previous mass strikes, the declining purchase of mass strikes, or the inability of trade unions to organize further mass strikes as a result of membership and organizational atrophy. Ascertaining the precise balance of these reasons is beyond the scope of this paper, but it should be noted that the decline in the staging of mass strikes could also indicate a strategic choice, whereby deploying sectoral public sector strikes is superseded by deploying general strikes.

At any rate, we can observe that in Britain there remain close political and institutional ties between the nominal party of Labour and the union movement despite some political turbulence, with this party having been in office since 1997. This, in part, explains the continued pursuit (but not achievement) of corporatism by the trade unions there and primarily explains

the absence of the mass strike there. By contrast, in France, Greece, Italy, and Spain, the same high degree of political and institutional enmeshing has not and does not currently exist between a singular labor movement and a social democratic party. For example, in Spain a considerable distance has opened up between the union movement and both the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) so that “unions’ political strategies now rely significantly less on [political] parties than they did until the late 1980s” (Hamann and Martinez Lucio 2003: 65). The same is broadly true of the situation in France. Neither have the newly developing far left parties like the Left Bloc in Portugal, the Communist Refoundation in Italy, or the Left Party (the electoral coalition of the Work and Welfare Party and the PDS) in Germany broken out of their political marginalization despite securing parliamentary representation to allow fuller representation of the interests of organized labor.

Trade Unionism, Mobilization, Political Action, and Affiliations to Political Parties

Social pacts between trade union peak organizations and political parties have become increasingly common in western European countries in the last two decades as the result of, on the one hand, the fragmentation of traditional voting patterns—which the latter relied upon to gain office—and, on the other hand, the desire of political parties to construct new vote aggregating coalitions to gain office (Hamann and Kelly forthcoming). The specific purchase of pacts with organs of organized labor concern the perceived need to use social pacts to control economic and social wage costs as a response to a changed regime for capital accumulation *and* the anticipation and experience of such controls being unpopular and thus necessitating means of controlling consequent conflict through incorporation. Where there are not specific pacts, there are often what can be termed as historically conditioned “mutual understandings” between national trade unions and social democratic governing parties. In this neoliberal project the continuing size of the public sector means the pay, conditions, and employment of its workers remain a key variable in government economic policy. The same is true of the components of social wages like pensions and unemployment benefit. In this sense, government actions help generate widespread grievances across larges swathes of society.

In this context, and at base, the maintenance and/or prevalence of the use of mass political action strike can be read as indicating (a) the effective political exclusion of trade unionism from exercising political influence from within the pact or relationship, and (b) the articulation and expression of collective discontent, organized by peak union federations to contest the actual and expected outcomes of the neoliberal policies of retrenchment. The rider

here is that this is starkest in the case of Greece, Italy, and Spain. Indeed, Rigby and Marco Aledo (2001) argued that if a trade union movement does not find sufficient form or extent of expression of its interests in a political party, then the heightened possibility of generalized strike activity exists.

Of course, this does not necessarily imply the failure of social pactism or mutual understandings by virtue of the existence of open conflict between labor, on the one hand, and capital and the state, on the other, for this requires an assessment of the objectives of the union mobilizations and whether these were gained as well as cost/benefit analysis of the social dislocation represented by the strikes—essentially, the transaction costs of the strikes for the implementation of retrenchment policies. However, if political cohesion and stability were key facilitators or preconditions for the renewal of a favorable regime for capital accumulation, this would alter the framework of any calculation. Looking at the issue the other way round, is the continued currency of the mass or general-cum-political strike an indication that such strikes are productive by virtue of wringing some concessions from the governing political parties, as Kelly and Frege (2004: 190) suggest? This is possible as some of the retrenchment programs have been held in check, either through amelioration or through delay. But the continued usage may also be taken to imply continued *de facto* political exclusion and thus lack of choice to exercise other strategic levers.¹ Indeed, there even exists a risk that the use of the mass strike suffers from a declining rate of return. Thus, its frequent usage in the form of short, demonstrative strikes, aimed not at the overturning of policies but rather the renewal of negotiations to attain compromise, may allow governments and political parties to develop the capability—all other things being equal—to withstand such political pressures.

Table 3 indicates that the last decade cannot be characterized as the return of the “political strike,” as some on the Marxist left have sought to do. Rather, what appears like the return of the “political strike” is better understood as mass strikes becoming more “political” in the contexts of (a) declining private sector-based economic strike activity; (b) weakened governments facing such demonstrative mass strikes (and mass strikes contributing to this weakness); and (c) mass action at the points of production, distribution, and exchange (*compared to, for example*, just the street demonstration) being taken against neoliberal actions of retrenchment. In essence, the action of trade union contestation is more manifest and visible. In this sense, the mass or general strike has become a weapon of choice or, as Kelly and Frege term it, “an item in the union confederations’ repertoire of contention” (2004: 185), particularly in Belgium, Greece, Italy, and Spain between 1986 and 2005. The use of the mass or general strike fits mostly obviously within the generic union strategies of collective bargaining and political action, but, as unions are both ideologically and strategically

diverse and flexible, this type of strike can also be used in a social partnership strategy. Most obviously, it could be deployed to enforce or maintain a social partnership upon a reluctant political party.

Aside from the influence of trade union political exclusion practices and strategies creating the rationale to stage mass strikes, trade unions require the authority as well as the organizing and mobilizing capacity at the micro level to be able to do so. Whether there are one or more union peak organizations with the national labor movements (and in Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Spain there are at least two), sufficient unity of purpose has existed on both horizontal and vertical planes—amongst peak organizations and between affiliates and their peak organizations—for such strikes to be called and organized, for the calling of mass general or sectoral strikes by one peak organization where more than one major organization exists is unlikely. But over and above this, certain structural conditions are more apposite to the staging of mass strikes, whether the strikes be general or public sector. Both centrally coordinated or centralized union organization and collective bargaining structures with extensive coverage are conducive to the logistical preparation for, and the outward reach of, a mass strike. Such several-fold conditions are found in the most mass strike-prone countries. So despite relatively low union densities and differences in the institutions of worker representation, centripetal tendencies of organization and structure sufficiently outweigh centrifugal forces. In France, for example, the extremely low levels of union membership suggest that unions hold an influence over nonunion members that is conducive to mobilizing large numbers of them.

Conclusion

The impact of the exclusions of certain types of strike activity from the annual aggregate strike activity casts sufficient doubt on the absolute veracity of the strike statistics for certain countries; it is harder to make a convincing case that in these countries the number of workers involved, number of days not worked, and number of days not worked per thousand workers is significantly higher than the annual statistics indicate. But this is not to suggest that “significant” should be taken to mean “substantial,” so that it can be argued that western Europe continues to experience a period of labor quiescence. Here the influence of declining union membership and organizational presence is an important explanatory factor. Given that the location of these “excluded” strikes are primarily found in the civil service within state administration and the public state in general, this only serves to further highlight the atrophy of the “economic” private sector strike, particularly those of individual company basis. Those of any significance that remain are the isolated, defensive indefinite actions against closures and mass redundancies.

However, the issue of labor quiescence cannot be settled alone on the basis of just a quantitative assessment, important though that is. The political action strike has weathered the continuing aggregate lower levels of strike activity in the period 1997–2005. Indeed, it has continued into 2006 in France, Germany, Greece, and Italy. Whether of the public sector, national, or regional type, the political action strike is characterized by demonstrative intent to exert leverage in the political exchange process rather than constitute an act of economic collective bargaining. Nonetheless, it is still a warning prior to negotiations and a vehicle for general protest. The choice of short, mass strikes by national trade unions indicates a strategy of seeking to gain concessions from governments rather than removal of the government proposal or the relevant government. Within the shrunken ambit of other types of strikes, the usage of the political action strike suggests that the predominant qualitative nature of strike activity starkly reflects the existing power bases and leverage options of contemporary national trade unions. In essence, because they are no longer able to exert significant, direct, workplace, collective bargaining influence over a large array of either private sector employers or immediate public sector employers, trade unions are choosing to engage far demonstrative political exchange collective mobilizations because political, cultural, and institutional distances have opened up between unions and their traditional means of political representation. But there is another side to this equation—the use of mass strikes reflects the terrain of the defensive struggles trade unions are waging in that the retrenchment of conditions concern large groups of workers in identifiable single bargaining units, namely, the public sector, the civil service, or all workers. Trade unions are compelled, in a period of relative weakness, to respond similarly.

But this does not lend sufficient support to the perspective of extant social and political polarization leading to increasingly frequent and widespread mass mobilizations, of which strikes are a central component, in the major economies of western continental Europe as to make such a perspective credible. This perspective has been supported by Callinicos (1999) and Wolfreys (2006). The mobilizations in the mid- to late 1990s, Callinicos argued, can be organically traced back to those of the early 1990s in terms of a continuing, underlying economic and social crisis afflicting western European economies. Similarly, Wolfreys (2006) argues that the mass strikes of “November/December 1995 w[ere] a turning point . . . in France.” However, what he subsequently cites does not indicate that, other than in 2003, there was a rising level of industrially based political combativity on the part of the trade unions there. Therefore, and as with Callinicos, if such polarization is taking place and is expressed through industrially based political action mobilization, then there remains to be provided an explanation of why the frequency of use of the mass strike has not been commensurate with the purported social forces produc-

ing the discontented side of the polarisation. In turn, this suggests, *inter alia*, the polarization is less extensive and deep-seated than argued, and the other means of political expression of discontent like new left parties are less than adequate.

Note

1. For example, Baccaro et al. (2003) suggest that Italian pactism—without any reference to mass strike actions—has worked successfully for trade unions but the number of such strikes has increased in absolute and relative terms (see Table 3), indicating that may not be the case.

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