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## **Introduction: Mass strikes in the global crisis**

*Alexander Gallas and Jörg Nowak*

**D**espite the fact that there have been spectacular strikes in many parts of the world since the inception of the global economic crisis in 2007-8, the news media and the academic public have mainly focussed their attention on street demonstrations and occupations of squares where the dominant regimes of crisis management were resisted. In our view, the negligence of strikes in accounts and analyses of the current cycle of protest is the flipside of a focus on middle-class mobilisations, which betrays the class bias of journalists and scholars alike. Moving beyond the silence on conflicts around work, we want to chart, in this special issue, the manifold forms of strikes that are occurring around the globe in a conjuncture of crisis. We contend that even if there is no evidence for an increase in strikes on a global scale, there are novel economic and political dynamics triggered by them that merit our attention.

### **The Continuing Economic and Political Relevance of Strikes**

It is quite common among political commentators and social scientists to infer from declining strike incidence in the global north that conflicts around work are a dying form of social confrontation.<sup>1</sup> Labour scholars have

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<sup>1</sup> See for example PAKULSKI, Jan and WALTERS, Malcolm. *The Death of Class*. London: Sage, 1996, p. 86; MEYERSON, Harold. "If Labor Dies, What Happens Next?". *The American Prospect*. September 2012, <http://prospect.org/article/if-labor-dies-whats-next>.

responded to this claim in various ways. Gregor Gall emphasises that workers nowadays often air their grievances with actions other than strikes, for example overtime bans or work-to-rule.<sup>2</sup> It follows that the decline in strike incidence in the global north cannot be equated with a decline in labour conflict, and that labour scholarship should not be focused exclusively on the strike weapon. Beverly Silver, in contrast, looks at the shifting geographical patterns of capital accumulation. She suggests that the shifts have led to a relocation of conflict from the old capitalist centres to “emerging” and newly industrialised economies, arguing that “*where capital goes, labour-capital conflict shortly follows*”.<sup>3</sup> This suggests that we should examine the question of labour conflict from a global perspective, which calls into question whether the assumption of a decline holds beyond the old centres.

Both observations are correct; however, it is also important to stress that the strike weapon is not an instrument of the past even in countries where strike incidence has declined markedly. In fact, large-scale strikes have been occurring around the globe in the wake of the global financial and economic crisis – not just in the “emerging” economies and the newly industrialising countries, but also in the old capitalist centres. Accordingly, the aim of our special issue is (a) to show that workers across the globe continue to resort to large-scale strikes – and, in so doing, cause significant economic and political upheaval, (b) to explore the motivations behind their decision to down tools, and (c) analyse the political-economic contexts in which strikes take place and the effects that strikes have on these contexts.

### **Analysing the North and South**

In line with our global orientation, this special issue contains three contributions looking in-depth at the global north and, more specifically, the Eurozone, and three that deal with “emerging” economies. It concludes with a comparative analysis of strikes in the global north and south.

The articles on the Eurozone cover France, Germany, Portugal and Spain. They converge insofar as they argue that the labour movements in these

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<sup>2</sup> GALL, Gregor. “New Forms of Labour Conflict: A Transnational Overview”. In: ATZENI, Maurizio (ed.), *Workers and Labour in a Globalised Capitalism: Contemporary Themes and Theoretical Issues*. Houndmills: Palgrave, 2014, p. 210.

<sup>3</sup> SILVER, Beverly. “Theorising the Working Class in Twenty-First-Century Global Capitalism”. In: ATZENI, Maurizio (ed.), *Workers and Labour in a Globalised Capitalism...* Op. Cit., p.50.

countries find themselves in a defensive position vis-à-vis the ruling blocs that exercise political and economic control. In a situation of deep crisis, workers try to defend themselves against onslaughts on their jobs, wages and working conditions as well as their social and political rights. At the same time, it becomes clear that the conditions of struggle vary greatly across the national borders inside the Eurozone.

Along these lines, Hugo Dias and Lídia Fernandes highlight in their contribution that the Portuguese governments and the EU responded to the Eurozone crisis by imposing austerity on the country, to which the unions reacted with defensive political strikes. In this situation, a shift in political opportunity structures took place, which was reflected, first, in the rapprochement of the unions and the social movements invested in the struggle against cuts and, second, in the transnationalisation of stoppages: there was a strike against austerity affecting the entire Iberian peninsula on 14 November 2012.

Similarly, Maria Gorosarri and Luciole Sauviat analyse the strikes in recent years against the dominant government strategies of crisis management in France and Spain. They argue that there is a marked difference in the dynamics of the strikes in these two countries: whereas the stoppages in Spain came close to a mass strike in a Luxemburgian sense with new forms of working class consciousness and organisation emerging, the same cannot be said of France.

Looking at Germany, Stefanie Hürtgen argues that the recent strike wave in the railway sector can be seen as a reflection of a deep-seated social crisis in the country. This crisis was born out of the deregulation and fragmentation of labour relations, and is reflected in the privatisation and marketisation of the German railway system. The “small” train drivers’ union GdL successfully led the opposition against the changes and did so by using the strike weapon. When the Merkel government responded by cracking down on the right to strike for smaller unions with a new law, the GdL managed to bypass this crackdown.

In the emerging economies, strike waves also occurred in recent years that had significant economic and political effects. In many cases, they follow more closely the pattern of traditional industrial action in the sense that they are confrontations with private employers and aim at improving wages and working conditions. Nevertheless, they have important political implications

because they address the configurations of labour relations and the structures of domination in the countries in question.

Correspondingly, Jörg Nowak compares strikes and their links to political protest movements in Brazil and India. He highlights the fact that large strike waves in the automobile industry (India) and the construction and public sectors (Brazil) preceded the emergence of political protest movements with significant middle-class involvement. These movements were directed against corruption and also, in the Brazilian case, against public transport fare hikes, the state of the public sector and the government in general. A key difference was that workers in India were more politicised than workers in Brazil; however, for the street protests, the reverse was true: Whereas the Indian activists just lambasted corruption, the Brazilian movement had a broader political agenda.

Luis Campos and Bruno Dobrusin analyse the development of labour conflict under the Kirchner and Dilma governments in Argentina and Brazil in recent years. They suggest that there were implicit arrangements between labour and capital and alliances between centre-left governments and trade unions in the run-up to the crisis. However, the precarious balance between the neo-developmental and neoliberal economic policies, which was installed by governments in both countries, could no longer be sustained once the countries faced economic difficulties from 2012 onwards. In turn, strike incidence surged and the pre-crisis arrangements and alliances eroded.

Looking at China, Tim Pringle also observes indications for growing worker militancy and strike incidence. In his view, this development has two effects: on the one hand, the Chinese union federation ACFTU is stepping up efforts to sustain its claim to represent workers; on the other hand, a layer of independent worker representatives is emerging that is supported by NGOs.

The contribution of Hermes Augusto Costa and Hugo Dias concludes the special issue. They take up the theme of the “general strike”, which is discussed in several of the other articles, and do so by engaging in a comparison across the North/South divide that focuses on Portugal and India. In their view, the general strike is a defensive form of struggle in the neoliberal age chosen because other means of influencing political decision-making are absent. In the Portuguese case, the strikes took place against the backdrop of the imposition of austerity through governments and the troika; in the Indian case, the background was the liberalisation of the economy and the insensitivity of governments to union demands in a situation of general economic insecurity. All in all, Costa and Dias say that unions in the north

have much to learn from unions in the south in the sense that they have to reach out to marginalised and precarious sectors of the population.

### Strike Waves across the Globe

Obviously, it is beyond the scope of this editorial to complement these analyses with a complete account of the strikes waves around the world that took place since the crisis hit in 2007-8. Nevertheless, it is possible to give a cursory overview by listing some of the salient actions and conflicts.

In Western Europe, there were numerous one- or two-day political strikes against austerity in Europe in recent years. This was not just the case in Portugal, Spain and Greece – countries badly hit by the Eurozone crisis – but also in the UK, Iceland, Italy and Belgium. Furthermore, there was the four-week strike in reaction to the restructuring of the pensions system in France in autumn 2010, which affected, in particular, the transport sector and the oil refineries.<sup>4</sup> In Germany, the recent strike wave in the railway system was complemented by large-scale strikes of postal workers and nursery nurses.

In the US, there was not just a large protest movement against the restriction of collective bargaining rights in the US state of Wisconsin in 2011. Recently, “Fight for \$15”, a national campaign for a minimum wage of 15 dollars started by retail and fast food workers, is gaining traction. The campaign is underpinned by protests and strikes, which have been taking place across the country in the last few years.<sup>5</sup>

In emerging and newly industrialised economies, there were numerous significant industrial actions in recent years. In Egypt, substantial cross-sectoral strikes took place in the run-up to the Arab spring and in 2014. In South Africa, there was a miners’ strike in 2012; in the course of this

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<sup>4</sup> GALLAS, Alexander, NOWAK, Jörg and WILDE, Florian (eds.). *Politische Streiks im Europa der Krise*. Hamburg: VSA, 2012. NOWAK, Jörg and GALLAS, Alexander. “Mass Strikes against Austerity in Western Europe – A Strategic Assessment”. *Global Labour Journal*, vol. 5., no. 3, 2014, pp. 306-21; GALLAS, Alexander. “Politisierte Streiks: Zur Dynamik und Deutung von Arbeitskämpfen in Großbritannien”. *Arbeits- und Industriesoziologische Studien*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2015, pp. 67-91.

<sup>5</sup> COLLINS, Jane. “Theorizing Wisconsin’s 2011 Protests: Community-based unionism confronts accumulation by dispossession”. *The American Ethnologist*, vol. 39, no. 1, 2012, pp. 6-20; LUCE, Stefanie. “15\$ or Bust: An Appraisal of the Higher Wages Movement”. *New Labour Forum*, vol. 24, No. 2, 2015, pp. 72-79.

stoppage, the Marikana massacre took place, where 41 workers were killed by the police. Furthermore, there was a five-month strike in the platinum mines in 2014. Apart from the stoppages in the Indian automobile factories and the Brazilian construction industry, there was a big strike in the Cambodian garment industry (2014) and wildcat strikes in the Turkish car industry (2015).<sup>6</sup>

Many of these strikes and protests attracted considerable attention in the political scene.<sup>7</sup> There were not just wide-ranging debates about their legitimacy and effectiveness, but also legal and policy initiatives aimed at restricting the right to strike – in the US, but also in European countries such as Britain, Germany, Greece and Spain, and at the level of the ILO. The initiatives to ban or restrict strikes show that they are still considered to have disruptive effects on the economic and the political level.

### Strikes of a New Quality?

Obviously, our list of strikes in the crisis constitutes anecdotal evidence. Actual numbers at the global level are hard to come by. The methods of measurement differ between countries, which also means that data are difficult to compare across national boundaries. Furthermore, they are incomplete and, in various cases, unreliable.<sup>8</sup> Finally, there is no definite, single method of quantifying strike action; numbers differ depending on which measure is used: the number of stoppages, the amount of days not worked due to stoppages, or the number of workers involved.

According to the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), the number of days not worked in Europe was lower in 2011-13 than at any time in the 2000s (between 32 and 35 days per 1,000 workers); however, the number

<sup>6</sup> BEININ, Joel and DUBOC, Marie. “The Egyptian Workers Movement before and after the 2011 Uprising”. *Socialist Register*, vol. 51, 2015, pp. 136-56.

<sup>7</sup> SILVER, Beverley. “Theorising the Working Class”. Op. Cit., p. 46f. KARATAŞLI, Şahan Savaş; SEFIKA, Kumral; SCULLY, Ben and UPADHYAY, Smriti. “Class, Crisis and the 2011 Protest Wave: Cyclical and Secular Trends in Global Labor Unrest”. In WALLERSTEIN, Immanuel; CHASE-DUNN, Christopher; SUTER, Christian (eds.). *Overcoming Global Inequalities*. London: Paradigm Publishers, 2015, pp. 184-200. SCHMALZ, Stefan; LIEBIG, Steffen; THIEL, Marcel. “Zur Zersplitterung des sozialen Konflikts in Westeuropa: Eine Typologie nichtnormierter Kämpfe um Arbeit”. *Arbeits- und Industriesoziologische Studien*, vol. 8, no. 2, November 2015, pp. 49-66.

<sup>8</sup> GALL, Gregor. “New Forms of Labour Conflict”. Op. Cit. p. 213. SCHMALZ, Stefan; LIEBIG, Steffen; THIEL, Marcel. “Zur Zersplitterung des sozialen Konflikts...”. Op. Cit., pp. 49-66.

recorded for 2010 was the second highest in the same period (70 days).<sup>9</sup> The case of Brazil seems to be different: According to DIEESE, the Brazilian trade union think tank, strike incidence has gone up markedly in the country between 2008 and 2013. Likewise, data compiled by the ILO suggests that there has been a marked increase in strike activity in South Africa in recent years; however, the picture is less clear in the case of India. Moreover, there seems to be a significant decline in the US.<sup>10</sup> All in all, the existing numbers are inconclusive; there appears to be no clear quantitative trend concerning strike activity at the global level.

However, it is also possible to ask whether there are qualitative changes to strikes – which would also explain why there is a long list of memorable actions and the renewed attention to strikes in the political scene. In our view, it is possible to observe several such changes. These concern the political context of strikes, the actors involved, the tactics and strategies chosen, and the overall dynamics triggered. Both in the contributions to this special issue and other recent literature on strikes, we find five noteworthy patterns:

1. *Geographical expansion*: Various strikes in recent years expanded beyond their initial sectoral or geographical extension; individual strikes were perceived as being linked, which transformed them into strike waves. In “emerging” and newly industrialised economies such as Egypt, China, Brazil and South Africa, there was a rapid and uncontrolled geographical diffusion of strikes at the national level. This suggests that the control of trade union apparatuses over strikes was limited, and that the stoppages were not triggered by the official

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<sup>9</sup> ETUI (2015) Strikes in Europe, Version 2.1, available at: <https://www.etui.org/Topics/Trade-union-renewal-and-mobilisation/Strikes-in-Europe-version-2.1-January-2015> (accessed 8 January 2016).

<sup>10</sup> ETUI (2015) Strikes in Europe, Version 2.1, available at: <https://www.etui.org/Topics/Trade-union-renewal-and-mobilisation/Strikes-in-Europe-version-2.1-January-2015> (accessed 8 January 2016);

ILOSTAT, Days not worked due to strikes and lockouts by economic activity, [https://www.ilo.org/ilostat/faces/help\\_home/data\\_by\\_subject/subject-details/indicator-](https://www.ilo.org/ilostat/faces/help_home/data_by_subject/subject-details/indicator-details-by-)

[subject?subject=&indicator=STR\\_DAYS\\_ECO\\_NB&datasetCode=&collectionCode=YI](https://www.ilo.org/ilostat/faces/help_home/data_by_subject/subject-details/indicator-details-by-subject?subject=&indicator=STR_DAYS_ECO_NB&datasetCode=&collectionCode=YI) (accessed 8 January 2016); DIEESE (2015) Balanço das greves em 2013, <http://www.dieese.org.br/estudosepesquisas/2013/estPesq79balancogreves2013.pdf> (accessed 19 February 2016).



mechanics inherent in the national labour relations frameworks. And yet, they mostly stayed within the confines of national territories.<sup>11</sup>

2. *Constituency*: The people on strike often were not part of what is often conceived of as the classical union constituency of permanently employed industrial workers. In some cases, the overlap was in fact very limited. In Europe as well as in Brazil, South Africa and India, significant public sector strikes took place. These were carried, among other groups, by civil servants, medical doctors and teachers – professions often seen as being “middle class” or even “upper middle class”. The fact that the public sector has become an important site of strikes in recent years also means that the general public is affected in a more direct fashion by stoppages, which may be part of the explanation why strikes are debated more at the political level even if the numbers have not gone up in some countries and regions. Importantly, the changes in the constituency of strikes does not just reflect a shift from the private to the public sector. If the strikes occurred in more traditional, industrial sectors, precarious and contract workers were often the protagonists, for example automobile workers in India, miners in South Africa, and migrant workers employed in the industrial sector in China. These workers in many cases managed to forge close links with permanent workforces during their actions.
3. *Relations of representation*: The shift in the constituency of strikes was accompanied, in various countries, by tensions between the established trade union bureaucracy and the strikers, who called into question the legitimacy of existing unions and their claim to represent workers. This pattern is observable in particular in the global south, for example in Brazil, China, Egypt, South Africa and Vietnam, but also, to some extent, in Europe: the railway strike in Germany was carried by a small, “professional” union that is not part of the DGB, the big union federation in Germany.

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<sup>11</sup> An exception is the wave of political strikes in the countries hit by the Eurozone crisis: there was an awareness of workers in other countries taking similar actions and, in the case of the Iberian general strike on 14 November 2011, at least one instance of a transnational strike.

4. *Repression*: Violent crackdowns have always been part and parcel of the repertoire with which state authorities have tried to deal with stoppages, but there seems to be an escalation in recent years, both in terms of how repressive state apparatuses have intervened in strikes, and in terms of recent developments concerning the right to strike at the legal and policy level. In Spain and France, several trade unionists are standing trial and facing prison because of their involvement in strikes and protest against dismissals; in Brazil, the national guard was called on several occasions to repress strikes of construction workers in 2011 and 2012; India witnessed the imprisonment of almost 150 workers at the carmaker Maruti in July 2012 and the arrest of more than 40 workers at the Honda plant in Thapukhera in February 2016; and the Marikana massacre in South Africa in August 2012 also stands out. This is flanked by active attempts to restrict the right to strike, both at the level of the ILO and at the level of national governments. The employers represented at the ILO have been pushing for an interpretation of convention no. 87 that does not include a right to strike. In Britain, a trade union bill has been passed in the House of Commons that creates a new threshold for ballots, making it exceedingly difficult for unions to go on strike. In Germany, a bill has passed parliament that bars “minority” unions from going on strike.
5. *Political context*: The political conditions under which strikes take place have changed significantly. In an environment of repression, strikes take on a political dimension almost by default because they defy the authorities; if they happen in the public sector, this is also the case because the government is the employer or controls the employer directly.

All in all, we contend that what we are witnessing is a return of the “mass strike” broadly in line with Rosa Luxemburg’s understanding of the term. Apart from mass participation, she argued that mass strikes veer between economic and political goals and have a discernible impact on the political scene; that they have a mobilising character for the working class as a whole; and that they are not controlled by union bureaucracies and spread beyond their geographical starting point or the sector where a strike was called. In a nutshell, a mass strike lays bare the class antagonism and the class domination inherent in any capitalist social formation by creating a situation of polarisation between labour and capital: “What results is a huge,

colourful image of a general confrontation between labour and capital, which reflects (...) the variegation of the social whole in its entirety".<sup>12</sup>

Importantly, however, the working classes in many countries around the globe seem to be on the defensive in the current conjuncture – which is different from the historical context of Luxemburg's analysis, the Russian Revolution of 1905. The mass strike for Luxemburg was the lightning rod of the revolution; what we are seeing today is the attempt by workers to respond to the offensives of capital launched across the globe in the wake of the crisis. This calls for the renewal of a materialist theory of the mass strike, which sheds teleological assumptions about its revolutionary character and takes on board the qualitative shifts observed.

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<sup>12</sup> LUXEMBURG, Rosa. *Politische Schriften*. Leipzig: Reclam, 1970, p. 151. (author's translation).