# Introduction: Strikes and Social Conflicts

*Sjaak van der Velden*
International Institute of Social History

*Raquel Varela*
Universidade Nova de Lisboa

This special issue is a product of the conference "Strikes and Social Conflict in the Twentieth Century," held in Lisbon, Portugal, in March of 2011, a time when much of the world, including Europe, was locked in social conflict over how to respond to the global economic crisis that capitalist economists had claimed would never happen again.

Our decision to organize that conference, made in 2008 in the depths of that crisis of globalized capitalism, reflected our reading of the history of the twentieth century as one shaped by waves of social conflict, some benefitting the forces of revolution, others helping impose a counterrevolution, often reversing the direction of history just when that direction seemed assured. It also reflected our study of historiography and our dismay at the abandonment of the study of strikes and social conflict by labor historians in the Global North, despite the surge of social conflict (including strikes) in the Global South—from China to Chile and Egypt to South Africa—and, since 2008, in Europe as well. Our goal for the conference—and for this special issue of *ILWCH*—is to stimulate the revival of academic labor studies in general, and the study of strikes and social conflicts in particular. It is our contention that strikes and social conflicts form a major axis of twentieth-century history and should constitute an important line of academic research and writing as well.

During the twentieth century, the world witnessed unprecedented social struggles. It started with the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917. The latter was both part of and the inspiration for an international wave of strikes, rebellions, and revolutions during the years immediately after the First World War. Workers' councils were established in Russia, Italy, Germany, and Hungary as well as in other countries. The idea that workers are able to govern their own lives and run their workplaces was absorbed by millions. Many believed that the world was on the eve of a new form of society. Capitalism would be replaced by socialism.

They were terribly wrong. The forces of counterrevolution turned out to be much stronger than expected. During the 1920s, the revolutionary mood was destroyed at the cost of millions of lives. Union membership plummeted worldwide, and movements against the deterioration of working and living conditions were often crushed. The defeat of the working class in its struggle for a better world may perhaps best be illustrated by the 1926 decision of the labor statisticians of the International Labour Office. In their methodological guidelines

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for the compilation of strike statistics, they decided to deal only with "the economic aspects" of the disputes. Strikes were no longer regarded as an index of worker activism. The only thing regarded as important was the question, what are the costs to the economy?

The counterrevolution of the 1920s and the Great Depression that began with the Wall Street crash of 1929 resulted in a tighter grip of the state on society in the 1930s. There were major labor movements in a number of countries, but it became ever more difficult for workers to go on strike during those years, and many strikes ended in defeat. The German, Italian, and Japanese fascisms that blossomed on the fertile ground of the counterrevolution detonated the Second World War. After this war, the victors reorganized social and economic institutions. The grip of the state on society became even tighter. Despite a repetition of the rebellious postwar mood that existed after the First World War, this time the impact was smaller. This reflected state oversight of the economy that prevented unemployment and inflation from rising sky high, as it had in many countries after the First World War. It was also a result of the incorporation of parts of the labor movement and especially the unions into the postwar state in many countries. The Cold War was the third factor explaining the relatively low level of workers' struggles after the war.

As a result, the initial strike wave of the late 1940s and early 1950s soon faded away. This gave ground to the oft-repeated remark two American researchers made in 1960. In their study, Arthur M. Ross and Paul T. Hartman speculated from the decline in strike activity across a range of countries about "the withering away of the strike."[1] It always takes some time for a new academic discovery to make its way through society, and just when the withering away of the strike was becoming conventional wisdom, history played a trick. In the late 1960s, the world witnessed a new strike wave. All around the globe, workers came out in protest against low wages and lack of control over their lives. Their movements coincided with the student movement, feminism, the environmental movement, antiwar protests, and other signs of discontent. The economy was in crisis in many countries and so was society.

No researcher had predicted this strike wave, but academia was eager to study the events and many left-wing students hopped on that bandwagon. It became fashionable to study strikes and social conflicts. Contemporary conflicts received intense attention from sociologists, while historians went back in time to study conflicts of the past. New journals and monograph series were founded, some of which—like *ILWCH*—still exist. Before the 1970s were over, however, enthusiasm for the study of workers' movements and struggles disappeared yet again from academia, despite the sometimes unprecedented strike waves in countries of the Global South. Just as the fast growth of this enthusiasm in the late 1960s was a result of a reemerging working class in battle, the disappearance of this enthusiasm was a result of the recovery of capital and the political Right. Pinochet in Chile, Thatcher in the United Kingdom, and Reagan in the United States showed once again that an attack on vested interests was not as easily won as many had hoped. Labor laws ceased to protect workers, and the

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union movement lost much of its attraction for them. The idea that social conflict was the prime mover of change in society soon became regarded as old-fashioned. So why study strikes and social conflicts?

At the end of the twentieth century, Capital seemed invincible, at least in the countries that formed the core of the Convention on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Mainstream capitalist economists maintained that the economy was able to promote permanent growth without serious economic crises, classes seemed to have disappeared, and people were all supposed to be members of an egalitarian society with endless upward mobility. But, again, reality didn't jibe with these optimistic visions. In 2007, an economic crisis again swept the world, the kind of crisis that was never supposed to happen again, according to most capitalist economists. At the same time, other grave crises emerged. Will human society be able to feed all humans in the near future? If climate change is man-made, can we turn the tide before the ice caps melt and global warming becomes irreversible? What about the wars between nations and "terrorism" of nonstate actors related to the so-called "clash of civilizations"? Despite the euphoria of the late 1990s, most people in the twenty-first century still face multifaceted problems.

And once again these problems have unleashed social conflicts. Strikes, demonstrations, and riots are again newspaper headlines and topics of discussions on the social media. The question for students of labor is whether this intensification of social conflict will promote a return to labor studies in academia. In 2008, the editors of this special issue of *ILWCH* met during a conference in Lisbon and decided after a few preliminary discussions that it was time for a meeting with other researchers who were also convinced that the study of strikes and social conflicts is not something of the past but, on the contrary, something that urgently needs further development. Using networks built during earlier conferences, we contacted researchers who had expressed a similar viewpoint. Although we believed that time was on our side, even we were surprised that more than 260 colleagues from Europe, the Americas, Africa, and the Middle East responded enthusiastically and that financial support from a handful of scientific institutes made it possible to organize a major conference. From March 16 to March 20, 2011, hundreds of colleagues from Argentina, Brazil, Canada, France, Israel, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom, among other countries, participated in forty-six sessions at the International Conference on Strikes and Social Conflicts in the Twentieth Century in Lisbon. The subjects addressed included the movement of 1968, rural conflicts, and class struggles under fascism, but panels also focused on art, literature and social conflicts, memories and images, and strikes at the beginning of the twentieth century. The few plenary sessions explored topics such as "Who is the Working Class?" "Towards an International Labor History Network," and "Labor Matters!"

Participants in the conference's final plenary session decided to organize a second conference and to establish an association for the promotion of the study

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of strikes and social conflicts. The existing academic organizations are, in our view, not equipped for this task because they have broader goals. This association has now come into existence—with the help of a large number of research institutes—as the International Association on Strikes and Social Conflicts. The goals of the Association are to promote and disseminate studies on labor and social conflicts from an interdisciplinary, global, long-term historical, and non-Eurocentric perspective. We started with a website[2] in six languages: Catalan, English, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish. The first results are two editions of a new online journal, *Workers of the World*.[3] With the aid of António Simões do Paço we also published almost 100 revised papers from the Lisbon conference in an online book, *Strikes and Social Conflicts: Towards a Global History*.[4]

Other papers were published in scholarly journals, and four papers have been revised and expanded for publication in this special issue of *ILWCH*. In this issue we try to communicate the results of the conceptual goals we had when we organized the Lisbon conference: to show the wide range of labor conflicts that existed in the past—and continue in the present—on a global scale. We think that the contributions we chose for this issue provide a good illustration of the variety in time, place, and character of strikes and social conflicts that we have in mind as our object of study.

Ralph Darlington, in "Syndicalism and Strikes: Leadership and Influence," sheds new light on the complex nature of the relationship between syndicalism and strikes by means of an international comparative analysis of the revolutionary syndicalist movements in France, Spain, Italy, Britain, the United States, and Ireland during the early years of the twentieth century. He contributes to a much-neglected comparative historiography of the international syndicalist movement, drawing on both the existing secondary literature and a variety of primary sources. Darlington presents evidence to suggest that their ideological organizational initiative and leadership was of immense importance to understanding how syndicalist movements could be simultaneously a contributory cause, a symptom, and a beneficiary of worker militancy.

Although most of the articles in this special issue focus on workplace organization and conflicts, Romulo Costa Mattos, in "Shantytown Dwellers' Resistance in Brazil's First Republic (1889–1930): Fighting for the Right to Reside in Rio de Janeiro," analyzes the struggles of Rio de Janeiro shantytown squatters to prevent the state from evicting them and destroying their houses during the first Brazilian republic (1889–1930). This article chronicles the government's attempts to demolish the homes and communities of *favela* (shantytown) residents and the different forms of resistance practiced by the squatters. It pays special attention to the years between 1907 and 1927, when the population of Morro da Favela ensured the permanence of their homes through street protests.

Xavier Domènech Sampere, in "The Workers' Movements and Political Change in Spain, 1956–1977," writes about the relationship between the labor movement and political change in Spain during the final decades of

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Francoism and the transition to democracy from 1956 to 1977, analyzing the different phases of this relationship. This article explores the factors that explain the postwar reemergence of the labor movement and its impact on the forms of political action against the dictatorship. The author also explains the survival of the labor movement under Franco's post-civil war repression. The establishment of alliances between the labor movement and other social actors resulted in strikes and demonstrations. He presents an analysis of worker organizations as the social movement that was essential to bringing the Francoist dictatorship to an end.

Paulo Fontes and Francisco Barbosa de Macedo, in "Strikes and Pickets in Brazil: Worker Mobilization in the 'Old' and 'New' Unionism, the Strikes of 1957 and 1980," analyze the role of pickets in two of the most emblematic strikes in the history of the Brazilian workers' movement in the twentieth century, the "strike of the 400,000" in São Paulo and neighboring cities in 1957 and the "forty-one day strike" of 1980 in the metropolitan region of the city of São Paulo. Through a detailed analysis of these strikes, they manage to link these two chronologically distant and politically divergent strikes. Despite these differences, Fontes and Macedo demonstrate that there are similarities between the two movements. The role of pickets in both strikes, as well as the organization of workers in both the workplace and their neighborhoods, and the strikers' rituals and performances, indicate that there was a more permanent and durable grassroots organizational repertoire than political and union leaders suggested.

The contributions written by participants in the Lisbon conference are supplemented in this special issue with an article written for it by Chris King-Chi Chan about recent developments in China. In "Contesting Class Organization: Migrant Workers' Strikes in China's Pearl River Delta, 1978–2010," Chan describes a number of important strikes of migrant workers that have attracted public attention and situates these cases within the specific context of China's political economy. He argues that workers' class consciousness and strategies of class organization have steadily advanced in the process of China's integration into the global economy since 1978. Chan concludes, however, that we must keep in mind that class organization in post-Maoist China is complicated by the manipulations of both the party-state and Capital. As a result, it has been difficult to link class action with class organization. Class self-organization is usually a *consequence* of workers' conscious class action rather than its precondition.

This special issue of *ILWCH* aims to be part of the revival of labor studies in academia and, in particular, the study of strikes and social conflict. Through this publication we hope to help retrieve, promote, and disseminate the history of social conflicts on a global scale. The return to the academic study of strikes and social conflicts, however, will not be a repetition of the former high point of interest in labor studies during the 1970s in the Global North. In the 1970s, the focus was mainly on the labor history of the Global North or Western countries. Current social movements and social conflicts in the Global South are forcing labor history into a new phase where a global perspective is needed more

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than ever before. After all, it is not a Western or Northern prerogative to fight for a better world. The recent wave of worldwide protests may be the next step on this path for the workers of the world.

## NOTES

1. Arthur M. Ross and Paul T. Hartman, *Changing Patterns of Industrial Conflict* (New York, 1960).
2. www.iassc-mshdijon.fr/
3. www.workersoftheworldjournal.net/
4. *Strikes and Social Conflicts. Towards a Global History*, ed. Raquel Varela, Sjaak van der Velden, and António Simões do Paço (Lisbon, 2012). www.iassc-mshdijon.fr/spip.php?article27&lang=en

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