Interpreting strike activity in western Europe in the past 20 years: the labour repertoire under pressure

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Summary
This article provides a comparative overview of developments in strike activity in western Europe since the mid-1990s. It uses various indicators to analyse discernible trends over time in levels and patterns of strike activity across sectors and countries. The article argues that strikes are generally blending into a broader palette of workers’ repertoire of collective action. This possible blending applies in particular to a context in which the institutional logic of collective bargaining is underdeveloped or has been undermined.

Résumé
Cet article présente un aperçu comparatif des évolutions des mouvements de grève en Europe occidentale depuis le milieu des années 1990. Il utilise différents indicateurs pour analyser les tendances identifiables au fil du temps, en termes de niveaux et de modèles d’actions de grève dans les différents secteurs et les différents pays. L’article soutient que les grèves se combinent généralement avec d’autres éléments, au sein d’une palette plus large d’actions collectives des travailleurs. La combinaison ainsi obtenue s’observe tout particulièrement dans un contexte où la logique institutionnelle de la négociation collective a été mise à mal.

Zusammenfassung

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Introduction
Is the mapping and analysing of strike trends still relevant in the 21st century? Wolfgang Streeck, Germany’s most renowned economic sociologist, affirms that it is: he expects that the surging social conflict in Europe’s largest economy is ‘here to stay’ (The Guardian, 22 May 2015) as pay and working conditions are deteriorating, especially in the public sector. Turning to the rest of Europe, austerity policies undoubtedly triggered a new cycle of social protest in 2010–2011 (Quaranta, 2015). Within a context of increasing precarious employment, it looks like social protest has been marked by growing fragmentation since the ‘Great Recession’ (hereafter: Recession): it is expressed by urban riots, such as those in the UK in 2011 and Sweden in 2013, wildcat strikes at the company level and large-scale demonstrations and general strikes (Schmalz et al., 2015). It appears that the context of the Recession has provided a fertile empirical ground for researchers of employment relations to analyse strikes again within the broader lens of a workers’ repertoire of collective action.  

Certainly, such an approach to labour unrest with unions acting as social movements is not novel. However, it should be borne in mind that many unions are also bureaucratic organizations relying on institutional power resources. Nonetheless, our reading of the available strike data is that it is tempting today to claim that the action repertoire has been undergoing noteworthy diversification, although not to the same extent in all economic sectors and all western European countries, this article’s geographical focus.

Emphasizing the domestic context, the framework developed by social movement researchers Gentile and Tarrow (2009) is a useful heuristic tool for understanding this diversification. Their framework allows us to interpret the prevailing or changing repertoire across sectors and countries via the degree of legal-institutionalized recognition of labour rights, the stability of which is challenged by ‘regime change’. In corporatist settings, with fairly robust legal-institutionalized resources, their framework predicts that workers will deploy a labour repertoire. Thus, industrial action dominates the repertoire and workers will seek the solidarity of other unions and frame their demands in terms of the expansion or violation of their labour rights. While adaptation or innovation in this repertoire is possible, it will probably focus on the tactics and actions themselves. However, if labour rights are severely curtailed, as in neoliberal regimes, this might lead to a shift towards a citizens’ rights-oriented repertoire: grievances will be framed in terms of civil rights; workers will build alliances with social movements, not just unions; and they will resort to civil legal institutions for protection. Indeed, the claim has recently been advanced that the US labour movement is going ‘back to the future’ (Milkman, 2013) regarding its repertoire, being reminiscent of social movement unionism and associated with the citizens’ rights realm (Johnston, 2000). In reality, a dichotomous approach to the repertoire is too simple as workers could combine both repertoires by layering one repertoire on a pre-existing one (Gentile, 2015).

1 At the same time, several social movement researchers have made a plea for analysing the ‘old’ labour movement and returning to concepts such as class and social conflict in the sociology of work (e.g. Della Porta, 2015).
Studying strike behaviour demands a disaggregated trade union-centred approach because unions normally call strikes. This implies an analysis of the following: the legal-institutionalized settings in which unions act and their collective identity, purposes and leadership; their strike history, tactical playlist and membership composition; and union competition and employers’ attitudes to industrial action. Such an in-depth approach is not possible here. Therefore, as a proxy, with the help of the Gentile-Tarrow framework, we turn to assessing the overall shape of strikes within national borders over time, combined with the sectoral variability of strike behaviour. However, the claim with regard to diversification in the workers’ collective action repertoire is methodologically hard to back up in such a mainly quantitative research design. Ideally, to prove or disprove the diversification claim would require analysing the proportion of strikes vis-à-vis non-strike actions. But longitudinal and comparative data on industrial action short of strikes (labour repertoire) and other forms and expressions of workers’ collective action (citizens’ rights-oriented repertoire) are lacking for most countries. Hence, an analysis solely based on strike data could only be a starting point as the degree of comparability of these data across sectors and countries is debatable. Strike data tend to reflect idiosyncratic national collection methods; small-scale strikes in particular are either overlooked by the statistical bureaus or ignored due to threshold criteria. Nevertheless, strike data remain an important source for analysing one of the most visible expressions of workers’ collective action in the employment relationship.

The aggregated strike picture: sustained cross-national diversity

Historically, strategic strikes by industrial unions in combination with political exchange processes have contributed to workers’ legal-institutionalized recognition, thereby fostering a labour repertoire (including industrial action short of strikes) in western Europe (Visser, 2012). Particularly outside southern Europe, countries with strong corporatist arrangements, by virtue of labour-related political parties, ‘routinized’ strikes within collective bargaining and tried to bind them institutionally. Accordingly, bargaining structures and strike regulation largely mirrored the actual pattern strikes took. Despite their institutionalization, strikes did not immediately wither away: factory-level strikes in manufacturing industry were central in the social protest cycle of 1968–1974 (Dubois, 1978). However, in the 1990s, strike activity decreased and has stayed at a rather low level in western Europe, although with significant country variation. Does this strike picture persist today? Strikes have a multi-dimensional character, reflected in three main indicators: the number of strikes, the number of workers going on strike and the number of days not worked due to industrial action. The days not worked per 1000 employees (days-not-worked rate) is considered the most reliable indicator for cross-national comparisons. The line graphs in Figure 1 depict the weighted average of this rate for most west European countries; the data series start in 1995 and end in 2014. This 20-year period enables us to put recent developments, encompassing the deepening of the Recession, into a longer perspective. The bar graphs, smoothing peaks in the days not worked, compare the countries’ average days-not-worked rate in 2005–2014 with the previous decade.

Focusing on the weighted days-not-worked average and especially its development since the Recession, the line graphs show a relative peak in 2010, resulting mainly from ‘national days of

2 Transnational actions are not analysed as such.
action’ against pension reforms in France (Ancelovici, 2011), after which the days-not-worked average declines to a level lower than before the Recession. This is also reflected in the bar graphs: days-not-worked rates have increased in only a limited number of countries in the past decade. It is instantly clear that Cyprus is well ahead at the top of the ‘strike league’ because of an open-ended conflict that erupted in construction in 2013. Compared with the previous decade, the average days-not-worked rate rose in only four other countries: Belgium, France, Germany and Luxembourg. However, for the latter three countries, data issues might be involved: for France and Germany the method for collecting strike information has changed and there are no data after 2007 for Luxembourg (Dribbusch and Vandaele, 2016). This small country will therefore be left out of the analysis; the same applies to Cyprus and Malta. Nevertheless, the anti-austerity protests appear barely visible. There are at least three reasons for this, indicating that the strike picture is far more differentiated than Figure 1 would suggest and that the domestic context is a significant factor for understanding cross-national diversity.³

³ A Spearman’s correlation coefficient of 0.81 (p<0.001) between the countries’ rank orders in the two periods concerned confirms their relative stable position in the ‘strike league’ – Greece, Italy and Luxembourg are excluded.
First, the number of countries covered by and the reliability of strike data has fallen since 2008. While underestimation of strike activity is an old methodological problem, this is especially relevant for southern European countries. Data are absent from 1999 and 2009 onwards for Greece and Italy, respectively; and while data have always been lacking for strikes in the public administration in Portugal, there are no data at all for 2008–2009; furthermore, certain public sector and general strikes in Spain have been excluded in 2010, 2012 and 2013. Hence, cross-national differences in the days not worked and its weighted average, particularly since the Recession, are both clearly underestimated and would rise if the missing data could be taken into account. This holds true in particular because southern Europe can be labelled the geographical epicentre of anti-austerity protest (Schmalz et al., 2015) and Greece, Italy and Spain have been consistently above average in the European ‘country-strike league’ (Vandaele, 2011). Secondly, the structural crisis of the finance-dominated accumulation regime has affected the European economies differently. Although economic hardship has provided a context for grievances and feelings of relative deprivation, the politics of austerity since 2010 can be associated with the social protest cycle as they made it more likely that blame would be attributed to political authorities (Bermeo and Bartels, 2014). Besides the austerity drive’s timing and severity, the organizational cohesion between unions and institutional access for negotiations between them and governments have also varied, all of which has generated national-specific dynamics of resistance (Ancelovici, 2015). Thirdly, nationally embedded action repertoires also explain the continuing cross-national variation in days-not-worked rates and their uneven development. In particular, general strikes are rarely or not part of the repertoire in several EU countries because they are (deemed) unlawful. It is more likely that general strikes, but also generalized large-scale strikes in the public sector – for example, education, health sector or public transport – both of which can be united under the label of ‘political mass strikes’ (Gall, 2013), dominate the strike data. Such political mass strikes involve many workers, thereby punctuating days-not-worked rates and accentuating their volatility.

Hence, in order to interpret days-not-worked rates, an analytical distinction should be made between political mass strikes and strikes in the realm of collective bargaining. Not only do they normally influence days-not-worked rates differently, but more importantly they (can) vary as to their purpose and opponent, spatial dimension and social significance. In practice, however, the distinction might be blurred as both types can mutually influence each other, a point already made by Rosa Luxemburg. In countries where strikes targeted at the government are legally restricted, social protest will, in all likelihood, be expressed via other types of collective action. The Central and Eastern European countries exemplify this variety in the repertoire: in several – though not all – of them, governments’ neoliberal-inspired austerity policy packages put an end to labour quiescence and prompted demonstrations, a protest type that now dominates the repertoire (Greskovits, 2015). The aforementioned Gentile-Tarrow framework helps to explain why workers in Central and Eastern European countries, with generally weak legal-institutional resources, are increasingly relying on collective non-strike actions in the employment relationship. Thus, Greskovits (2015: 282) identifies ‘tectonic changes in labour’s typical voices of discontent’, essentially supporting the framework’s expectations. As he suggests, the dynamic Gentile-Tarrow framework also looks suitable for a historical and comparative understanding of strike developments in western Europe.

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5 Long-lasting strikes in the collective bargaining context could have a similar effect.
The shape of strikes

Based on the strike indicators, the overall ‘shape’ of strikes can be calculated. Dividing the strike frequency per million workers in employment represents the first dimension. The second dimension is the number of strikers per strike or mean size of a strike. The last dimension refers to the duration or the days not worked divided by the number of workers on strike. Based on the shape of strikes at least three prevailing groups of countries in western Europe have been identified historically, although with some noteworthy changes since the 1990s (Bordogna and Cella, 2002): a group consisting of southern countries marked by frequent, large-scale but short strikes, resulting in high days-not-worked rates; a country group characterized by a low strike frequency but rather large and lengthy strikes with low days-not-worked rates as an outcome; and a ‘mixed group’ showing features of both other country groups. In order to assess whether this clustering still holds true, the overall shape of strikes is calculated for different countries over the past two decades (see Table 1).

Still intact – the southern ‘strike front’

In most southern European countries, attempts to channel industrial conflict via ‘social pacts’ in the 1990s and beyond help to explain the generally decreasing strike activity and days-not-worked rates before the Recession (Vandaele, 2011: 16–17). Since then, there has been a resurgence of industrial conflict, especially addressing the political dimension via general strikes. Showing unions’ capacity to mobilize, such one-day demonstration strikes, aimed at governments, have been historically and geographically concentrated in southern Europe and Greece particularly. In general, in Europe as whole, such strikes, or the threat of them, have been on the rise since the 1980s (Kelly, 2015: 11). They are not called for an indefinite period with the explicit purpose of

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**Table 1. The shape of strikes, 1995–2004 and 2005–2014.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country groups</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>Duration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Southern countries</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>2073.3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>429.9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>494.3</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low-strike countries</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>2290.9</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>8.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>1473.1</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>1457.8</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>2154.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mixed country group</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>568.4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>609.2</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>127.8</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>1572.1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Source: ETUI.*
bringing down the government; today’s general strikes are directed towards (unilateral) govern-
ment policy initiatives or policies, with the purpose of pushing their policy closer to union pre-
ferences. As this requires a different research design, their effectiveness in moderating or reversing
austerity packages and penalizing incumbent governments cannot be analysed here, but it is
claimed that governments offered concessions in 35 per cent of 92 general strikes between 1980
and 2013 (Kelly, 2015: 13). Figure 2 demonstrates that general strikes can still be largely associ-
ated with southern Europe and increased in the period 2010–2013. More qualitative research is
needed on the extent to which workers act upon union strike calls, the actual form of those strikes
and their significance for influencing the political agenda and discourse.

Solely based on the data in Table 1, the existence of a southern ‘strike front’ seems doubtful as
data for France and Greece are lacking and the official strike data of the other countries have
deficiencies. Nevertheless, the short duration of strikes in Italy, Portugal and to some extent Spain
parallels the use of one-day mass demonstration strikes. Correspondingly, unions usually do
not have strike funds. In fact, in Portugal, partial strikes have become more common since the
Recession to limit wage losses (Costa et al., 2015: 5). Also, on average, the Portuguese strike size
has increased, and, although this seems not to be the case in Spain, we should recall that several
large strikes have been excluded from the data since the Recession. In France, while the days-not-
worked rate during the Hollande presidency (further) declined, at least until 2013, no later data are
available. The French repertoire has altered as ‘strikes are getting more scattered, impromptu, and
shorter, and significantly, there is a rise in individual manifestations of conflict’ (Le Queux and
Sainsaulieu, 2010: 507). However, due to divisions between unions, a revival of social movement
unionism has hardly resulted in revitalizing the main characteristics of France’s industrial relations.

Figure 2. General strikes (including threats) in western Europe since 1995.
Source: Data provided by John Kelly.
Persistently low-strike countries

This group consists of Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland (on the latter, see Rieger, 2016). Typically, general strikes are nearly absent in this country group as they hardly belong to the repertoire; they are very singular events. Rather, contract bargaining periods influence but do not determine the ‘strike rhythm’; they explain occasional peaks in industrial conflict. Cross-national variation in days-not-worked rates highlights differences in the dimension of bargaining units, ‘union-restricting workplace institutions’ (Gentile, 2015: 259) and the strictness of peace obligation clauses contained in collective agreements. Where industrial conflict – exceptionally – occurs, it tends to be large and long-lasting. Particularly in Germany, indefinite strikes are mounting in the services sector, with strike tactics shifting towards discontinuous, rolling walkouts, while today’s repertoire comprises flash mobs, rallies and demonstrations (Bewernitz and Dribbusch, 2014). Nevertheless, the countries in this group continue to show negligible levels of strike activity generating low days-not-worked rates (except for Norway). In fact, strikes are almost waning in Sweden: they only account for one-third of all industrial actions, although unions are still advancing a labour repertoire as boycotts and solidarity actions are increasing (Lindberg, 2012). In 1997, a new agreement, covering most of the manufacturing sector, made it difficult to use strikes as a bargaining tactic, which, later on, also influenced public sector bargaining (Teague, 2009: 510–512). However, challenges such as globalization, the EU internal market and the rise of extreme-right parties explain why the main unions are slowly diversifying their action repertoire and cooperation with social movements is burgeoning (Peterson et al., 2012).

A mixed country group

Denmark, Finland, Ireland, the UK and probably Belgium are all part of a mixed group with various shapes fairly distinct from the country groups above. In Belgium, strikes are also associated with the bargaining cycle, but the interpretation of the agreements’ peace obligations is fairly liberal. Public mass strikes, including two general strikes, significantly influence the country’s strike pattern since the Recession. Anti-austerity/pro-democracy movements newly established by citizens and civil society organizations, though split along communitarian lines, are buttressing the unions in their anti-austerity protests and enriching them with a citizens’ rights-oriented repertoire.
Tolerating wildcat strikes, Denmark is marked by many small strikes, a trend that began in the 1990s, although the high frequency is partly the result of changes in data collection (Birke, 2007). The country is still at the top regarding strike frequency, but this has declined considerably, whereas an almost four-week lock-out of teaching staff in the local government sector in 2013 has boosted the duration of industrial conflict. In Finland, strike activity is high and has increased, whereas strikes tend to be shorter and smaller. The data do not yet include the general strike of 2015 opposing planned government labour market reforms.

In the UK, public sector strikes, involving large numbers of workers, are clearly in the ascendant and explain the changed strike pattern (Lyddon, 2015). The predominance of such large-scale one-off demonstrative strikes is reflected in the strong increase in strike size, whereas the average duration has decreased. Over time, strike frequency and days-not-worked rates have declined considerably and stabilized at a historical low. Questioning a trade-off relationship between strikes and industrial action short of strikes, overtime bans, go-slow and works-to-rule have declined over time (Kelly, 2015: 4–5). However, simultaneously a shift has developed in the repertoire towards the civil rights domain: the proportion of strikes has been reduced alongside a corresponding increase in labour demonstrations, a trend that has become even more pronounced since the Recession (Bailey, 2013). Economic restructuring, hostile legislation since the Thatcher administration of the 1980s, which has taken the strike weapon out of the hands of shop stewards, and chastening defeats suffered by major unions all contribute to our understanding of repertorial adaptation (Joyce, 2015). The UK case illustrates especially that if workers’ legal-institutionalized resources are strongly reduced, they move to a citizens’ rights-oriented repertoire based on labour demonstrations.

Apart from the higher average duration, Ireland shows a fairly similar strike pattern, although without a notable increase of political mass strikes (at least outside the transport sector). Irish governments aimed to move away from adversarial workplace attitudes and turned to an institutionalization of conflict, consecrated in national social partnership agreements from 1989 to 2009, fostering ‘new formal and informal approaches to addressing industrial relations conflict’ (Teague, 2009: 507). Like the UK, Ireland saw direct actions at the onset of the Recession; although in Ireland occupations have ‘been more used by students and community campaigners as citizens than by workers as workers’ (Gall, 2013: 221). Public sector unions organized one of Ireland’s largest one-day strikes against the bailout in 2010, but strike activity declined afterwards. This might change if the economy recovers and workers demand higher wages.

De-industrialization and globalization affecting the labour repertoire

The empirical overview given above shows an almost general downward tendency in strike frequency, albeit to different degrees across countries; Finland and the Netherlands are exceptions. While earlier theories suggest a pro-cyclical trend in frequency, with low inflation and high unemployment dampening workers’ willingness to strike, other studies have emphasized structural variables alluding to a higher frequency, either because of a decentralization of collective bargaining, resulting in more opportunities for industrial conflict, or shifts in the employment composition. The latter – the ‘tertiarisation of industrial conflict’ (Bordogna and

6 Looking at the period since 2010, strike frequency has declined in Finland and the Netherlands, but has risen in Norway, Spain and Switzerland, compared with the previous five-year average.
Cella, 2002) – assumes that strikes in the services sector are escalating, whereas strike-prone unionized sectors have structurally declined over time, yielding an overall muted days-not-worked rate. Although the calculation is only indicative, as the NACE classification was revised in 2008, Table 2 displays a steady trend towards further de-industrialization of employment with a corresponding decrease in the days-not-worked rate in industry in most countries. Days-not-worked rates are below 33 per cent in Germany, the Netherlands and the UK. Germany’s rate in industry is predominantly dependent on the strategy of IG Metall, which has turned to warning strikes in the past decade, which are not measured in the official data. In the UK, as discussed above, public sector strikes dominate the pattern. Still, in all other countries, with notable country variation, the impact of the industrial sector strikes on the days-not-worked rate is still sizeable, even in the past decade, pointing to the industrial unions’ reliance on a labour repertoire, although this might not exclude adaptation to this repertoire.

The arithmetic effect of shrinking manufacturing employment has not been the only structural change in the economy that has reduced days-not-worked rates. Economic globalization increases the ability of multinational corporations to use whipsawing techniques and makes their exit options more credible even without any actual capital relocation or explicit threats (Dunn, 2015: 161–176). Although mediated by labour market institutions (Brandl and Traxler, 2010), intensified competitive pressures have probably altered how workers, especially in exposed sectors, engage in strike action, leading to a ‘novel calculus’ (Scheuer, 2006) characterized by labour concessions and quiescence. At the same time, multinational corporations’ brand consciousness offers opportunities for unions to launch comprehensive campaigns short of strikes for improving working conditions (Lévesque and Murray, 2002). Moreover, whereas fragile just-in-time production and supply chain systems offer potential levers for strategic strike action, this has been barely exploited to date (Gall, 2014: 213–214), although the continuing Amazon campaign by Germany’s ver.di is a notable exception in the services sector.


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<tr>
<td>Southern Europe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>35%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>46%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>35%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed country group</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>43%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Ireland</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>22%</td>
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<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>19%</td>
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<td>10%</td>
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Sources: Employment: Eurostat; Days-not-worked rates: ETUI.
Mixed repertoires in the private services sector?

In general, the occupational structure has been marked by ‘upgrading’: employment has expanded much more rapidly in high-paid occupations than in low-paid ones over time (Oesch, 2015). As the average size of establishments tends to be smaller in the private services sector, this upgrading implies a lower likelihood of unionization. Thus, other than de-unionization as such, weakening workplace unionism can further explain the declining trend in strike activity (Jansen, 2014). As mobilization theory highlights, workplace union activists are crucial in a sequential process of framing: they help in identifying potential issues of conflict, making workers aware of social injustice and attributing it to management; fostering group identification; and defending strike action as an effective means of mitigating or undoing perceived social injustice when the occasion arises (Buttigieg et al., 2008). Weakening workplace unionism might be the result of inadequate union strategies, employers’ union-avoidance practices or anti-union legislation or ongoing transformation in the organizing of work and employment. The lack of union voice makes room for non-strike actions, often of a more individual character, for addressing workplace conflict (Gall, 2014: 223–224). Assuming a trade-off relationship, the low strike days-not-worked rate7 probably implies a corresponding increase of other forms and expressions of individual or collective resistance to being treated as a commodity, whether in the workplace or in the labour market (Hebdon and Noh, 2013). Indeed, Gall (2013: 217) provides a transnational overview of non-strike actions in the private service sector considering them to be attempts to generate ‘soft power’ and that they often involve ‘workers as citizens’ as much or more than they do ‘workers as workers’.

Moving to low-paid occupations, workers’ associational and workplace bargaining power are relatively low (Silver, 2003: 170–173). Does this imply that low-paid workers are moving towards social movement tactics and alliance-building strategies? Linking new occupational groups with a renovated collective action repertoire might be too general. Embedded in country-specific production and welfare state regimes, occupational groups are heterogeneous and develop unevenly and, hence, their relative size and importance differ across countries (Hyman, 1978). Also, universalistic assertions are dubious because unions differ in terms of their organizational legacies of strike behaviour and learning capabilities. In Greece and Italy, for instance, unions representing precarious workers have moved towards a more diversified set of actions and alliance-building with social movements, although demands are centred on labour rights in the Greece case but not necessarily in Italy (Vogiatzoglou, 2015: 153–156). Furthermore, the importance of legal-institutional resources is illustrated by the UK ‘Justice for Cleaners’ campaign and a similar Dutch campaign. As labour rights are relatively unaffected in the Netherlands, prolonged industrial action in the cleaning sector is clearly linked to collective bargaining rounds, whereas strike actions are less central in the UK. Finally, a repertoire shift should not be understood as a mechanical reaction to regime change: it is ‘contingent on networks of trust between the union’s leadership and the membership and . . . upon union leaders’ openness to outsiders and externally-connected insiders experienced with non-labor contention’ (Gentile and Tarrow, 2009: 489). Hence, a complementary qualitative approach is necessary: the literature on community and social movement unionism and unions’ relationship with social movements would be of particular relevance for understanding why workers successfully shift to a citizens’ rights-oriented repertoire or not.

7 A lower days-not-worked rate might also be the result of strikes linked to smaller bargaining units or average size of establishments.
Finally, the transport and logistics sector, although close to the industry sector, is part of the services sector and the development of its days-not-worked rates is different. Days-not-worked rates are characterized by cross-country variation, but have also been increasing in most countries (see Figure 3). This reflects a labour repertoire and relatively favourable and unaffected workplace bargaining power stemming from transport systems’ centrality to transnational production networks (Silver, 2003: 97–103). Transport workers can generally use strikes more economically and effectively. Even short strikes involving a relatively small number of strikers – for example, train drivers, maritime pilots or air traffic controllers – can cause considerable disruption to distribution and transport flows, which is not fully captured by conventional strike indicators. At the same time, this disruptiveness might explain why the state continues to curb the right to strike, particularly in transport, by providing for minimum or guaranteed services in so-called ‘essential services’.8 More systematic analysis, focusing on transport subsectors, could examine whether this undermining of labour rights entails an adaptation of the established labour repertoire or a shift to a citizens’ rights-oriented repertoire. At least some of these transport unions take a more politicized approach and have been opening up to cooperation with civil society, while still relying on a labour repertoire,

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8 Other strategies for tackling disruption are technological innovation and increasing competitive pressures.
although it is unclear whether such a ‘radical political unionism has a reasonable chance of spreading into other sectors across Europe as an instrument of revitalization’ (McIlroy, 2012: 257).

The new protest cycle: addressing the state . . . and combining repertoires?

Reclaiming urban public spaces, one of the most visible responses to the austerity regime, undoubtedly lay at the origin of the initial mobilization by anti-austerity/pro-democracy movements such as Geração à Rasca, the Indignados, Amesi Dimokratia Tora! and Occupy in 2011.9 Those movements have a younger and more educated constituency – those most affected by the Recession – and participants are more likely to identify with the middle class (Peterson et al., 2015). Not only do these movements differ from unions in terms of their socio-demographic composition and class identification, but they have also been – at least initially – critical towards unions, accusing them of not representing their demands and needs. This contested political legitimacy and declining trust in the main unions in southern Europe has been the price they have paid for their original strategy of political inclusion in co-managing the crisis (Hyman, 2015). However, besides workers’ grass-roots resistance, unions have been central in the anti-austerity protest, adding an intergenerational dimension to it (Peterson et al., 2015). As most national governments in Europe are sacrificing the public sector on the altar of fiscal orthodoxy, the prevalence of anti-austerity protest in this sector has, unsurprisingly, clearly characterized the current cycle of social protest (Bermeo and Bartels, 2014). Not that the locus of protest is novel: it is part of a long-term trend as such ‘public sector militancy’ emerged during the previous protest cycle of 1968–1974 (Hyman, 1978) and continued in the following decades (Gall, 2013). Compared with the period 1995–2004, Figure 4 shows that the share of – often large-scale – public sector strikes rose in the following five-year periods in most countries for which disaggregated data are available. The interplay between adjustments in public employment regimes and different modalities in the right to strike might contribute to a better understanding of this variation in militancy.

Not only focusing on workers’ (vested) interests, but paying closer attention to civil rights issues has been claimed to be a prior requirement for overcoming the divide between unions and anti-austerity/pro-democracy movements and shifting towards social movement unionism (Köhler and Calleja Jiménez, 2015). Apart from possible learning processes, various dynamics could explain why unions might have incentives for experimenting with a citizens’ rights–oriented repertoire. Thus, governments have seen the Recession context as an opportunity for legislating away labour rights, for example, and there has been a (further) de-institutionalization of collective bargaining, especially in crisis-hit countries (Schömann, 2016). If the state is no longer upholding or is even hostile towards collective bargaining structures, it narrows the opportunity structure for a labour repertoire. This also accounts for the prosecution of strikers and the introduction of stricter strike regulations, against which unions have increasingly been taking legal action: they have brought cases before national and international labour courts and tribunals, but also before the European Court of Human Rights (Schömann, 2016). As participants in anti-austerity/pro-democracy movements share the same discontent and left-leaning political orientations as unionists (Peterson et al., 2015), there are opportunities for coalition-building based on a citizens’ rights-oriented approach, particularly as European unions have been familiar with such an approach in the past (Gentile, 2015). Also, a perceived low effectiveness of political mass strikes by workers might further contribute to a more mixed repertoire involving worker–citizen alliances. And

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9 The 2008 student protest in Italy with its slogan ‘Noi la vostra crisi non la paghiamo’ anticipated this.
as public mass strikes often go together with rallies and demonstrations, they probably lend themselves better to a citizens’ rights-oriented framing than strikes in the realm of collective bargaining.

Nevertheless, whether unions have actually and effectively shifted towards a more mixed repertoire is an empirical question, which can only be hinted at here by reference to southern Europe. In this part of Europe, there has undoubtedly been higher participation in demonstrations since the Recession (Ancelovici, 2015: 191). Yet, the main Greek union confederation is experiencing difficulties connecting with anti-austerity/pro-democracy movements (Vogiatzoglou, 2015: 210–214). Still, in Spain, unions have rediscovered ‘a protest model that transcends the representation of labour interests and connects with civil society’ (González Begega and Luque Balbóna, 2014: 97). The Spanish repertoire has also featured performances beyond the traditional labour repertoire: union members have become participants in large-scale demonstrations, such as the mareas ciudadanas seeking to defend public workers’ labour rights and the users of services (Cristancho, 2015: 199–202). Similarly, in Portugal there is a rising rapprochement between unions and anti-austerity/pro-democracy movements (Accornero and Ramos Pinto, 2015; Costa et al., 2015). All in all, whether a sustainable collective identity and framing can be built is still undecided as ‘divisions and potential conflicts of interests according to class, gender and ethnicity’ require ‘sustained dialogue and debate’ (Hyman, 2015: 118 and 119). Moreover, if political opportunity structures for unions become more open again, ‘political unionism’ (Gentile, 2015) might return for promoting sustainable labour rights, whether or not in combination with other repertoires.


*Note: Public sector comprises public administration and defence, compulsory social security; education; and human health services. Data partial or lacking: Austria, Belgium (until 2002), Finland (2009–2014), France, Greece, Italy (2009–2014), Portugal and Sweden (2009–2014).*

*Source: ETUI.*
Conclusion

Whereas any interpretation is dependent on the country selected and period studied, two general observations, corroborating previous findings, can be made about strike developments over the past 20 years. First, the level of strike activity has fallen further in almost all countries in western Europe, resulting in a levelling off of aggregated days-not-worked rates. This should not be mistaken for an absence of conflict in employment relations. But, in contrast to what the mainstream press and media might generally report, even more than in the past, strike action today is exceptional. With a view to explaining this ‘strike aridity’, the Swedish case points to a further institutionalization of strikes; such a channelling of social conflict also holds true for the southern European countries and Ireland before the Recession. Also, the strike decline mirrors the fall of industrial unionism and, hence, the lesser prominence of a labour repertoire. In particular, multinational corporations’ whipsawing techniques might have a negative effect on industrial workers’ fairly strong marketplace bargaining and strike tactics, while the relocation of production plants goes together with increased industrial conflict in the global South (Silver, 2003). Furthermore, there will be a debilitating impact on future strike activity as a result of key strike defeats in union stronghold sectors. Nevertheless, the labour repertoire is associated with the bargaining cycle in those countries where the branch or sector is the dominant level for concluding collective agreements and the threat of strike action might still be effective. This certainly also accounts for the transport sector. At the same time, the labour repertoire does not exclude that the ‘institutionalized’ strike weapon may be immersed in a barrel containing a wider range of non-strike tactics and actions for collective resistance. Probably the tertiarization of industrial conflict is only partially expressed via a labour repertoire; it is certainly dominant in the transport and public sector – both strongholds of unionism – but also curtailed by strict strike regulations. However, whether a citizens’ rights-oriented collective action repertoire in the private services sector is developing across Europe will depend on the specificities of the industrial relations system in each country.

The second general observation is that even though strike developments in specific sectors are often similar, countries can still be categorized in terms of the dominant pattern of their strikes. Apart from the varying employment composition of national economies, the incidence of general strikes should certainly be taken into account here. While strike activity in southern Europe as such was generally declining before the Recession, there has been an intensification of such strikes since the expansion and deepening of austerity programmes. Outside southern Europe, such strikes are less frequent and only occasionally disturb country-specific strike contours. However, compared with the period 1995–2004, in most of the Germanic and Nordic countries for which data are available, and unquestionably in the UK, public sector militancy, measured by its days-not-worked share, has increased in the past decade. Further study is needed to examine whether the Recession has been a critical juncture for unions in developing an enduring citizens’ rights-oriented repertoire and whether such a repertoire finds a stable resonance within a changing party-political opportunity structure. Both public sector and general strikes could offer new openings for layering a citizens’ rights-oriented repertoire onto a labour repertoire. Even so, underlining unions’ lasting capacity as mobilization machines, political mass strikes have been dominating today’s social protest cycle and, given continuing adjustments in public employment regimes, it is very likely that they are indeed ‘here to stay’. They are frequently well-organized one-day events, involving a larger number of workers, bureaucratically organized and coordinated by unions. Rather than economic conditions, it is primarily institutional factors linked to the austerity drive that are influencing the timing, level and form of anti-austerity protest and strike actions. Those actions have been mostly defensive in nature, aimed at seeking a direct political exchange with
governments, although with limited success so far (Hyman, 2015), at least in terms of discernible and immediate effects on austerity policies.

All of this is in stark contrast to the protest cycle of 1968–1974, when political unionism was in its heyday in the advanced capitalist societies. Grass-roots-driven short strikes, at the factory level in industry, with a mainly offensive character initially characterized that previous cycle and were instrumental in strengthening corporatist arrangements (Dubois, 1978). However, there are also historical parallels such as fears about social order and state strategies for suppressing strike activity, which might further shape a repertoire favouring industrial action short of strikes or a citizens’ rights-based one, or both. Another similarity is the critical attitude of certain occupational groups towards unions. Whereas grass-roots criticism was largely internal to unions in the previous protest cycle, today external criticism of the unions comes mostly from the younger and more educated constituency of anti-austerity/pro-democracy movements, at least in southern Europe. But the labour movement also outside this part of Europe is likely to face the task not only of seeking to overcome a potential internal private sector–public sector divide, but also the challenge of deploying a citizens’ rights-oriented repertoire for framing demands and alliance-building strategies with anti-austerity/pro-democracy movements or community-based and social reform organizations. Although more detailed country and sector-specific evidence is certainly needed, in general it looks like there are increasing incentives for the labour movement as a whole to experiment progressively with combining a labour repertoire with a citizens’ rights-oriented repertoire for supplementing labour rights. Whether unions could really do this is an empirical question of aspiration and ability.

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