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Editorial

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Aggregated strike volumes in western Europe, the geographical focus of this special issue, are on average below the peaks reached in the immediate post-war period and again from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s. However, the European strike picture masks significant differentiation across sectors and between countries and, therefore, general observations on strike activity are encumbered with many exceptions. Overall, however, many strike actions and union-led protests have been defensive struggles as they have been called by trade unions to protect collectively agreed or statutory social standards. The national or EU imposed austerity policies, which followed the Great Recession of 2008/2009, triggered a new cycle of social protest which led to political mass strikes, in particular in southern Europe but also in some other countries. This upswing of contestation contributed to more pronounced differences in the days not worked due to industrial action across countries. Indeed, in some countries, strike activity declined even further over time. Still, the tertiarization of industrial conflict, that is, the shift of strike activity from the traditional trade union heartlands in manufacturing industries to the service sector, is further driven by ongoing privatization and liberalization of public employment and deteriorating working conditions. Over the last years, this industrial action in former subsectors of the public sector has especially become prominent in Germany but also in other countries.

The fact that Transfer is devoting within just over a year a second special issue to research in industrial action and social protest is testimony to a renewed academic and public interest in the subject. While the May 2015 issue of this journal discussed the conditions, obstacles and opportunities for transnational collective action in Europe, this special issue aims to offer a range of different perspectives on and aspects of recent industrial action and union-led protests. The special issue starts with a comparative overview of the quantitative developments in strike activity across western Europe in the last 20 years. Applying a comparative cross-country perspective, two contributions focus respectively on participants’ contentious cultures and on the deployment of new information and communication technologies in trade union-led protests. Whether the gendered character of strikes and protests can be a key to the understanding of their success or failure is examined by looking at two strongly gendered groups of workers, namely nurses and miners in Poland. The complex relationship between industrial action and trade union organizing is studied by using disaggregated data on union membership in the German service sector, while a set of major strikes in the Danish public sector is the background against which economic gains and losses of collective action are considered. The contemporary relevance of the strike weapon is analysed by looking at political mass strikes in Italy and Spain since the Great Recession. Finally, this special issue includes four News and Background articles. Two feature the legal situation of industrial action, within the international frameworks of respectively the International Labour Organisation and of the Council of Europe. A third article takes stock of the disparate recording of strike activity by official statistical agencies and the like, while the final one looks at the development of industrial conflict in a country commonly associated with social peace, Switzerland. With this special issue we aim not only to provide new insights, but also to stimulate further research into what remains an indispensable tool within the repertoire of contention of workers and trade unions.

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