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Contemporary strike activity in western Europe: the domination of the political mass strike

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Introduction

So long as there is capitalism, there will be a mass of exploited and oppressed wage labourers called workers (the proletariat). So long as there are workers, there will be associations of workers (most obviously, labour unions) which attempt to right the wrongs that their members (as workers) face under capitalism. So long as there are unions, there will be strikes as unions of workers attempt to exert pressure upon and leverage over employers and government to right the wrongs that their members face.

This simple historical and theoretical formulation simultaneously tells us a great deal and almost nothing about the state of strike activity in western Europe over the last two decades. The formulation suggests that there will be strikes but is unable to give any guidance on their qualitative and quantitative dimensions such as form, nature and frequency. Neither can the formulation give guidance on their specific causes and particular effects such as bargaining outcomes and political ramifications. It is only when we ponder the specificities of the historical period under study that we can begin to apply a general formulation in a way that is productive and illuminating. This makes taking account of the political and economic dynamics and imperatives of the particular period of capitalist society essential in order to understand the 'how', 'where', 'when' and 'why' of unions acting and re-acting with strikes to the situations they find themselves and their members in.

Based upon my paper called 'Quiescence continued? Recent strike activity in nine Western European economies' (which was published in the academic journal, *Economic and Industrial Democracy*, in November 2013 and examined the period 1986 to 2008 in Belgium, Britain, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain), this article argues that the defining features – or hall marks - of the last two decades for understanding strike activity are the ascendancy and entrenchment of neo-liberalism, the corresponding decline of the remnants of social democracy and the continued ability of unions to mobilise their members in mass strikes despite atrophy in their workplace organisational presence and political influence. Neo-liberalism is defined by two essential elements. First, the belief that market mechanisms are superior to any other (especially that of state intervention) for the operation of economies. Therefore, any impediments to the untrammelled operation of the market are to be reduced and removed. And, second, that neo-liberalism has been used by existing dominant elites in society to further their own material, political and ideological interests to the detriment of wage labourers. This implies that organisations of workers like unions are then to be denuded of their power and influence. By contrast, social democracy is defined as the intervention of the state in the processes of the operation of the market to ameliorate its outcomes in order that the extent of inequality and social injustice are reduced. One of social democracy's most significant components is corporatism (also called tripartism), whereby government and the peak organisations of employers and unions meet together in order to exercise restraint on the operation of the market through a negotiated process of political exchange.

The most obvious outcome of the clash of neo-liberalism (and its effects) and labour unions wishing to defend their members interests and re-establish or maintain the remnants of the institutions of social democracy has been the mass strike. Whether taking the form of a general strike throughout the whole economy or a general strike across the public sector, the public sector has emerged as the heartland of labour unionism in this battle and mostly obviously provides the characterisation of these strikes as *political* mass strikes. Political strikes are defined as the mounting of demonstrative collective mobilizations in the political, rather than industrial, arena. The point is to develop political

leverage over the government rather than impose economic costs upon workers' immediate employers as per what can be termed an 'economic' strike where the purpose is to reduce the ability to make profit. Furthermore, since the turn of the crisis of neo-liberalism into the era of austerity from 2007-2008 onwards, these political mass strikes have become more marked in both their qualitative and quantitative dimensions.

However, there is an important geographical qualification to be made here to the presence of the three defining constituents of the period, and especially the presence of the political mass strike. Essentially, there is a north-south divide whereby the economies of Portugal, Spain, France, Italy and Greece do conform to this proffered analysis while those of Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany do not. Nonetheless, re-examining the three components of neo-liberalism, social democracy and union actors in those latter countries of northern western Europe does still help to explain why the particular configuration or inter-relationship of the three components. For example, in Germany the framework of social democratic intervention still exists by way of the system of co-determination (works councils, worker directors) and industry-wide collective bargaining which has a legal standing. In Britain, political ties between the unions and Labour Party remain strong by comparison to many other countries under study and maintain the institutionalisation of union practice (compared to the traditions of street protest found elsewhere in France, Greece, Italy, Spain and Portugal).

Added to here in this article is an overview of the period 2009 to 2013 so that the overall analysis covers fully the years of the last two decades. This is done using the same research methods, namely, of utilising secondary data from national state agencies and quality news reports. The structure of this article is to first of all make some observations about the reliability of the data on strikes before moving to examine the overall trends on strike activity. The remainder of the article then concentrates upon the phenomenon of the political mass strike.

Data issues: impact of exclusions and revisions

The standard measures of aggregate strike activity are, by year, the number of strikes, the number of workers involved, the number of days not worked (or days 'lost') and the number of days not worked per 1000 workers. The last is a key measure of strike activity because it allows a standardized comparison across countries given that it is a relative measure. The overwhelming majority of the nine countries calculate this measure based on the constituency being the total workforce, thereby including all those adults of a working age available for work. Yet the lack of standardized inter-country data has always been a necessary consideration when analysing strike activity. The exclusion of public sector, general and political strikes from data for the period under study is likely to have had significant implications for several countries – Belgium, Greece, Portugal, France and Germany – in terms of under-capturing the numbers of workers involved and days not worked in strikes as the number of these political mass strikes has increased in absolute and relative terms. On top of this, the case of Greece presents particular problems as a result of the cessation of data collection in 1998 by the Greek state. Significant downward revisions have also taken place in the data for France, Greece and Spain. And in regard to Germany, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) official figures are considerably below those published by the Institute of Economic and Social Research of the Hans Böckler Foundation. The outcome of these data deficiencies is that there may be a significant degree of under-reporting of strike activity. However, the resources are not available to measure the extent of this under-reporting.

Recent strike activity

There are four main features of strike activity in the nine countries. First, while there has been a general decline in aggregate strike activity, this has often been punctuated by sharp peaks, namely, significant inter-year variation. This is primarily accounted for by the existence of the political mass strikes. However, since the late 1990s there has been some considerable stability at the lower levels established prior to the late 1990s and even some growth within these parameters. Second, substantial inter-country variation remains and is most easily highlighted by comparing Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands to France, Italy and Spain. Third, the sectoral location of strike activity in the nine countries continues to be heavily based in areas of the public sector and transport and communication. Metalworking is much less represented. Thus, the dominant nature of the strike activity, especially the sharp peaks, has become increasingly concerned with mounting demonstrative collective mobilizations in the political, rather than industrial, arena. Consequently, much strike activity is increasingly being deployed as a tool of political leverage with governments rather than as a tool of industrial leverage with (private sector) employers. The issues that give rise to the political mass strikes are labour market and social welfare reforms for the whole economy or changes to terms and conditions for public sector workers. Fourth, official (state) data on strikes are likely to be increasingly unreliable as they contain ever more significant exclusions (of strikes in many parts of the public sector), raising not so much the prospect of an end to quiescence but an overestimation of the extent of decline.

Between 1986 and 1996, 51 of these political mass strikes took place, while a slightly higher rate of 70 took place in the 12 years between 1997 and 2008. As suggested below, this number has increased considerably in absolute and proportionate terms since 2009 (albeit the singular contribution of Greece does considerably skew these figures). The maintenance, and relative growth, of these demonstrative strikes as a weapon in open-ended, public policy negotiations, and where the government is the one step removed direct employer, continue to indicate that in a number of countries unions are being excluded from exercising effective influence within the formal, institutionalised process of political exchange. The breakdown of multi-employer collective bargaining arrangements in the private sector (especially in manufacturing) is one of the facilitating reasons why strikes in this sector have become fragmented and disorganised (into establishment and/or employer units). By contrast, mass public sector strikes often remain as a facilitated outcome of multi-employer bargaining. And where general strikes take place across the whole economy, the single target of the government provides the unifying focus.

In terms of the north-south divide in the presence of the political mass strike, the traditions of protest and prior exclusion have an important bearing. Thus, the exclusion of some major parts of national union movements is not historically new in a number of countries given their affiliation to communist parties and the existence of dictatorships until the mid-1970s (i.e. France, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain). Consequently, forms of articulation of interest representation, based upon mass popular street protests and demonstrations, were part of the repertoires of contention and, with a sense of path dependency rather than determination, have now become ever more habituated as part of the activity of political mass strikes. In the context of the general weakening of organized labour and overall decline in strike activity, the existence of these strikes may be seen as a both a strength and a weakness. Thus, the strength is to be found in the organizational ability to stage these in terms of the expression of collective discontent against and contestation of neoliberal policies. But the weakness is that there is a need to at all – given the decline of political influence – and a need to organize so many, indicating that they are not a panacea and may have a declining purchase if used frequently, as the case of Greece may indicate. Moreover, the ability to mobilize for political mass strikes should not be assumed to imply that the workplace organisation of unions in the public sector is necessarily in a rude state of health.

In the north of Europe, and possibly aided by the depth of the crisis and austerity being slightly less severe than in the south of Europe, the development of new traditions of more active mass protest (like those of the political mass strike) to outflank those of the old ways like the practice of lobbying (associated with corporatism) with lowered political objectives has not (yet) taken place. While in all of the nine economies, there has been a considerable decline in the closeness of political and institutional ties between the (nominal) parties of labour and their respective union movements, in Britain, Germany and the Netherlands, ties remain somewhat closer, testifying to the continued pursuit (but not achievement) of social dialogue by unions there. In these northern European countries, the semi-occasional mass demonstration in a capital city as way to left off member's steam and a way to give expression of voice (but without much effect to that expression of voice) has not yet been connected to a strategy to stop the operation of a capital city on a work day and the wider economy on the same day through a general strike.

However, it is not just the difference in traditions of protest that explains why such political mass strikes are common in southern Europe. Given that social democratic parties (and governments) no longer meaningfully exist as a result of their colonization by neoliberalism (producing 'social liberalism'), it is also crucial to note that, through realignment projects, new radical left parties like the Communist Refoundation (Italy), Left Bloc (Portugal), Syriza (Greece) or Left Party (Germany) have not filled the vacuum of becoming credible potential governing parties. Only since 2013 may this be the case in Greece.

Therefore, the argument here runs that the prevalence of these political mass strikes in southern Europe results from the co-joining of the effective political exclusion, in terms of both process and outcomes, within a neoliberal reconfigured economy and society and the maintenance of certain traditions of political protest and action. Consequently, these strikes result not from attempts to influence the political process from within – as per with corporatism and or social democratic governments – but from without and in the absence of corporatism and social democracy. Looked at another way, the political strikes are not deployed because social democratic parties are out of office for a term of office here or there as may have been the case prior to the rise of neoliberalism. Rather, the paradigm shift to neo-liberalism has resulted in the end of social democracy as a credible political force even if the electoral basis for it remains among certain constituencies such as unionized workers.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of 2009, the dominant presence of the political mass strike within overall state of strike activity in the nine economies has been maintained, if not extended. For example, in Greece in 2012 there were twelve general strikes and seventeen in the two previous years. In Spain, there have been general strikes in 2010, 2012 and 2013 while in neighbouring Portugal there have been two general strikes each in 2012 and 2013 with one each in the two previous years. And on 14 November 2012, there was a European-wide general strike. These political mass strikes arose as a reaction to governments' response to the crisis of neo-liberalism. Specifically, the government's response has meant not only the imposition of an 'age of austerity' in terms of cuts in welfare spending but also reform in the regulation of national labour market to – so the argument goes – stimulate job creation and economic growth and the imposition of social changes which were previously negotiated upon (to some extent) with unions. Concomitant, the phenomenon of private sector (economic) strike has continued to dwindle in relative terms and so makes little contribution to the data on the overall level of strike activity. Added to this is the effect of the aforementioned data exclusions. The pattern of the north-south divide has continued. For example, Britain has seen only one comparable political mass strike – that of the public sector strike over pension reform on 30 November 2011.

So it appears that in the south of western Europe, quiescence is not the most accurate of characterisations of the state of strike activity as it may be of the north of western Europe. However, that does not mean that it is sensible to go as far as to talk of a new found militancy or return of militancy in these southern countries for the battles being fought are not only defensive and often lost but the past levels of strikes prior to the 1990s and 1980s have not yet been reverted to. Returning to the combined historical and theoretical formulation outlined at the outset of this article, that strikes can be predicted to occur is a truism. But identifying and determining the particular nature of the strikes and what they are a response to can only be accurately carried out in relation to understanding the specificities of period of capitalist society under study.