

Call for contributions for a book

Strikes in the twenty-first century: Revisiting old theories, exploring new research avenues

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Background and idea of the book

Strike actions have recently gained momentum in the industrialised world. Although strikes tended to decrease in the past decades they are back again. While the ‘comeback’ of strikes in 2008 and 2009 was mainly associated with public mass strikes in especially southern Europe, the current strike wave which is rooted in a cost-of-living crisis spreads over to other countries as well. For example strikes became a frequent phenomenon in countries like Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Of course, there are strikes in more countries all over the world and the reasons and causes for these strikes are manifold.

Strikes in the ‘old’ economy and new terrains of labour conflicts

Not only high inflation is triggering the ‘comeback’ of strikes. For instance, employment terms and conditions have been deteriorating for a long time in the health and care sector, and the Covid-19 pandemic context has not changed those trends despite that health and care workers have been applauded since then. Pension reforms are once again on the policy agenda in France causing national days-of-actions and large demonstrations. In addition, social protest in new sectors like the ‘gig economy’ or ‘platform economy’ is increasing across the globe. Furthermore, (narratives about) labour shortages strengthen the labour market bargaining power of workers as well, and thus the threat of the strike weapon might become more credible. At the same time, ongoing trends like the fissuring of workplaces, the deregulation and flexibilisation of labour markets, and the digitalization and financialization of the economy might impede industrial action. Likewise, upcoming regulation on minimum services in case of industrial action in the UK and legal restrictions to strikes in other countries might equally disincentivize the use of the strike weapon.

The role of ‘old’ explanations and theories of strikes

To some extent, the current ‘comeback’ of strikes can be explained by well-known and established theories, not least as the underlying mechanisms and dynamics of conflict are (still) the same. For example, we know from literature that previous strike activity was associated with factors such as high inflation, labour

shortages, and high firm profits. Since the industrialised world is characterised by the same factors, it is hardly surprising that strike activity is increasing again. Other contextual factors do not correspond with ‘standard’ knowledge and theories from well-known literature, however. For example, it is traditionally argued that trade unions may shy away from strike action when union membership is low and hence their mobilising power is weak. Of course, as we know from literature, there are more reasons for strikes and far more contextual and structural factors that (still) matter for the explanation of strikes.

The role and need of ‘new’ explanations and theories of strikes

As we can see today, some ‘old’ explanations might not be sufficient anymore since we also see that trade unions have gone on the offensive even though their membership is relatively low. It might well be that they are on the offensive exactly because of low membership rates and the potential need to signal strength. Similarly, recent strikes at platform economy companies like Deliveroo suggest that the common assumption that social ties at the workplace are a prerequisite for collective action and therefore strikes also require some rethinking. Of course, there are more puzzles to be solved and theoretical approaches have to be developed in order to be able to explain recent dynamics in strike activity.

How can we explain strikes and other forms of labour conflicts today?

Although we do know a lot about strikes from a theoretical and empirical perspectives, there are many factors that need to be analysed in more detail. For example, it remains relatively unclear what the impact of some more long-term trends has been on strikes. Specifically, there is little new literature on what the impact of labour market flexibilization and dualization, financialization, new technology and digitalization and individualization is on strike activity. Hence, it appears timely to reconsider to what extent classic explanations hold up for strikes in the 21st century, and which new explanations are urgently needed. At the same time, there are some perennial issues that remain unresolved but are again gaining urgency. For example, what precisely is the impact of strikes upon different actors and institutions? How do you measure ‘success’ of (transnational) strike action? If strikes are successful, for whom, under which conditions, and along which dimensions? Are strikes again important in the action repertoire of workers (in certain sectors) – why (not)? What have been dynamics, shifts, trends in industrial action and workers’ action repertoire over time? Have workers’ or activists’ attitudes been shifting towards the use of the strike weapon? Etc.

Call for contributions for understanding current and future strikes

The ebb and flow in studies on industrial action largely follows reality, and this call for papers is no exception. New research on industrial action has largely been dormant in recent years (although there are a few exceptions). This call for papers welcomes theoretical, methodological and empirical oriented papers on strikes and industrial action from various fields like employment studies, geography, history, industrial relations studies, political science, legal studies, media studies, philosophy, (social) psychology, economics, sociology, or other relevant fields.

We encourage authors to submit novel and potentially even provocative theoretical and empirical contributions to the book. Comparative studies either between industries, sectors, regions, countries or country-groups are welcome, but we also welcome studies using novel sources of data and/or innovative empirical designs, such as (text) data mining, computational methods and machine learning, social network analysis, (quasi-)experiments as well as more traditional sources of (statistical) data such as survey designs. Against the background that the book aims to integrate different perspectives and approaches on strikes, from the micro-level over the meso-level to the macro-level, we encourage researchers with and from different theoretical and empirical approaches ‘schools’ and backgrounds. This aim and scope allows us to integrate a wide and deep perspective that provides a better understanding of strikes in the 21st century across the globe. Last but not least we want to emphasise that we aim for a gender balance among the authors and that we encourage younger scholars e.g. those working on their PhD-dissertations, to participate in this book. We will seek a renowned academic publisher and aim to publish the book in fall/winter 2024.

Tentative timeline for the book publication process

31th May	Abstract submission deadline
15th June	Notification of acceptance (or earlier)
January 2024	Submission of draft chapter
March 2024	Reviews and feedback
June 2024	Submission of final version of chapter
Fall/Winter of 2024	Publication of book

Please submit an abstract of around **500-word** of your proposed paper to strikestwentfirstcentury@gmail.com before **31st May 2023**.

Special Session on ‘Strikes in the twenty-first century’ at IREC 2023 in Durham

We are organising a special session at the *Industrial Relations in Europe Conference (IREC) 2023 in Durham* (UK). The IREC will be held on 18-20 September 2023.

The idea of the special session is that interested authors/contributors present and discuss their first draft chapters. Together with all participants of the special session, the editors will provide feedback on the contributions.

Interested contributors are encouraged to also submit an abstract for the IREC and indicate that you wish to participate in the special session on ‘Strikes in the twenty-first century’. Participation in this special session is not mandatory for contributing to the book, but will provide an excellent opportunity to exchange thoughts and ideas.

The deadline for registering for this special session is set at 15th July. For further details on the conference and for abstract submission see: <https://www.durham.ac.uk/business/about/departments/management-and-marketing/irec-2023/>