

Contemporary strike trends since 1980: Peering through the wrong end of a telescope

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Introduction

There has been limited interest among academics in strikes as a social and industrial phenomena in recent years. This has also been the case in the media, although there, the limited interest is punctuated with occasional headline status, as in the case of the fire-fighters' strike in the UK in 2002/2003, the lorry drivers' blockades in France in 2000 and the Volkswagen strike in Germany in 2004. Since the early 1980s there has been much greater focus in academic circles on new strategies for managing people and new forms of work organisation. This is true of both prescriptive texts and critical writings. The 1980s saw the birth of human resource management (HRM), which was managerialist in nature. Critical writers responded to that development by interrogating the logical consistency and empirical reality of that model.

Subsequently, attention turned to the plethora of new forms of work organisation; Just in Time (JIT), World Class Manufacturing (WCM), Total Quality Management (TQM), High Performance Work Systems (HPWS) and Lean Production. In this rush to 'sell' or 'interrogate' these workplace-level developments, there was a noticeable lessening of attention on societal issues, in general, and industrial conflict in particular. This may be due, in part, to the fact that much analysis of the world of work has emanated from business schools and this tends to focus attention on organisational issues. However, this development may also be due to an underlying feeling that the strike problem had largely gone away or, at least, that the residual strike levels were insignificant. Indeed, just such a point has been argued by Hansen and Mather (1988: 27): 'the diminution of strike action in practice is accompanied by a new understanding that strikes themselves are inefficient and outdated means of bargaining. The strike threat is a crude weapon ill-suited to advanced societies in which workers have valuable skills to sell in an efficiently functioning labour market'.

The degree of attention, which scholars had focused on conflict in the 1970s, may be absent today but conflict in general, and strikes in particular, continue to attract interest. Two broad sets of articles have tended to appear in the literature. One set questions the extent of the decline in strikes (Aligisakis 1997; Gall 1999; Clarke et al. 1988), while the second questions the suitability of strike statistics as an indicator of levels of industrial conflict. Some articles in the first set raise concerns over the reliability of strike statistics and particularly the effect of changes to collection methods, which bias comparisons over time. It is suggested that in some countries there has been a systematic under-reporting of strikes and a consequent overstating of any decline. For example, Gall (1999) notes the exclusion of public sector strikes in Belgium, France, Greece (since 1993) and Portugal (since 1986). In these four countries, he argues, 'the impact of statistical exclusions is likely to be such that serious doubts must be raised about the validity of data used and the conclusions drawn from them' (Gall 1999: 371). Aligisakis (1997: 73) points to the 'wave of

strikes' in France and Germany as indicative of counter currents within the general decline in strikes in Western Europe. Gall (1999) suggests that there was a greater diversity in strike trends, levels and trajectories than previously recognised. Within these articles the focus is generally on the exclusion of strikes in the public sector as there is general agreement that private sector strikes are on the decline. This mirrors the general decline in trade union density in the private sector (outside of Scandinavia) and the higher concentration of union members in the public sector.

The second approach questions the use of strike statistics as a useful measure of collective industrial conflict. Kelly and Nicholson (1980: 30) note 'the "iceberg tip" view of recorded strikes is correct insofar as this form of conflict is only part of a much larger picture ...'. Blyton and Turnbull (2004: 328) reject Hanson and Mather's arguments noted earlier, and suggest that, 'if anything, the bases of conflicts have been heightened over the past two decades. What needs to be explained are the various manifestations of such conflicts, including non-strike forms of dissension'. Within this group there are two distinct trends. The first explore the existence of a displacement effect, which, at one level, can involve cut-price forms of industrial action such as a ban on overtime, work to rule, goslows, etc., which official statistics fail to measure. It is also noted that collective forms of conflict may be displaced to the developing world. Arrighi (1990: 54) writes 'in the past the tensions of capitalism could be eased by expansion of the system into new regions and that capitalism now operates on a truly global scale'. In particular, the growth of strikes in South Korea has been cited as an example of this effect at work (cf. Cho 1985; Salamon 2000). The second trend points to the possible displacement of collective conflict with individual forms of conflict such as absenteeism, turnover and claims for bullying and harassment (cf. Edwards 1992; Wallace et al. 2004). Authors also point to management-initiated conflict such as speed-ups, stress at work and growing income inequality which is indicative of a heightened basis of conflict (Edwards 1992).

These points have a strong theoretical basis and undoubtedly strikes are an inadequate measure of the level of industrial conflict. However, the criticisms of the use of strike figures as a measure of movements in conflict only become relevant if strikes and other forms of conflict are negatively correlated. This does not appear to be the case and there are indications that there is a direct relationship between strikes and other forms of collective industrial action with high levels of strikes associated with high levels of non-strike action, and vice versa (cf. Stokke and Thörnqvist 2001; Clegg 1979). If this were the case then a decline in strikes would likely be accompanied by a decline in other organised collective forms of conflict. This lack of availability of comparative data means that, whatever the limitations of strike statistics, they remain the one readily available source of data and their usage is almost inevitable in any comparative analysis of conflict levels. Their disadvantages are outweighed by the fact that they provide indices that can be readily compared across countries to provide a kind of 'league table'. This simplicity and ease of use, however, invites misuse and abuse of the indices and a clear understanding of the limitations of strike data is essential.

Measures of strike activity

There are four measures used to determine strike activity and it is generally advised that all four should be used. The four measures are:

- Strike incidence (the number of strikes)
- Strike breadth (the number of workers involved)
- Strike duration (the length a strike lasts)
- Working days lost.

Strike frequency has the greatest reliability problems due to two factors; the different criteria used by different countries for the inclusion of strikes and the likelihood that many smaller strikes, that meet the definition for inclusion, may not be counted. The second measure, strike breadth, measures the size of strikes and can indicate a degree of social mobilisation. The third index, strike duration, is seen as indicating the intransigence of disputes within a country. It can also reflect differing strike 'cultures' across countries, with French strikes having traditionally been short due to the absence of strike pay in trade unions and the fact that strikes can be demonstration strikes with a political purpose (cf. Wallace et al. 2004). The working days lost (WDL) index is derived by multiplying the number of workers involved by the strike duration. This is widely accepted to be the most reliable of the strike indices, because larger strikes tend to be counted due to their greater visibility and these account for the vast bulk of working days lost. By contrast, strike frequency is likely to be seriously compromised by a failure to count small strikes in some countries or at various time intervals. When comparing strikes across countries, working days lost per thousand employees is considered the most useful statistic as it standardises for employment levels, although not for unionisation rates. The latter is an important point as, although strikes can occur without unions, they are chiefly associated with unionisation.

An overview of problems in using strike statistics

While the attractiveness of strike statistics lies in their ability to generate ready and simple comparisons across countries, there are substantial limitations to any such comparisons (Shalev 1978). At a global level, there are so many methodological problems with the compilation and use of strike statistics that only an outline of the main exceptions and qualifications can be given. For example the following stand out:

- Data is frequently missing for years making consistent comparisons of countries across extended time periods difficult;
- Countries count different phenomena as strikes. In Hungary a two-hour sit-in counts as a strike but in others political strikes are not counted. This is a significant consideration, as political strikes tend to be large;
- As mentioned earlier, some countries exclude strike activity in the public sector;
- There are differing qualifications in terms of the size a strike must be in order to be counted. In most countries strikes lasting one day and involving a minimum number of working days lost (typically 10 or 100) are counted. Some countries only include strikes with a minimum number of workers involved. This is the case with the United States of America (USA) where only strikes involving at least 1,000 workers are included, while in Canada the qualifying size since 1984 is a strike involving 500 workers;
- There are differences between countries in the data collected. In some countries it appears that all or most strikes, which should be counted, are

counted, while in other countries the data appears much less reliable or even haphazard (e.g. Cambodia);

- While the ILO categorises strike activity as including both strikes and lockouts, many countries only include strikes in their data.

Some changes are so major, such as those in the USA and Canada, as to have a significant effect on all strike statistics, including working days lost. In other instances, such as Denmark, the changes are relatively minor and more likely to affect the strike incidence than the working days lost figure. Readers interested in individual countries should look carefully at the effects of any changes on those countries. Table 13.1 summarises the major changes that have been made to strike statistics since the 1980s.

In undertaking a global analysis, the most crucial limitation is that for many countries data is missing for some years. The absence of data is potentially damaging to the working days lost figure, which we have noted is the most useful strike index. The absence of any data for some years may be due to only a small number of strikes occurring in the years for which data is missing. However, the alternative possibility exists that strike data may be unavailable for high strike prone years due to the social dislocation involved or the sheer embarrassment of national authorities at the high strike statistics. Which of these effects predominate can only be resolved in the context of local knowledge and cannot be discerned from the published ILO data. This means that a global perspective can only seek to answer broad questions in the first instance. We set out to examine global trends and to answer three broad questions:

- To what extent have strikes increased or decreased globally since 1980?
- Has there been a ‘bottoming out’ effect in the period 1991–2002? A bottoming out effect refers to any tendency there might be for any decline in strikes to lessen in the 1990s (cf. Gall 1999).
- To what extent is there evidence of a displacement of strikes to the developing world?

While a global analysis will lack the fine detail of an individual country or regional analysis, a global perspective has some compensating advantages. It is extremely unlikely that global trends will be systematically affected by undercounting of strikes and working days lost by comparison with a previous time period. Also, while at a global level it is not possible to have comparative data for all countries across time periods, data is available for a range of countries and, again, it is unlikely that the countries involved will be highly unrepresentative of global trends. We complement the global analysis by taking a closer look at developments in a number of selected regions. No general validity is claimed for this regional analysis as the countries have been selected to demonstrate some overall trends and countervailing developments. A selection of different countries might paint a somewhat different picture and more detailed analysis of individual countries would undoubtedly add many qualifications to the picture that emerges. In general, we have not sought to posit reasons for developments in countries/differing regions as we are of the view that this can only be done in an informed way by closer study of these regions. Due to space restrictions, at the global level we focus on two statistics – strike incidence (the number of strikes) and working days lost. While we recognise the limitations of the strike incidence

index, we have used it to see if the trends are similar to, or different from, the more reliable working days lost figures.

Table 13.1 Major changes in strike statistics²

Canada	Beginning 1985, only includes stoppages involving 500 workers or more
Spain	Prior to 1985, excluded Catalunya; 1986–1990, excluded Basque country
UK	Revised classification applied since 1983
New Zealand	Prior to 1980, excluded political strikes. Prior to 1988, excluded public sector stoppages. Prior to 1989, included partial strikes with no work stoppages. From 2000, excludes work stoppages in which five workdays not worked.
Brazil	1989, new data series.
Hong Kong	Up to 1985, included stoppages involving fewer than 10 workers or lasting less than one day if 100 or more workdays not worked
Denmark	Up to 1995, excluded disputes in which less than 100 work days not worked
Hungary	1991–1995, included work stoppages in which 800 hours or more not worked. Beginning 1986, included stoppages involving 10 workers or more.
Portugal	From 1986, new data series. Up to 1994, excluded Madeira and the Azores and enterprises employing fewer than 5 workers.

Data in the following years for the following countries is not strictly comparable with data in the years preceding them: Morocco (1998); Barbados (2001); Ecuador (1998); Guatemala (1996); Puerto Rico (1996); India (2000); Myanmar (1997); Pakistan (1994); Philippines (2001); France: (1994); Iceland (1997); Italy (1996); Norway (1995); Portugal (1997); Switzerland (1994); Sweden (1994); UK (1994)
Source: ILO Yearbook of Labour Statistics, various years

Global strike trends

As indicated above, the major data problem at a global level is the fact that for many countries data is missing for various years. This means that if one were to test for every year since the 1980s it would be necessary either (a) to exclude a large number of countries or (b) to exclude years for a large number of countries. Excluding years for countries would raise the possibility that the excluded years were important and might have been missing due to the high incidence of strikes/working days lost in any year. Also it would make the resultant presentation of data difficult, as it would be necessary to record many qualifications. As we were interested to see whether strikes had declined since the early 1980s, a comparison is made between the years 1981–1985 and the years 1996–2000. Our approach brings into focus the movements over time. By focusing on two five-year time periods, we were able to reduce the number of countries that had to be excluded due to incomplete data. We also excluded countries that had major discontinuities in the collection of strike statistics in the time periods. Even using a restricted time period resulted in comparisons between forty-two countries on strike incidence and forty countries on working days lost. The analysis ending in 2000 minimised the number of countries that had not yet reported data but made the figures relatively up to date. We also compare the period 1991–1995 with the period 1996–2001 in order to test for a ‘bottoming out’ effect.

While the strike incidence may be suspect for comparison between countries, there is no reason to suspect that the collection and gathering of such data within countries has become any less reliable over time. Indeed it is clear from Table 13.1 that methodological changes would have increased the number of strikes counted in some countries. Thus it is a good indicator for making a time-based comparison to test for an increase or decrease in strikes. We use the raw working days lost figures rather than standardising for employment levels. This is justified as population and employment levels have generally risen since the early 1980s. Should there have been a fall in working days lost, this would only be accentuated by standardising for employment levels.

Global strikes: A comparison of 1981–1985 and 1996–2001

Figure 13.1 and Table 13.2 contain an analysis of the changes in the number of strikes in the time periods 1981–1985 and the period 1996–2001. Only eight of the countries displayed an increase between 1981–1985 and 1996–2000, while thirty-four countries registered a decline (Figure 13.1 and Table 13.2). Those countries registering a decline experienced a total fall of 63,765 in the number of strikes; an average of approximately 1,872 strikes per country. By comparison, the increase in strike numbers for the eight countries was far less at 5,183; an average of almost 648 per country. These figures provide unambiguous evidence, within the countries examined, of a substantial decline in strikes since the early 1980s. Taking the forty-two countries as a representative of global developments, there appears to have been a dramatic global decline in strikes since 1980.

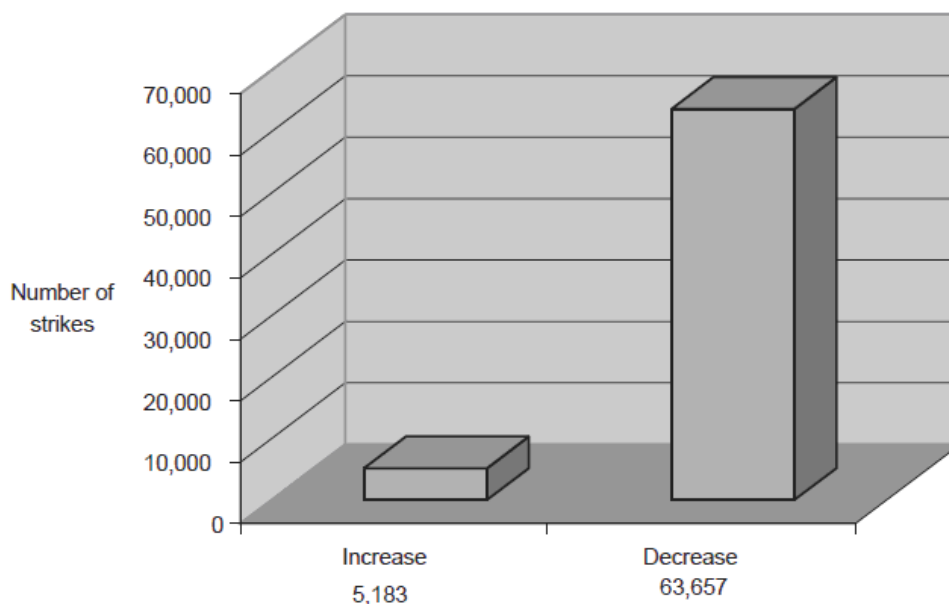


Figure 13.1 Total increase and decrease in the number of strikes and lockouts: time periods 1981–1985 and 1996–2000 compared*

Source: Derived from ILO Yearbook of Labour Statistics, various years

* Refers to the total increase in the number of strikes and lockouts in those countries experiencing an increase, and total decrease in the number of strikes and lockouts, in those countries experiencing a decrease

As data is available on an inconsistent basis for the number of strikes and strike incidence, the countries in Figures 13.1 and 13.2 (and Tables 13.2 and 13.3) differ and, as such, the figures are not strictly comparable. However, even with a different group of countries the same pattern as in the strike incidence index is apparent. Only nine countries experienced an increase in working days lost, while thirty-one registered a decline (Figure 13.2 and Table 13.3). The magnitude of the decline was even more pronounced in the number of working days lost. Looking at the extent of the decline/increase in these groups, the total decline for the thirty-one countries was a massive decrease in excess of 467 million days by comparison with a minimal increase of slightly in excess of 13 million days lost in the remaining nine countries. Thus the reduction in working days lost, in those countries experiencing a decline, swamps by many orders of magnitude the much smaller increase in those countries where there has been a rise. The average reduction for the thirty-one countries was 15,080,929 while the average increase for the nine countries displaying a rise in working days lost was 1,472,477.

Table 13.2 Countries with an increase or decrease in the number of strikes and lockouts (number in parentheses): time periods 1981–1985 and 1996–2000 compared

Increase	Morocco (397); Mauritius (20); El Salvador (647); Netherlands Antilles (107); Denmark (3,959); Netherlands (6); Norway (34); Switzerland (13)
Decrease	Burundi (51); Guyana (1,735); Mexico (3,612); Panama (31); Peru (3,089); Puerto Rico (56); Trinidad and Tobago (28); Canada (2,133); USA (282); Bangladesh (368); Hong Kong (68); India (6,143); Israel (258); Japan (3,227); Republic of Korea (11); Malaysia (80); Pakistan (199); Philippines (834); Sri Lanka (326); Thailand (47); Austria (13); Cyprus (73); Spain (4,139); Finland (6,790); France (9,008); Iceland (21); Ireland (545); Italy (4,024); Portugal (1,415); San Marino (57); Sweden (524); UK (5,284); Australia (7,684); New Zealand (1,502)

Increase: 8 countries; Decrease: 34 countries

Source: Derived from ILO Yearbook of Labour Statistics, various years

Strikes in the developing world³

Figure 13.1 and Table 13.2 show a decline in strikes across a large number of developing countries between the periods 1981–1985 and 1996–2000 as follows: Burundi (–51); Guyana (–1,735); Panama (31); Peru (–3,089), Puerto Rico (–56), Trinidad and Tobago (–28), Bangladesh (–368), India (–6143), Korea (–11); Malaysia (–80); Pakistan (–199); Philippines (–834); Sri Lanka (–326) and Thailand (–47). These declines contrast with more modest growth in a small number of countries. These are Morocco (+397); Mauritius (+20); El Salvador (+647) and Netherlands Antilles (+107). Turning to the working days lost figures, there has been a substantial decline in working days lost in three of the countries for which consistent data is available: Peru (+10,750,250); India (+126,452,850); the Philippines (+5,115,883) and Korea (+5,914,320) (Figure 13.2 and Table 13.3). By contrast the increases in two other developing countries, El Salvador (+792,317) and Panama (+1,886,184), are more modest. Obviously the small number of countries for comparison on the

basis of working days lost makes this statistic insufficient to disprove a hypothesis of a displacement of strikes to developing countries.

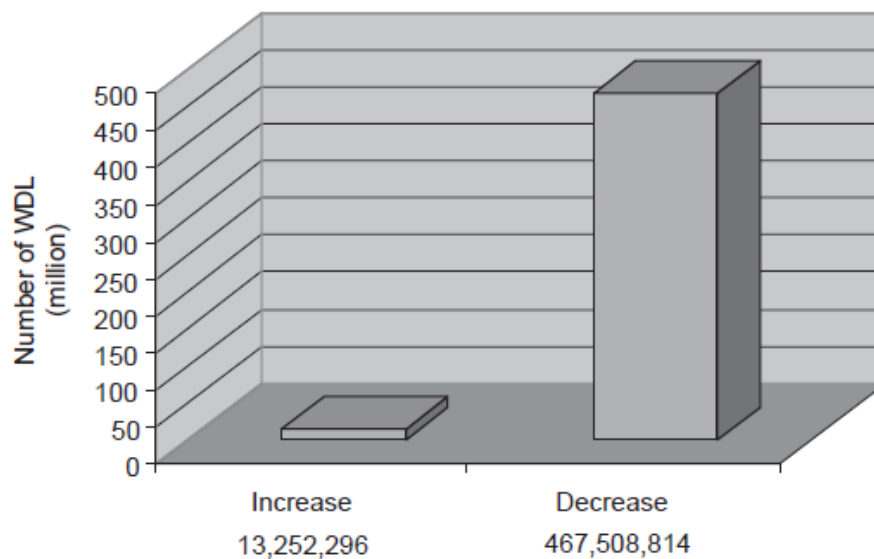


Figure 13.2 Total increase and decrease in the number of working days lost: time periods 1981–1985 and 1996–2000 compared*

Source: Derived from ILO Yearbook of Labour Statistics, various years

* Refers to the total increase in the number of working days lost, in those countries experiencing an increase, and total decrease in working days lost, in those countries experiencing a decrease

There are wide disparities in the incidence of strikes between countries. While India had high, but falling, strike frequency levels in the 1990s; strike incidence in other countries was much lower. This is not always related to the size of the country, as demonstrated by China, where the number of strikes often falls below ten. Low strike incidence is often associated with the lack of opportunity to strike. Some countries make strikes virtually impossible due to legal or military constraints. Salamon (2000) notes the legal restraints placed on strikes in South- East Asian countries, that can extend to large swathes of the economy including transport, banking, tourism and export-oriented industries. In addition, Salamon (2000) explains that some fundamental aspects of the employment relationship, such as recruitment, promotion and dismissals, are excluded from collective bargaining and therefore cannot be the subject of a dispute, and consequently, strike action. This is the case with Singapore and Malaysia. It should be noted that neither limitations are, of themselves, sufficient to explain fully the absence of strike, as there are many societies which have tried such an approach without success. Such limitations on strike action may help to explain why South-East Asian countries make ‘fairly extensive use of other forms of industrial action’ such as sit-ins, hunger strikes and demonstrations (Salamon 2000: 449).

Table 13.3 Countries with an increase or decrease in the number of working days lost (number of days in parentheses): time periods 1981–1985 and 1996–2000 compared

Increase	Morocco (606,210), El Salvador (792,317), Panama (1,895,211), Israel (2,586,990), Republic of Korea (5,914,320), Thailand (283,446), Denmark (279,500), Norway (860,777), Switzerland (33,525)
Decrease	Mauritius (29,060), Chile (169,940), Guyana (219,762), Peru (10,750,250), Puerto Rico (299,408), Trinidad and Tobago (397,234), Canada (18,870,674), USA (26,491,240), Bangladesh (2,977,556), Hong Kong (33,947), India (126,452,850), Japan (1,840,233), Malaysia (61,446), Pakistan (1,540,356), Philippines (5,115,883), Sri Lanka (376,904), Austria (42,321), Cyprus (103,780), Spain (12,120,200), Finland (2,757,784), France (4,908,769), Germany (5,509,656), Ireland (1,452,290), Italy (187,942,800), Netherlands (335,862), Portugal (2,065,900), San Marino (12,737), Sweden (617,709), UK (44,309,000), Australia (7,566,100), New Zealand (2,137,163)

Increase: 9 countries; Decrease: 31 countries

Source: Derived from ILO Yearbook of Labour Statistics, various years

Strike trends in the developed world

An overview

The data in Figures 13.1 and 13.2 (and Tables 13.2 and 13.3) provides evidence for a remarkable decline in the number of strikes in a number of developed countries. This is particularly so in those countries that previously had high levels of strikes. Thus, Japan (-3227), Spain (-4139), Finland (-6790), France (-3185), Ireland (-545), Italy (-4024), Portugal (-1415), Sweden (-524), the UK (-5284), Australia (-7684) and New Zealand (-1502) all register a substantial decline in the number of strikes between the period 1981–1985 and the period 1996–2000. Focusing on working days lost shows large declines in the UK (-44,309,000), Australia (-7,566,100); New Zealand (-2,137,163), Spain (-12,120,200) and Japan (-1,840,233). One feature that stands out from the data is the widespread extent of the decline across countries with differing industrial relations systems. Countries which have had social partnership/neo-corporatist policies (Ireland, Sweden and to an extent Italy) experienced a decline in the indices as have countries which have seen neo-liberal policies applied (Australia, New Zealand and the UK). This fact appears especially significant and is discussed further in our conclusion.

North and Central America

As the world's largest economy the strike experience of the USA is of special interest. Analysis of strike levels in the USA is complicated by the high criteria for including a strike in the statistics (involving 1,000 workers). However, this problem does not affect the internal USA strike trends. The decline in working days lost of 26,491,240 between the two periods 1981–1985 and 1996–2000 is indicative of a major reduction in the impact of strikes in that country. It is highly improbable that this decline could be counterbalanced by working days lost in strikes in with fewer than 1,000 workers involved. Indeed the likelihood is that the decline in working days lost in large strikes will have been paralleled by a similar decline in smaller strikes.

Canada too experienced a decline in strike numbers and working days lost in the two periods. Thompson and Taras (2004) note that the largest five or six strikes account for 35 per cent of working days lost and that, in recent years, the average duration of strikes has been twelve to fifteen days. They suggest that these characteristics may be accounted for by the presence of multi-national corporations and the fact that 'large unions can withstand long strikes at individual production units without the parent enterprises suffering major economic loss' (Thompson and Taras 2004: 106).

In Central America, Mexico experienced a reduction of 3,612 in the number of strikes between the two time periods. While data on working days lost in Mexico is unavailable for 1981, resulting in its exclusion from the examination, an analysis of the years 1982–1985 and 1996–2000 indicates a decrease in working days lost by almost 300,000 days. It is much more difficult to establish a pattern for working days lost for the late 1980s due to the existence of conflicting data.

The EU and Norway

As a major trading block, the strike levels within the EU are of major interest and are considered to be one of the indicators of the health of EU social dialogue. Mirroring the global picture, there has been a substantial reduction in strike incidence and working days lost since the early 1980s within the EU. The European Industrial Relations Observatory (EIRO) (2003) notes that 'levels of industrial action throughout the EU are generally at a low level' and have fallen, not just since the early 1980s, but also in comparison to the second half of the 1980s. It concludes that the late 1990s and early 2000s have 'clearly been a period of relative industrial peace in many countries' (EIRO website 2003). While there has been a decline in strikes within the EU there have also been departures from the downward trend in some years, for example, both France and Germany experienced a strike wave in the mid 1990s (Aligisakis 1997), and Poland had a peak of 920 strikes in 1999.

France, Denmark, Spain, and Italy stand out as having relatively high absolute strike incidence over the years 1998–2001 while the UK, Portugal and Belgium come in a middle group (Table 13.4). These figures do not take account of country size; however, they do highlight some interesting features. EIRO (2003) points to the very different picture 'in the broadly comparable (in size terms) "big five" EU member states – France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK'. They note that France, Italy and especially Spain show considerably higher levels of industrial action than Germany.

Perhaps the most noticeable feature of the table is the wide variation in the number of strikes across countries. Some countries, such as Austria, Luxembourg, Slovakia and Sweden, have a very low number of strikes, while others have large numbers.

Thus political and social stability is consistent with wide variation in strike levels.

Table 13.4 Total number of strikes in 17 EU countries and Norway, 1998–2001

Austria 2	Luxembourg 3
Belgium 759	Netherlands 85
Denmark 4,371	Norway 83
Finland 333	Poland 1,012
France 5,357	Portugal 677
Germany 9	Slovakia 0
Greece 53	Spain 2,813
Ireland 131	Sweden 45
Italy 3,503	UK 777

Note: For some years, data was unavailable for Greece, Slovakia and Portugal. For some countries, the data refers to a portion of a year.

Source: EIRO website 2003; Figure for Germany from Monger 2004

There is clear evidence of a decline in working days lost per 1,000 employees within the EU. Monger (2004) points to an overall decline of 25 per cent between the period 1993–1997 and the period 1998–2002. Looking at the composite working days lost per 1,000 employees, EIRO (2003) has divided the countries into three groups for the years 1998–2001 (Table 13.5). Denmark, Spain, Norway and Ireland are classified in the relatively high strike prone group with Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Sweden and the UK at the other end of the spectrum. Even such standardised figures can give a misleading picture. In particular, the ranking of a country over shorter periods of time is greatly affected by the time period chosen. Thus the high position of Denmark is due to the large number of working days lost in one strike in the private sector over a new collective agreement (EIRO, 2003).⁴

Table 13.5 Annual average working days lost (WDL) per 1,000 employees: EU countries and Norway, 1998–2001

Relatively high annual average WDL (over 70)	Denmark, Ireland, Norway, Spain
Moderate levels of annual average WDL (between 20–70)	Belgium, Finland, France, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg
Relatively low levels of annual WDL (under 20)	Austria, Germany, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Sweden, UK

Source: EIRO, 2003

Japan and Australia

An analysis of the data indicates that Japan experienced a decrease both in the number of strikes and working days lost in the periods 1981–1985 and 1996–2000 but, as mentioned earlier, strikes are but one face of conflict in the employment relationship. Thus, Kuwahara (2004: 292) notes that, in the case of Japan, ‘one of the remarkable changes is that the weight of disputes is shifting from the collective to the individual. There have also been higher levels of labour turnover’. In Australia, there has been a massive decrease in working days lost but Lansbury and Wailes (2004) contend that this reduction cannot be attributed to the controversial 1996 Workplace Relations Act as the decline started prior to its introduction. Interesting to note, though, is Ellem’s

(2001) observation that there has been an increase in employer-initiated industrial action regarding the introduction of non-union agreements in the private sector.

Global strikes: A comparison of the periods 1991–1995 and 1996–2000

The above analysis indicates a major shift in strike patterns since the 1980s. Of particular interest is the extent to which this disjuncture continued in the 1990s or whether there is evidence of a bottoming out effect. In order to test this, we compare strike incidence and working days lost for the period 1991–1995 and the period 1996–2000 (Figures 13.3 and 13.4; Tables 13.6 and 13.7). For these time periods it was possible to compare data for the number of strikes in a total of forty-eight countries. This comparison shows that there was in fact a rise in strikes between the two time periods and not a decline. However, the picture is complicated by the fact that the vast proportion of the rise was due to strikes in the Russian Federation. The Soviet Union was not included in earlier (1981–1985 and 1996–2000) comparisons due to data issues and, in any event, their inclusion would not have made sense given the restrictions on strikes there during the soviet period. Comparing the periods 1991–1995 and 1996–2000, there was a marked increase, rather than decrease, in the number of strikes. This increase is overwhelmingly accounted for by the Russian Federation (+26,886). This increase can be attributed to social and political dislocation and not to a displacement effect – this is also true of the increase in El Salvador. Substantial increases have also occurred in three Western European countries, Denmark (+4,135), France (+1872) and Belgium (+499).

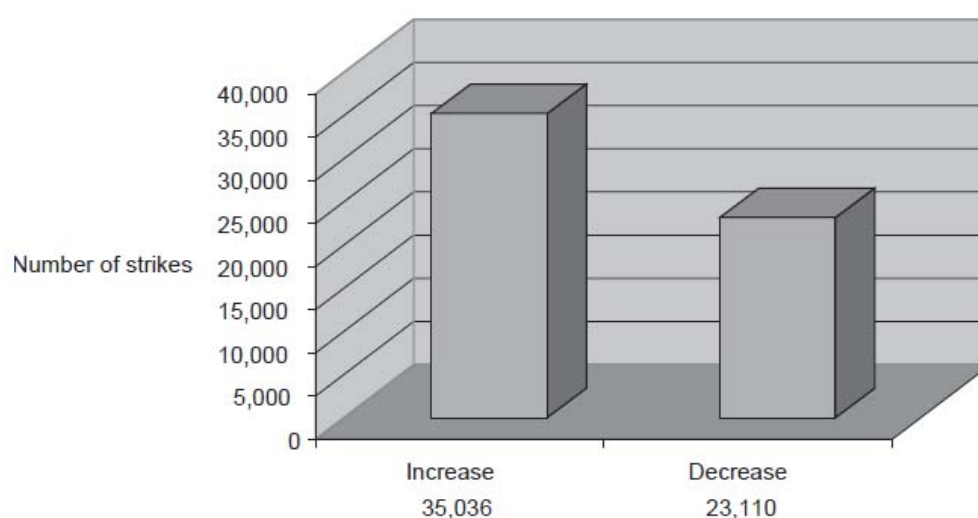


Figure 13.3 Total increase and decrease in strikes and lockouts: time periods 1991–1995 and 1996–2000 compared*

Source: Derived from ILO Yearbook of Labour Statistics, various years

* Refers to the total increase in the number of strikes and lockouts in those countries experiencing an increase, and total decrease in the number of strikes and lockouts, in those countries experiencing a decrease

Turning to working days lost we find an overall decrease but this is much less marked than the decline from the earlier period (Figure 13.4 and Table 13.7). There was a decline of just over 51 million days lost by comparison with an increase of over 35 million days lost. Exclusion of the Russian Federation would only reduce this figure

to in excess of 27 million days lost and this is much larger than countries experiencing an increase in days lost when comparing the periods 1981–1985 and 1996–2000. This is again indicative of a bottoming out effect at work, although the overall trend is still downwards.

Table 13.6 Countries with an increase or decrease in the number of strikes and lockouts (numbers in parentheses): time periods 1991–1995 and 1996–2000 compared

Increase	Egypt (15), Morocco (371), Mauritius (71), El Salvador (611), Panama (16), Trinidad and Tobago (33), Hong Kong (2), Sri Lanka (16), Belgium (499), Denmark (4,135), France (1,826), Isle of Man (1), Italy (495), Netherlands (5), Norway (41), Russian Federation (26,886), San-Marino (2), Switzerland (11)
Decrease	Tunisia (645), Chile (347), Mexico (478), Netherlands Antilles (52), Nicaragua (249), Peru (646), Puerto Rico (6), United States (30), Bangladesh (22), Cyprus (57), India (1575), Israel (93), Japan (476), Republic of Korea (82), Malaysia (38), Philippines (235), Thailand (22), Austria (10), Belarus (55), Finland (399), Iceland (14), Ireland (35), Poland (13,434), Portugal (267), Spain (2,300), Sweden (77), Turkey (496), United Kingdom (230), Australia (639), New Zealand (101)

Note: The figure for France is a cumulative total for localised and generalised strikes Increase: 18 countries; Decrease: 30 countries

Source: Derived from ILO Yearbook of Labour Statistics, various years

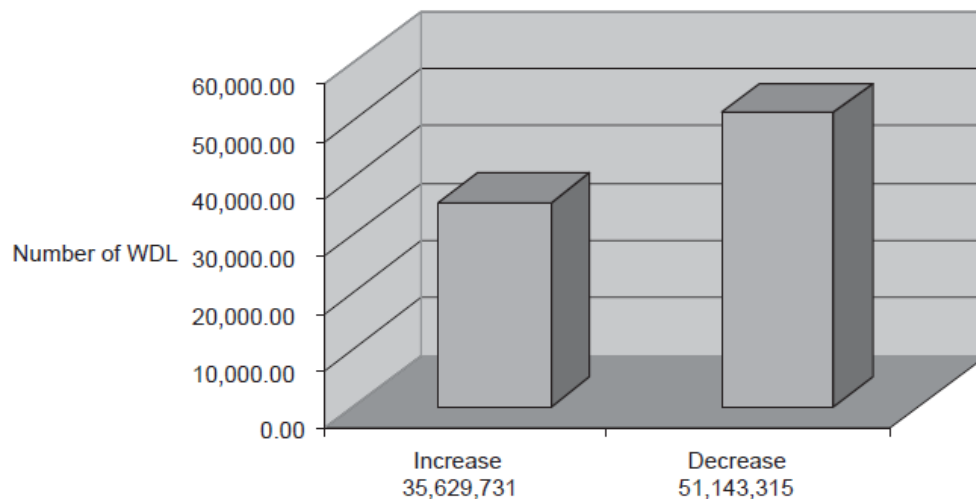


Figure 13.4 Total increase and decrease in the number of working days lost: time periods 1991–1995 and 1996–2000 compared*

Note: The figure for France is a cumulative total for localised and generalised strikes Source: Derived from ILO Yearbook of Labour Statistics, various years

* Refers to the total increase in the number of working days lost, in those countries experiencing an increase, and total decrease in working days lost, in those countries experiencing a decrease

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, it is clear that there has been a major decline in the extent of strikes and their impact (as measured by working days lost) in the 1980s. This disjuncture in strike incidence and impact continued into the 1990s, with some evidence of a tapering off (or bottoming out) in the later period. The fact that there has been such a substantial decline at a global level suggests that national factors are insufficient to explain the trends. There may be a natural tendency, when examining the strike trends of a single country, to focus on developments internal to that country. Credit is variously given to social partnership or government action to counter the power of unions. For instance, the reduction in strikes in the UK is frequently credited to the changes in collective labour law introduced under the Thatcher governments which have continued in place since then. However, Brown et al. (1997) have challenged this view, suggesting that the UK decline can only be understood as part of broader international developments. It is also useful to note that Ireland, which has a common legislative framework with the UK experienced major reductions in strike levels in the 1980s without any legislative changes affecting unions and those changes which were implemented in the 1990s have been much more modest than the UK changes (Wallace and O'Sullivan 2002).

Table 13.7 Countries with an increase or decrease in the number of working days lost (numbers in parentheses): time periods 1991–1995 and 1996–2000 compared

Increase	Egypt (4,661), Mauritius (36,73), Puerto Rico (135,339), United States (13,570,500), Bangladesh (16,021), India (4,451,402), Israel (4,525,648), Sri Lanka (473,487), Denmark (3,048,200), Hungary (90,465), Ireland (46,141), Norway (797,340), Russian Federation (8,387,100), San-Marino (22,297), Switzerland (24,397)
Decrease	Morocco (18,988), Chile (967,247), El Salvador (937,217), Mexico (5,327,272), Netherlands Antilles (18,790), Nicaragua (924,283), Trinidad and Tobago (269,763), Cyprus (172,404), Hong Kong (14,932), Japan (229,613), Republic of Korea (1920,835), Malaysia (33,076), Philippines (1428,098), Thailand (81,447), Austria (72,834), Belarus (374,600), Finland (1417,085), France (1691,305), Iceland (168,723), Isle of Man (147), Italy (7,926,600), Netherlands (824,886), Poland (3750,100), Portugal (217,600), Spain (10,925,504), Sweden (753,771), Turkey (9,281,328), United Kingdom (70,000), Australia (1,128,200), New Zealand (196,667)

Increase: 15 countries; Decrease: 30 countries

Source: Derived from ILO Yearbook of Labour Statistics, various years

The most obvious explanatory factor at a global level is the process of trade liberalisation which has been underway since the 1970s – the process of globalisation itself may be at the root of a decline in many countries. There are other potential causal variables, such as the decline of Keynesian economics. Keynesian demand management policies emphasised the need for governments to pursue policies to ensure full employment. These policies increased the power of labour and limited the

impact of a reserve army of the unemployed. The rise of neoclassical economics following the first oil crisis in 1974, and the greater market discipline which this imposed, has arguably advantaged capital at the expense of labour. At a sub-global level, this change in the relative power balance has been accentuated by the rise of service-based economies with lower levels of unionisation and reduced potential for workers to display collective solidarity. Indeed the processes of globalisation and the rise of service-based economies in the advanced economies may be inextricably linked. Thus globalisation gives employers greater options in dealing with their workers. Companies can promote competition between plants in differing countries. Companies that come under competitive pressure can relocate to Eastern Europe, China and developing countries.

Faced with such competitive pressures, workers there may see very limited prospects for successful strike action. There is considerable evidence from Western Europe that strikes are tending to involve large numbers, be relatively short and are frequently defensive in nature (Gall 1999; Aligisakis 1997). This is important because it clashes with the optimistic perspective of individual workers with strong market power position sketched by Hansen and Mather (1988). The picture that emerges from most of the industrial relations literature is one of working class movements in retreat and workers being negatively affected by the process of globalisation. Foroohar and Emerson (2004: 42) note that 'falling wages, reduced benefits and rising job insecurity seem to be increasingly entrenched features of the job scene across most of Western Europe, the United States and other parts of the developed world'. They see the new labour market as being shaped by growing global competition, and while noting emerging protests in Western Europe they suggest, 'protest won't turn the tanker of the global economy' (Foroohar and Emerson 2004: 42). Not only is that the case but the very process of globalisation floods the world with a massively increased labour supply, which decreases the possibility of protest and gives many alternatives to capital in dealing with organised labour. Thus while there is a displacement effect at work it is not one which sees strikes being displaced to developing countries but the power of organised labour being displaced in the developed world.

Notes

1. The authors wish to thank Emma Parkinson and Teresa Murray, research assistants in the University of Limerick, for their invaluable assistance with this chapter.
2. The ILO Yearbook of Labour Statistics provides no further detail on the nature of the changes. Thus, the meaning of some is not fully clear.
3. Some countries, classified here as developing, may have been so in the early 1980s but not currently. Thus, the use of the category, 'developing world', is an arbitrary one.
4. Looked at over the longer time period of the 1980s and 1990s and using a number of indices Aligisakis (2001) suggests the following four way classification:
 - countries with a very high propensity to strike: Greece, Italy, Spain
 - countries with a high propensity to strike: Iceland, Ireland, UK
 - countries with a low propensity to strike: Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Germany, Netherlands

- countries with a very low propensity to strike: France, Portugal, Switzerland, Luxembourg.

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Key websites

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International Labour Organisation (ILO) www.ilo.org

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) www.oecd.org