

Strikes in Europe: Still a Decade of Decline or the Eve of a New Upsurge?

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Europe witnessed a resurgence of various forms of industrial unrest in recent years, from seizure or kidnapping of company managers to street riots and other episodes of violence. These actions are practiced by employees and trade unions to protest lay-offs, renegotiate redundancy pay, and in general avoid or contrast plant closings or their relocation in areas with lower wage and welfare standards. The author attempts to verify whether the recent trends are enduring transformations of industrial conflicts or have proved to be ephemeral changes, as it has often happened in the ups and downs of this phenomenon. In particular, the paper examines whether the decline in strike activity noticed in the 1980s and 1990s continued in the 2000s? Or has it been lately reversed, following the recent upturn in industrial unrest? What are the prospects for the years to come?

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Introduction

Still afflicted by the deepest economic crisis since the 1930s, at the end of the first decade of the new millennium Europe is apparently the theatre, after more than two decades of labour quiescence, of a resurgence of various forms of industrial unrest, from seizure or kidnapping of company managers to street riots and other episodes of violence. Unlike the kidnap of factory managers of multinational companies carried out in several countries by criminal gangs for extortion purposes, to obtain a monetary ransom, what is peculiar of recent episodes in some European countries—mostly in, but not limited to France—is that these actions are practiced by employees and trade unions to protest lay-offs, renegotiate redundancy pay, and in general avoid or contrast plant closings or their relocation in areas with lower wage and welfare standards (*boss-napping* is the newly-coined word). Just to mention a few cases in the first months of 2009, the list includes the holding company PPR SA in Paris, where at the end of March 2009 the head of the company was surrounded for one hour in a taxi

in Paris in a protest against a plan to lay-off 1,200 workers at the department stores Fnac and Confora; a Caterpillar factory in Grenoble, where four managers were held as hostages in their offices for one night, in protest against the company's plan to cut more than 700 jobs (25 percent of Caterpillar's French workforce); the 3M Co.'s factory in Pithiviers and the Sony Corp.'s Pontonx-sur-l'Adour, both in similar episodes; two managers at the Lisle-based American Molex Inc. factory. Examples could continue, and a poll of French citizens carried out in Spring 2009 for a Paris newspaper showed that 45 percent believed that sequestering a boss is "acceptable" during protests over lay-offs or other company action. Without resorting to such extreme solutions, other forms of individual or small group protest have been utilized as well, like the occupation of plants and factories, or the self-segregation for several days of one or few workers on the top of a freight elevator cabin (cases in Italy could be mentioned). Finally, a number of cases of suicide of employees are also reported on the press. Although obviously different in nature and in their social meaning from the above-mentioned manifestations of industrial unrest, they testify as well the drama of actual or prospective unem-

ployment and, more generally, the work-related stress connected with industrial restructuring. France again seems to be particularly hit by this phenomenon¹, but cases are registered in Italy and in other European countries too.

But what about strikes, which are undoubtedly the principal and most straightforward expression of industrial unrest (Hyman 1972, Cella 1979)? At the beginning of the 1990s two important comparative studies (Shalev 1992, Edwards & Hyman 1994) analysed the evolution of collective labour disputes in Europe after the great strike wave of the late 1960s and early 1970s. They provided contrasting interpretations. Shalev tended to emphasise a rather general decline in strike activity during the 1980s, although with qualifications, as well as a marked shift of industrial con-

1. Since the beginning of 2008, France Telecom, the third biggest phone company in Europe, registered more than 40 staff suicides, in addition to at least a dozen failed attempts, many of them connected, according to trade unions, with work-related stress and a bullying management style. Although company's sources, based on World Health Organization data, refer that the suicide rate is not very distant from the average rate in France (about 26 for 100,000 men in 2008), at the beginning of October 2009 the deputy chief executive of France Telecom resigned, while the company chairman and chief executive officer resigned in February 2010. Until 1998, the Company was part of the public sector and its employees enjoyed protected civil servant employment contracts. Civil servant status is still enjoyed by around two-thirds of the about 100,000 current employees, while the French government still owns 27% of the firm. After being privatized, some 40 thousand people were laid-off, many of them between 2006 and 2008.

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flict from manufacturing to the services sector. Edwards and Hyman (1994) were much more cautious on both counts, considering the decline in strike levels to be a temporary downswing, not a secular trend, and the 'tertiarization' of industrial conflict to be a phenomenon possibly affecting a limited number of countries but not a general feature. These divergent conclusions, as it is not unusual in the history of the study of industrial conflict², were partly due also to the use of different indicators of strike activity and the adoption of different time-periods in the analysis³. In order to avoid these pitfalls, a subsequent study, about ten years later (Bordogna & Cella 2002), tried to assess the conclusions of the above-cited analyses both utilizing the three standard measures for levels of in-

dustrial conflict, weighted for total employment, and considering all five of the decades since the Second World War, in annual averages over five-year and ten-year periods. The conclusions of this article stressed a further decline in strike activity in the 1990s with respect to previous decades, as well as an increasing importance of strikes in the services sector, more marked in some countries than in others, with a connected transformation of the logic of industrial conflict (the so-called tertiarization of labour disputes).

The possibility of examining an additional decade of empirical evidence gives now the opportunity to verify whether the trends identified by previous studies are enduring transformations on the scene of industrial conflict or have proved to be ephemeral changes, as it has often happened in the ups and downs of this phenomenon. In particular, has the decline which characterized strike activity in the 1980s and 1990s continued in the 2000s, or has it been lately reversed, following the recent upturn in industrial unrest? And what are the prospects for the years to come, in the light of the 2009 and 2010 events, not yet recorded in the available statistical sources?

Strike Activity: Another Decade of Decline

Table 1 shows the evolution of the levels of strike activity, weighted on total employment, since the Second World War to 2008, the last year for which data are provided by the ILO sources. The option of utilizing yearly averages over

2. See, among others, the criticisms raised by Shorter and Tilly (1974: 399) to the important book by Ross and Hartman (1960). See also Bordogna and Provasi (1998: 334 ff.) on the methodological weaknesses underpinning the Ross and Hartman thesis about "the withering away of the strike", and Franzosi (1995).
3. Shalev analysis was mostly based on the indicators of 'relative involvement' and 'duration', the first one being the number of workers involved in disputes relative to the total number of workers in employment, and the second one the number of days the average striker spent on strike, that is the number of total working-days lost relative to the number of strikers, while Edwards and Hyman utilized a wider set of measures. As for time-periods adopted, Edwards and Hyman considered five-year averages since 1950, while Shalev excluded the 1950s and analysed four periods corresponding to the main turning points in the economic history of advanced capitalist societies (1960-67, 1968-73, 1974-79, 1980-89); making the comparison with the 1968-73 period obviously accentuates the impression of labour quiescence during the 1980s.

Table 1: Levels of strike activity (Annual Averages, 1950-2008)

Frequency: Strikes per million Employed Persons								
	Denmark	France Loc+Gen	Germany	Italy	Sweden	Nether lands	United Kingdom	United States
1950-59	12.5	115.5	n.a.	92.6	7.1	16.9	89.1	68.6
1960-69	15.9	85.9	n.a.	170.9	4.9	11.2	100.3	57.6
1970-79	66.3	168.4	n.a.	192.0	21.7	6.7	105.4	60.6
1980-89	92.5	101.2	n.a.	79.5	28.3	4.5	45.6	6.9
1990-99	216.3	76.2	n.a.	42.9	7.0	2.9	10.3	0.3
2000-08	282.8	n.a.	n.a.	31.5	2.4	2.5	5.6	0.2
Relative Involvement: Workers Involved per 1000 Employed Persons								
1950-59	5.7	83.1	6.0	117.9	2.0	3.6	27.8	35.8
1960-69	13.6	118.5	3.1	175.9	1.3	4.1	55.7	25.2
1970-79	39.6	86.6	7.6	456.9	5.1	5.9	65.2	26.7
1980-89	40.0	20.9	5.2	320.2	28.6	4.1	42.3	5.8
1990-99	39.3	14.5	6.6	90.7	7.3	4.7	7.7	2.2
2000-08	24.4**	n.a.	3.3	67.8	2.9	4.2	14.8	1.0
Volume: Days Lost per 1000 Employed Persons								
1950-59	62.9	315.5	47.5	301.5	49.2	19.4	135.9	550.2
1960-69	129.4	138.5	12.0	730.5	14.7	16.7	145.7	382.3
1970-79	212.4	167.8	44.7	1041.0	41.1	35.7	521.6	457.1
1980-89	153.3	61.7	22.9	433.3	167.8	12.8	292.8	132.0
1990-99	151.5	31.2	10.5	110.6	44.3	19.3	25.0	37.0
2000-08	33.8**	n.a.	4.3	62.9	20.2	8.0	25.5	27.9

* Data for 1968 not included.

** 2000-07.

Source: ILO, *Yearbook of Labor Statistics*, Geneva, several years
(since 1970 available at the address: <http://laborsta.ilo.org/>)

Prior to 1970, Edwards & Hyman (1994, Tab. 10.2) elaborations have been utilized.

Notes on labour disputes series:

Denmark: Up to 1995 excl. work stoppages with fewer than 100 work-days not worked. Excl. political strikes.

France: Excl. agriculture and public administration (therefore also France Telecom and public postal services); since 1983, the data on *workers involved* are supplied as "monthly average of workers involved in disputes in progress each month", therefore have been multiplied by 12 (as in Edwards-Hyman, 1994); localized strikes: the call to strikes concerns only one establishment; generalized: strikes: the call to strike extends to several enterprises (this series is provided separately since 1976 for days lost, 1982 for workers involved and 1984 for no. of strikes).

Germany: Prior to 1993, the series relate to the territory of the Fed. Rep. of Germany before 3.10.1990; incl. work stoppages lasting less than one day only if more than 100 workdays not worked; excl. workers indirectly involved.

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Italy: Excluded workers indirectly affected; prior to 1975 and since 2004, excluded political strikes; prior to 1970, days not worked computed on the basis of a 8-hour working day, since 1970 on the basis of a 7-hour working day.

United Kingdom: Incl. work stoppages lasting less than one day only if more than 100 workdays not worked; incl. work stoppages involving less than 10 workers only if more than 100 workdays not worked; excl. political strikes.

United States: Series discontinued since 1982, excluding work stoppages involving less than 1000 workers and lasting less than a full day or shift; prior to 1982, excl. work stoppages involving less than 6 workers.

Notes on total employment series:

Denmark: Persons aged 15 to 66 years; prior to 1994: persons aged 15 to 74 years; prior to 1984: civilian labour force employed.

France: Incl. Professional army, excl. compulsory military service; persons aged 15 years and over.

Germany: Persons aged 15 years and over (prior to 1993: 14 years and over); incl. conscripts; prior to 1993 the series relates to the territory of the Fed. Rep. of Germany before 3-10-1990

Italy: Prior to 1993 persons aged 14 years and over, after 1993 15 years and over; incl. conscripts and permanent members of institutional households; since 1993 methodology revised.

Sweden: Persons aged 16 to 64 years, prior to 1986, 16-74; incl. professional army, excl. compulsory military service; 1993: methodology revised, data not strictly comparable.

United Kingdom: Persons aged 16 years and over; incl. armed forces.

United States: Persons aged 16 years and over; civilian labor force employed; beginning 1990 estimates based on 1990 Census benchmarks; 1994: methodology revised, data not strictly comparable.

Netherlands: Persons aged 15 to 64 years, prior to 1981, 14 years and over; beginning 1992, questionnaire revised.

ten-year periods is adopted to allow comparison with the findings in Bordogna and Cella (2002). However, the use of yearly averages over five-year periods would not substantially change our results, but only make them more sensible to the distorting effect of exceptional outbreak of conflict in one or the other year. On the other hand, a periodization, tailored on the turning-points in the economic and social history of each country, which was the option followed by

Shalev and other studies (Shorter & Tilly 1974, Cella 1979), would imply the risk of pre-packaging one conclusion rather than another, a weakness that Edwards and Hyman attributed to Shalev, without mentioning that, since the turning points are not coincident in all countries, it would entail distortions in any case. The analysis covers seven European countries plus the United States. Unfortunately, after 1999 the data about France, indeed a most interesting case

for our study, are so incomplete and fragmented to make them hardly comparable with the previous series; therefore they have not been utilized in the following discussion, if not occasionally.

The picture is that of a further, general decline of aggregate strike activity in the first decade of the new millennium in all the countries considered.

On the whole, the picture is that of a further, general decline of aggregate strike activity in the first decade of the new millennium in all the countries considered. All the three indicators in all countries, with rare exceptions, show a decreasing trend over the last decade, in most instances a very pronounced decline, occasionally a more limited one. If we consider the most comprehensive measure of aggregate strike activity, that is the volume of working days lost per 1,000 employed persons, this measure has decreased by about 25% in the US with reference to the 1990s⁴, has almost halved in Italy, more than halved in Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands, and fallen down to about one fifth in Denmark. Only in UK in the last de-

cade the number of working days lost per 1,000 employed persons has been the same as in the 1990s, that is an average of 25 working days a year, which is in any case 12 times less than in the 1980s and 20 times less than in the 1970s. The number of strikers has slightly diminished in the Netherlands with reference to the 1990s, has decreased by one third/one fourth in Denmark and Italy, halved in Germany, more than halved in Sweden and the US, but doubled in UK, remaining however largely below the average of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Finally, the frequency of strikes has decreased in all the countries, notably in Sweden, UK and Italy, it has significantly increased in Denmark. As a matter of fact, with more than 280 disputes a year per one million employed persons, Denmark absolutely stands out as the large and the most strike-prone country in our group, enormously above the national cases which were once considered as the theatre of a sort of evil of permanent conflict, like the Latin countries and UK in the 1970s. This astonishing transformation in the Danish case is certainly partly due to a change that occurred in 1995⁵ in the survey criteria utilized in that country, but it must be noticed that the increase in the number of strikes had already begun in the mid-1970s, which was well before the survey criteria were altered. All in all, the three exceptions we have mentioned frequency in Denmark, relative involvement and volume in UK, of which only

4. The US series are characterized by a discontinuity in the survey criteria since 1982, when work stoppages involving less than 1000 workers and lasting less than a full day or shift were excluded, while prior to 1982 only work stoppages involving less than 6 workers were excluded. This 'technical' discontinuity in survey criteria shouldn't however substantially affect the changes occurred between the 1980s and the following decades, and certainly not the changes from the 1990s to the 2000s.

5. Up to 1995, work stoppages with fewer than 100 work-days not worked were excluded.

Table 2: Percentage Change in the 1990s & 2000s on Preceding Decades

Frequency: Strikes per million Employed Persons								
	Denmark	France* Loc+Gen	Germany	Italy	Sweden	Nether lands	United Kingdom	United States
90s/50s	1630.2	-34.0	0.0	-53.7	-1.0	-82.8	-88.4	-99.6
90s/60s	1260.2	-11.3	0.0	-74.9	44.4	-73.8	-89.7	-99.5
90s/70s	226.3	-54.7	0.0	-77.7	-67.6	-56.7	-90.2	-99.5
90s/80s	133.8	-24.6	0.0	-46.1	-75.1	-35.2	-77.3	-95.9
00s/90s	30.8			-26.6	-65.7	-13.8	-45.6	-33.0
Relative Involvement: Workers Involved per 1000 Employed Persons								
90s/50s	589.6	-82.5	9.6	-23.1	267.2	30.3	-72.4	-93.9
90s/60s	189.0	-87.7	112.0	-48.4	460.8	13.6	-86.2	-91.3
90s/70s	-0.8	-83.2	-13.9	-80.1	42.7	-20.7	-88.2	-91.8
90s/80s	-1.7	-30.6	26.3	-71.7	-74.4	14.4	-81.9	-62.3
00s/90s	-37.8		-50.5	-25.2	-60.3	-10.6	93.4	-54.5
Volume: Days Lost per 1000 Employed Persons								
90s/50s	140.8	-90.1	-77.8	-63.3	-9.9	-0.5	-81.6	-93.3
90s/60s	17.1	-77.4	-12.4	-84.9	200.7	15.5	-82.9	-90.3
90s/70s	-28.7	-81.4	-76.5	-89.4	7.8	-45.9	-95.2	-91.9
90s/80s	-1.2	-49.4	-54.0	-74.5	-73.6	50.7	-91.5	-72.0
00s/90s	-77.7		-59.0	-43.2	-54.5	-58.6	2.0	-24.4

the first one is a relevant case are not such as to alter the general picture of a further, marked decline of strike activity in the countries considered here.

Not only the last three decades display a general decrease with reference to the peak period in each country, but in the last decade in almost all cases the levels of strike activity are the lowest.

This picture is confirmed also if we adopt a longer perspective. Countries display different profiles of strike activity over the long run. If we look at the volume of working days lost, most of them show a hump shape curve, with the peak in the 1970s, like Italy, UK,

the Netherlands and Denmark, or in the 1980s, like Sweden. Germany and the US show a double peak, one in the 1950s, the highest, and one in the 1970s, while the profile of France is altered by the fact that the 1968 data is not included in the series. Profiles are even more varied if we look at the number of strikers or the frequency of strikes. Despite these differences, however, not only the last three decades display a general decrease with reference to the peak period in each country, but in the last decade in almost all cases the levels of strike activity are the lowest (and often by far the lowest) ever registered in the post World-War-II period, even in countries where strike activity has always been negligible.

An accurate explanation of these trends goes beyond the boundaries of this brief article and would require a deeper analysis, including econometric techniques. What can be suggested, however, is that these tendencies can hardly be considered as temporary downswings. They have now been going on for thirty years and more, passing substantially unhurt through periods of economic recovery and even strong expansion, like the exceptionally long and intense American boom of the 1990s when unemployment decreased significantly, as well as through periods of economic contraction and recession: yet, the trend towards a decline in strike activity is still there. By the same token, changes in political conditions and in governments' coalitions might have produced sudden upturns, as in Italy and France in 1994-95 against attempts to reform the pension system, or again in Italy in 2002 against prospected revisions of rules about dismissals, but apparently have not so far altered in a substantial and lasting way the trend towards a decline of strike activity. Rather than temporary, short-term variations in the business cycle or in political conditions, more structural transformations of the political economies of advanced industrialized countries should be taken into consideration. Transformations such as the much intensified competitive pressures in the product and labour markets, connected with the globalization of the economy, which weakens the position of workers vis-à-vis the employers and seriously challenges the mission of labour organizations "to take wages out of competition", in J. Commons words. Or the

transition from Fordist to more flexible models of production, including just in time systems, which are extremely vulnerable to labour disputes and therefore require on the part of management careful measures to prevent strikes. Or, again, transformations in labour markets and in the industrial composition of the labour force, with an occupational decline of traditionally strike-prone sectors, the wide diffusion of contingent and atypical workers, the increase of employment in small and medium size enterprises. All these factors, as stressed in Bordogna and Cella (2002), can be expected to exercise powerful and durable effects in depressing the levels of strike activity.

The question is now whether these effects can be contrasted, or perhaps even reversed, by the dramatic worsening of working and living conditions brought about in advanced, industrialized countries by the deepest economic crisis since the 1930s. Traditionally, as is well known, the increase in unemployment discourages strike activity. But exceptionally, when the crisis goes beyond the 'normal' ups and downs of the business cycle to threaten the very working and living conditions of workers, the opposite can occur, as happened in some cases precisely during the 1930s (Cella 1979). Might this be the case in the present situation of many European countries? Might the episodes of industrial unrest we have recalled at the beginning of this article turn into a resurgence of strike activity? We will come back to these questions in the final section of this article, after briefly consid-

ering the issue of the tertiarization of conflict.

Shift away from Manufacturing Sectors

A second feature underlined by Shalev (1992) and Bordogna and Cella (2002) regards a change in the industrial composition of strike activity, with a move of conflict away from the traditional manufacturing sectors towards the services sectors, although this is a less linear and generalized trend than the previous one. The necessary caution notwithstanding⁶, Table 3 shows that in five countries out of seven the share of working days lost in the manufacturing sectors in total strike activity has further diminished in the first decade of the 2000s with reference to the 1990s, to a significant extent in Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands and the US, and dramatically in UK (from 24 to 8.7 per cent). This share has slightly increased in Sweden, where however it had already collapsed from over 40 per cent in the 1970s and 1980s to less than 6 per cent in the 1990s, and has remained substantially the same in Germany, the European country with the highest weight of the manufacturing sectors in the overall eco-

nomic structure. In a longer term perspective, again in five countries out of seven the percentage of working days lost in the manufacturing sectors has constantly decreased and is in the last two decades significantly lower than in both the previous decades (Denmark, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands and UK), which allows to detect a rather clear transformation, while Italy and the US show a less linear trend.

This shift from the manufacturing to the services sectors implies a basic transformation of the very logic of conflict, particularly when public services are involved.

Bordogna and Cella (2002), elaborating on previous analyses (especially Kochan 1974, Accornero 1985, Franzosi 1993), stressed that this shift from the manufacturing to the services sectors is more than a simple sectoral re-location of labour disputes. It implies a basic transformation of the very logic of conflict, particularly when public services are involved. When this is the case, third parties not directly involved in the dispute are inevitably affected, which was only an exceptional event in traditional industrial conflict. And when the services provided are essential public services, as they are called in the legislation of some European countries, that is they are instrumental to the fruition of the fundamental rights of the person constitutionally protected in democratic polities, this type of conflict raises a problem of public interest, which in turn brings in the need of a regulatory inter-

6. With reference to Italy there is an additional reason for caution: disputes originating outside the employment relationship (for instance, strikes against government policies) are included (between 1975 and 2003) in the total aggregate data of working days lost, but are not classified by economic activity, with the effect of underestimating the weight of the manufacturing sectors in years in which strikes for political reasons are very important (like in 2002).

vention by the state. A regulatory intervention which is extremely problematic, and potentially ineffective, in pluralist industrial relations systems, as Dunlop (1984) has stressed with reference to disputes in the New York transport system in the 1960s and the recent Italian experience has often shown (Bordogna 2008). But the normative and regulatory implications of the tertiarization of conflict are not the topic of this brief article.

More pertinent to the present discussion, rather, are the analytical consequences of the shift of labour disputes from the manufacturing sectors towards the public services. Especially (but not only) when the services under consideration are characterized by a network structure (for example, transports of any kind, communications) work stoppages do not need large quantity of strikers or of working days lost to be socially disruptive. As it has been underlined

(Accornero 1985), there is a structural disproportion between the action of protest and the expected and actual effects on service users and citizens at large: what really matters in this context is the number of work stoppages, more than the number workers involved or of working days lost. And even actions ‘short of strikes’ can be very effective (Franzosi 1993, Bordogna & Cella 2002). That is why the tertiarization of conflict to some extent reverses the analytical hierarchy of the traditional statistical indicators of strike activity. The volume of working days lost, traditionally considered as the most comprehensive and effective measure of aggregate strike activity, is at least partly inadequate to capture a conflict which, as said, does not need to be quantitatively relevant to be socially disruptive. That is also why Table 3, based on the number of working days lost, probably underestimates the trend under examination.

Table 3: Percentage of Days Lost in Manufacturing Industry in Total Days Lost (Annual Averages)

	Denmark	France*	Germany	Italy	Sweden	Netherlands	United Kingdom	United States
1972-79	79.78	64.05	80.22	54.51	41.87	55.14	54.33	51.42
1980-89	75.67	73.32	76.59	48.90	43.24	38.50	47.60	40.87
1990-99	69.64	52.29	62.83	53.38	5.67	32.86	23.66	50.59
2000-08	48.60*	n.a.	62.04*	43.55	6.06	21.42	8.67	32.13

* 2000-07

France: The data for manufacturing refer only to localized strikes and the % has been computed on total days lost in localized strikes only.

Germany: Prior to 1993, the series relates to the territory of the Fed. Rep. of Germany before 3.10.1990. Year 1984 includes groups 9512, 9514 and 9519

Italy: Prior to 1975, exc. political strikes.

Sweden: 1980, 1981 and 1982 incl. mining and quarrying.

Netherlands: 1987 incl. electricity, gas and water; 1989 incl. agriculture, hunting, forestry and fishing.

Prospects

The two main trends underlined by Shalev and Bordogna and Cella about twenty and ten years ago turn out to be confirmed by the analysis carried out in the previous sections. In all the countries considered in this article and with reference to all the indicators, with few exceptions, the levels of strike activity have continued to decrease in the first decade of the new millennium, for the third decade in a row after the great strike wave of late 1960s and early 1970s. On average, in each year of the most recent decade the number of days lost has been from 6 (Denmark) to 19 (United Kingdom) times less than in the peak period in each country-usually the 1970s, the 1980s in Sweden. Second, strike activity has continued to shift away from the traditional manufacturing sectors towards the services sectors. While in the 1970s only in one country out of eight (Sweden) the days lost in the manufacturing sectors were (slightly) less than 50% of the total days lost, in the most recent decade the picture is totally reversed: only in Germany the manufacturing sectors still contribute for more than half of the total days lost, compared with 40-50 per cent in Denmark and Italy, one third in the United States, one fifth in the Netherlands and less than 10 per cent in Sweden and United Kingdom.

These trends look, so far, rather sound and durable. Are they likely to last in the near future?

The discussion should distinguish between the two. With regard to the second

one, not only the services are now the largest occupational sector in many European countries and will be even more so in the foreseeable future, but in many countries part of these services transport, public administration- are hit by some of the deepest restructuring processes of the entire economy. These sectors will likely remain an elective centre of strikes and mass protests, as shown by several cases in 2009 and 2010 in France (general strikes by public employees; air traffic controllers), United Kingdom (British Airways), Germany (Lufthansa), Portugal (public employees), Greece (public employees; general strikes), among others.

More difficult is the answer with regard to the second trend. Contrasting factors must be considered. Making predictions about strike trends, especially in the long run, is always risky, as shown by the destiny of the well known thesis on the withering away of the strike, elaborated by Ross and Hartman just few years before one of the greatest and generalized strike wave of the XX century, probably the greatest. After that impressing wave, however, three decades have followed which look more consistent with their thesis, even if differences across countries matter. Perhaps, Ross and Hartman thesis should be revisited more carefully than in the past, considering both the structural transformations of the political economies of advanced industrialized countries we have stressed in the previous pages and the (supposedly converging) institutional features analysed by the American authors. Indeed, while institutional features could account for persisting cross-country variations, rather than

convergence, structural transformations could help explain the overall decline of the last three decades.

When one form, for instance going on strike, is legally forbidden or precluded for some reason, other forms will increase.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that episodes of industrial unrest other than strikes have intensified in recent years in many European countries, from bossnappings to occupation of factories to street riots. Will these forms of industrial unrest remain separate from strike activity, almost a sort of substitute of it, or will they eventually convert into strikes? The literature on industrial conflict has often suggested a sort of substitution effect, or trade-off, between the various forms of expression of industrial unrest (Knowles 1952, Hyman 1972, Cella 1979): when one form, for instance going on strike, is legally forbidden or precluded for some reason, other forms will increase. This could perhaps be the case in some European countries or in some sectors: general restraints on the exercise of strike action have been set up in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, in the United Kingdom, and special legal restraints in sectors like (essential) public services have been introduced in Italy in 1990, amended and tightened in 2000, and lately in France in 2007. Could this account for the recent combination of intensified manifestations of industrial unrest with low levels of strike activity in these countries? A deeper analysis is required to answer this question appropri-

ately. But in any case the above mentioned measures to restrain strike activity are not a generalized practice across European countries, and therefore do not seem capable of providing an adequate explanation to our problem. Rather, it is more likely that workers' discontent against the effects of the economic crisis has so far found a privileged channel of expression in the forms we have mentioned at the beginning of this article, either because they apparently are more effective in calling the attention of public opinion and political authorities, somehow miming the logic of tertiary conflict, or because trade unions are less able, or willing, to canalize this discontent into traditional strike activity. But signs in 2009 and 2010 years not yet captured by our data and not yet available in the ILO sources- show that things could change, under the pressure of a sudden worsening of working and living conditions brought about in many European countries by the economic crisis. It cannot be ruled out that a dramatic increase of workers' insecurity (Greece could be the first example) might reverse the current mix of high industrial unrest with low strike levels, and eventually give rise to a significant resurgence of strike activity, similar to what happened in some countries during the 1930s.

Which of these two scenarios is bound to prevail is uncertain. The depressing effects of the previously underlined structural transformations in European political economies do not appear to be easily reversible in the near future. But much might depend on the evolution of the economic crisis and its man-

agement on the part of European governments. To simplify, if the globalization of the economy brought about labour quiescence, the crisis of globalization-if it is not just a temporary downturn, however serious- could reverse this trend in European countries⁷. Once again it is apparent how making predictions about strike activity, and industrial conflict in general, is a risky business.

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7. Things could of course be different in new developing, democratic countries which have been only partially hit by the economic crisis and which still exhibit very high rates of growth, with huge and rapid processes of industrialization and

urbanization -a condition which many European countries met in the first decades after the Second World War, culminated in the highest strike wave of the XX century. This point would require, however, a much deeper and wider investigation.