



A DANGEROUS UNSELFISHNESS

Learning from Strike Actions

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A DANGEROUS UNSELFISHNESS:

Learning from Strike Actions

“You may not be on strike (Yeah), but either we go up together or we go down together. Let us develop a kind of dangerous unselfishness.”

---Dr Martin Luther King Jr¹

¹ Dr Martin Luther King Jr, “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop,” Address Delivered at Bishop Charles Mason Temple, 3 April 1968, Memphis, Tennessee, USA, in reference to the Memphis Sanitation Workers strike, see <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/ive-been-mountaintop-address-delivered-bishop-charles-mason-temple>

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Executive Summary

We are living in an era of unprecedented wealth coupled with unprecedented inequality. Richest one per cent of the global population owns the 82% of the wealth created in 2017.² Sixty nine of the largest 100 economies in the world are corporations and 10 corporations are richer than 180 countries combined. This concentration of wealth is fuelled by an extractive economy that prioritises consumption, growth and profit over social and environmental good. Consequently, we are experiencing a climate crisis that threatens humanity and has the most catastrophic consequences for women in the global south.

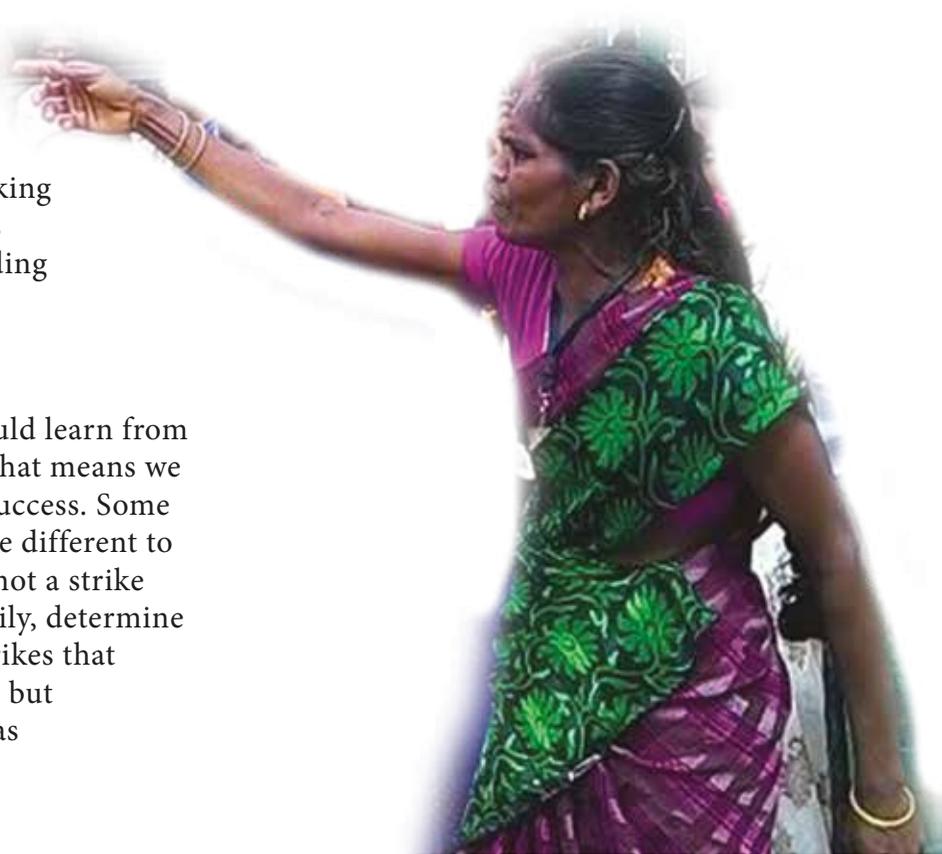
To address the structural problems of neoliberal globalisation, fundamentalisms, and militarism and ecological crisis, we need to revive global solidarity through the form of solidarity strikes where social movements working around inequality, democracy, environmental justice, and human rights & women's rights come together to disrupt the current order and make our demands for Development Justice.³ This report has reviewed 40 politically significant strikes in the past in various parts of the world, and reflected on what lessons the peoples' movements can take forward for future political actions.

Strike as a tool

Strikes are galvanising forces, even if they do not achieve their demands. In many of the case studies included here, the strikes helped build the labour movement. Understanding strikes as a tool rather than a result means asking what we are using that tool for. One answer is better organising: strikes are movement-building opportunities.

Defining success

This document sought to explore what we could learn from strikes that had met some degree of success: that means we need to think about what we understand by success. Some of the examples in this report achieved change different to or beyond their strike demands. Whether or not a strike achieves its stated demand does not, necessarily, determine its ultimate success. There are examples of strikes that do not realise the full demands of the strikers but are viewed – by the strikers and by history – as successful.



² Retrieved from <https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/pressreleases/2018-01-22/richest-1-percent-bagged-82-percent-wealth-created-last-year>

³ Development Justice is an alternative development model demanded by civil society in the Global South. It is a development framework aimed to assert the rights to development for all people over profits. Development Justice comprises 5 transformative shifts: Redistributive Justice, Economic Justice, Social Justice, Environmental Justice, and Accountability to the People. Retrieved from http://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/2016_Development_Justice_Briefer.pdf

Broad appeal and support

It is easy to think of movements and protests that had huge levels of support but still were unable to achieve their goals – the mass marches against the war in Iraq would be one example. Broad support alone is not enough, but time and again, we see that making any positive change necessarily means mobilising to build a vision of a better world that is shared across a wide cross-section of society.

Solidarity

Strikes are inherently about solidarity: they are a collective action to press for a specific demand or advocate for or respond to broader policy objectives. The solidarity between strikers is a critical motivating factor and also provides a measure of self-care. Strikes achieving cross-sectional solidarity demonstrate to the authorities that the underlying ideals have a broader appeal. The doctors and health professionals in El Salvador who led nationwide strike against healthcare privatisation enjoyed broad support for their action, which aided their cause and also meant that the blame for the disruption arising from the strike stayed focused on the cause of the strike action.

Media

Another element that can drive or undermine solidarity for strikers is the media. In the examples of strikes there are those that saw favourable media for the strikers, but not all of these strikes achieved their objectives. The media swung behind the Dunnes workers strikers who struck against apartheid after they were denied entry to South Africa, helping to turn public opinion in their favour and putting further pressure on the government. However, the media also traded in the prejudices of the day, for example ridiculing the 1970 US women's strike for equality.

Inclusion

Just as any strike benefits from broad support, it also needs to have a broad base. However, the labour movement, including unions, have not always worked intersectionally for social justice. Labour activism has included efforts to limit access to work for example to women and/or immigrant workers, in favour of citizen men workers of the dominant racial group (Barnsley 2011).

It is not just about ensuring that more women join unions, but ensuring women organisers of all backgrounds are in leadership positions. Unions, like other organisations, need to address their discriminations including sexism and racism. As current mass women's human rights organising demonstrates, women are entirely capable of building powerful movements with minority women in the lead (McAlevey 2017).

Alliance-building

Strikes of all kinds, especially political strikes – those that address wider social and economic policy concerns – benefit from deliberate alliance-building by groups with a unifying political narrative and shared analysis.

This involves building inclusive solidarity, recognising multiple forms of oppression, as a political decision. Enacting this solidarity requires active bridge-building work to build a coalition politics that is intersectional and makes room for different groups to organise around their issues of concern while centring those who have long been marginalised (Ferree and Roth 1998). This is important to break down

existing class, gender, race, and other hierarchies that often drive a top-down approach to organising.

Addressing negative associations

When planning strike action it is important to try to minimise the negative consequences as far as possible, and to share information about the possible risks to ensure that workers can make an informed choice about whether or how to participate. As the power of the majority always poses a threat to the elite, workers' organisations are often perceived by governments as posing a threat to the social order, as they often position them as subversive.

For women, engagement in labour organising and activism more broadly often incurs attacks on their sexual autonomy (Rothschild 2005). Dealing with this takes time and attention and can undermine women's labour activism, including by limiting opportunities for alliance-building.

Violence

Strikes at individual workplaces and those over wider policy issues have been subject to violence by agents of the state through deployment of military or police forces, and sometimes by non-state actors brought in by the company. Strikers frequently face state violence: they are arrested, beaten, killed. In some cases, the strike leaders are specifically targeted.

Violence against striking workers is a deliberate act that has consequences beyond the specific violent moment. The Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association identifies violence against workers as “both a reason for and a consequence of the global weakening of workers' rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association” (UN General Assembly 2016, para.76).



Source <http://alternativepoliticalnews.blogspot.com/2013/06/the-bangladeshi-betrayal.html>

Introduction

Why organise collectively?

In short, because we know it works. Whatever challenges and rollbacks social justice movements have struggled with and continue to face, there are many more successes.

Many of the rights and benefits we enjoy today are due to collective organising by activists in the past. Collective organising brings many benefits through strength in numbers, and a diversity of views and experiences that can deepen our analysis and demonstrate to the authorities the breadth of interest in the issue. Through history and across the world, social movements have changed attitudes and policies, social norms and governments.

In efforts to advance women's human rights, organising – specifically, feminist civil society mobilisation – has been shown to improve the policy response to violence against women (Htun and Weldon 2012). In labour organising, trade unions have provided the structure, resources and solidarity to support individuals in resolving their workplace disputes and moreover, to find collective solutions to collective problems (McAlevey 2017). Unions especially benefit minority workers and reduce the gender pay gap (Bronson 2016, Henwood 2018). And it is not just unions and labour activists who believe this. Even staff within that bastion of neoliberal globalisation, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have conceded that representative unions are important in addressing economic inequality, including for the role they play in the fight for minimum wage (Jaumotte and Osorio Buitron 2015).⁴

Daily we see examples of collective action standing up to power that seeks to roll back our rights, championing profit over rights, harm our environment, take us to war. Even when they do not succeed in realising their objective, these movements build solidarity, share knowledge, and train activists to be better prepared for the next challenge.

Why strike?

Strike action is one tactic available in exercising our freedom of association to campaign for our rights. Such collective expressions of worker agency is generally understood as the result of class struggle. It is usually pursued when other tactics such as negotiating with the relevant authorities – employers, corporations, state actors, etc., – have not worked. It is, as the global unions have asserted, “a powerful and fundamental foundation of democracy and economic justice” (ICFTU 2015).

The right to freedom of association has been established in international law for 70 years (see Box 1 on page 10). The right to strike is a recognised human right, strongly related to the right to unionise and the right to collective bargaining.

What do we mean by strike and solidarity strikes?

Strike actions are a withdrawal of labour to leverage workers' interests in a specific negotiation or as part of a wider protest. They are most readily associated with labour activism and trade unions as a strategy to address workers' grievances, often over pay or working conditions.



The power of strikes comes from limiting labour's supply, which increases its power and value and inflicts costs on capital (Srnicsek and Williams 2015). Although understood by some as “a form of political action that belongs solely to the labour movement” (Ferree and Roth 1998, 641), strikes have been used to pursue other civil resistance objectives including those relating to peace, environmental justice, women's human rights, and a range of other political objectives.

The UN expert in freedom of association notes that the right to strike is about States “creating democratic and equitable societies that are sustainable in the long run. The concentration of power in one sector – whether in the hands of government or business – inevitably leads to the erosion of democracy, and an increase in inequalities and marginalization with all their attendant consequences. The right to strike is a check on this concentration of power” (UN 2017).

Solidarity strikes, or also known as a sympathy strike or a secondary boycott, is an industrial action by a trade union in support of a strike initiated by workers in a separate worksite, across employers or sometimes across industries. Solidarity strikes allow the workers to expand the sites of conflicts, elevate the workers' leverage, and confronting their employers as a class.⁵

In the US, Australia and UK, solidarity strikes and secondary boycotts have been outlawed, prohibiting workers from striking against others aside from their direct employers. In the majority of OECD countries, solidarity action is generally lawful, and the right to strike is seen as a part of broader political freedom.

Solidarity is the power to encounter patriarchy. For us, the opposite of patriarchy is not matriarchy, but solidarity. Patriarchy is about using power and violence against other people in order to gain power, while feminism is about using care and solidarity to change systems and share and redistribute power. When we combine solidarity with strikes, it can transform human relationships by using care to contribute to the public goods and the commons, not merely one group's own interests.

Solidarity strike is powerful as it synergises people's resistance to support each others' causes, recognising that their oppression derives from similar structural problems. In this publication, you will see not only the history of strikes but specifically strikes that fostered, revived, strengthened solidarity across issues and movements to change structural oppression, whether it be patriarchy, neoliberal globalisation, militarism, fundamentalism or environmental destruction.

5 *Secondary Strikes Are Primary to Labor's Revival.* <http://labornotes.org/2010/11/secondary-strikes-are-primary-labor%E2%80%99s-revival>

[BOX 1]

A note on strikes in international law

The right to strike is specifically recognised in international human rights law.

The International Bill of Human Rights – consisting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), as well as its two Optional Protocols – affirms that everyone has the right to freedom of association.⁶ This specifically includes the right to form or join a union,⁷ and to strike.⁸

This is further affirmed by two of the fundamental conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO): Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention (1948) and Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention (1949).⁹ Although the rights to unionise and to collective bargaining are among the fundamental rights and principles of international labour law and may lead to taking strike action, the ILO standards do not explicitly affirm the right to strike and it had been contested by employers under the ILO's tripartite structure. However, the ILO,¹⁰ through its expert committees and resolutions adopted by its tripartite constituency have long understood the right to strike as inextricably linked to the right of association.

For further information see Annex.

6 UDHR Article 20, ICCPR Article 22, ICESCR Article 8.

7 ICCPR Article 22.1, ICESCR Article 8. In the UDHR it is addressed separately, in Article 23.

8 ICESCR Article 8.1(d)

9 Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No.87) and Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No.98)

10 In June 2012, the International Organisation of Employers (IOE) questioned the mandate of the ILO Committee on the Application of Standards in relation to the right to strike: their annual report included several references to the issue. This was unprecedented and unprovoked, as the Committee had not taken any new approach to strikes (see discussion in van der Heijden 2013).

The development of labour organising

With corporations increasingly powerful – just ten corporations have more wealth than 180 countries combined – strikes, as a tool developed to respond to corporate power, are relevant to addressing the wider harms of neoliberal capitalism.¹¹ A thorough global review of the history of labour organising is outside the scope of this document but some of the main stages are worth noting.

Though they had been documented through history, strikes emerged as a powerful tactic during the industrial revolution and have travelled the world along the path of industrialisation. The first mass worker movements emerged in the 1880s, a period that saw mass employment including at concentrated workplace such as factories in which workers faced appalling conditions (Barnsley 2011, Mason 2015). This development has subsequently been mirrored in settings of new industrialisation as globalised production moved to the global south (Mills 2005, Mason 2015).

This rise of labour organising was often driven by Communist Party members and socialist organisers. That

first wave of trade union organising was prolific: in the UK during 1889 there were 1211 strikes involving 350,000 workers demanding better pay, an eight-hour workday, and union recognition, and just the threat of strike action could win demands (Barnsley 2011). After that, power swings back as courts start to rule for the employers but upheavals in the early decades of the 20th century – the Great Depression, World Wars I and II, and the Russian Revolution – incentivised states to address economic and social rights, including in relation to trade unions (Beer 1983, Kang 2012). However the authoritarian regimes across much of Europe in the 1930s saw the suppression and destruction of the labour movement (Mason 2015). World War II saw large-scale employment of women in the defense industry and other sectors. Fearing that they would not recover wages to their pre-war level when men returned to work after the war if they allowed industries to pay women less than the existing union wage, some unions supported equal pay (Boris and Orleck 2011).

The second half of the twentieth century saw increased participation of women in the workforce outside the home. Along with ethnic minorities/people of colour and migrants, women now dominate the service sectors and several areas of the public sector. This has been commensurate with the increase of strikes in those sectors in several countries: strikes, as well as workplaces, are now feminised and intersectional (van der Velden 2007, Boris and Orleck 2011, McAlevey 2017).

Since the 1970s, neoliberalism has sought to destroy the bargaining power of organised labour (Mason 2015). Deregulation has decreased accountability and increased impunity for rights abuses by corporations. The widespread recession of the 1980s afforded many governments an opportunity to bring in policies that undermined labour organising, such as privatisation, and introduced various legal limitations on the right to strike, sometimes even banning various forms of strike action such as solidarity strikes. These limitations include the issues on which a strike can be called, who can call a strike, which workers are permitted to strike, the rules that have to be followed in calling for and conducting a strike for it to be deemed legal, how a strike can be conducted, who can legally call a strike and negotiate terms, and rules or bans on solidarity strikes/secondary picketing.

Many of these rules would have denied success to historical strikes had they been in place at the time. For example, one woman who was part of the strike for equal pay at the Trico factory (London, UK, 1976, see Strikes for labour rights) commented: “The Trico women would not have been able to achieve their right to equal pay under the draconian provisions of the new Trade Union Act 2016.”¹² Since the 1990s, there has been a decline in the number and density of unionised workplaces and a related fall in the power, in terms of economic relevance, of strike action with the number of strike days and the share of workers joining strikes both at a low (Nowak and Gallas 2014).

Globalisation has propelled the off-shoring of work to countries offering cheaper production, primarily through cheaper labour, building supply chains of precarious and often unsafe work, with corporations threatening to move jobs to countries with fewer labour rights as leverage for favourable conditions and regulations that position profit ahead of worker rights and wellbeing. After 30 years of globalisation, the global workforce is mostly women of colour centred in low-income countries in the global south in low-wage, low-status, menial jobs (Silvey 2003, Mason 2015). Under the same processes that has formed workforces since the industrial revolution and the driven the cycle between strikes and strike-breaking tactics, these newer industrialising nations have learnt the lessons of history. This outsourcing of labour has been met with the willingness of governments to sell their citizens’ labour cheap (in their own countries

¹² Sally Groves, quoted in: *Today in London radical history: 350 women strike at Trico factory, Brentford, for equal pay with men, 1976, Past Tense (blog)*, 24 May 2016, <https://pasttenseblog.wordpress.com/2016/05/24/today-in-london-radical-history-350-women-strike-at-trico-factory-brentford-for-equal-pay-with-men-1976/>

or as migrant workers) and fuelled rapid industrialisation and high rates of growth, along with labour conditions associated with earlier industrialisation eras of other countries (Mason 2015, Kamath and Ramanathan 2017). Flexibility is favoured and the degree to which labour organising is restricted becomes a benefit to the state.

Until 2010, the World Bank's Doing Business rankings – which rank countries on the basis of how business-friendly they are – included an indicator assessing labour market flexibility of its member states: a message to potential foreign investors of the power of organised labour in the country.¹³ Countries have sought to quash industrial action in order to gain favour from foreign investment (see for example Kamath and Ramanathan 2017). The interconnectivity of flexible, global production such as supply chains means that a local struggle can very quickly have global impact – which can benefit the striking workforce or be used to justify a violent crackdown. However, research in Asia Pacific suggests that collective networks and actions, such as self-organised groups but not strikes, are more often used to pressure management into negotiations or making concessions (Zajak et al. 2017).

In the 21st century the precarious labour conditions of globalisation have reached back to the global north. There has been a notable rise in contract labour across the world. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that more than 60 per cent of workers across the world are working on temporary, part-time, or short-term contracts – and that most of them are women. This trend is especially strong in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa where as many as 80 per cent of workers may be in precarious jobs: for example, contract labour has doubled in India in the century's first decade (ILO 2015b, Kamath and Ramanathan 2017). This casualisation fuels poverty and other inequalities and has been a challenge to organising. The established trade unions are not necessarily set up to represent such a precarious workforce (Mellino 2017). But it is not just a problem of the organising model – casualisation is often used deliberately to undermine labour organising: building a divided, mobile workforce with different rights who can be played off against each other. But it is also driving a new wave of action against the lack of even basic labour rights and protections inherent in the increased casualisation and gig economy pursued in the name of flexibility, action that is including strikes (Semuels 2018). The rise in inequalities, which are driven further by the austerity measures brought in since the financial crisis in 2008, has also changed the profile of workers who are in precarious situations, with more middle class workers in full-time work, sometimes holding down multiple jobs, but still finding themselves unable to meet their financial obligations, sometimes losing their homes. And they are starting to organise (Kessler 2016, Semuels 2018).

In this paper we set out to explore some of the lessons we can learn from strike actions that have enjoyed some measure of success. In the next section we look at a range of examples of strikes before moving on to draw out some lessons from these and other examples.

¹³ That indicator was dropped in response to strong trade union pressure. In June 2013 an independent panel recommended the World Bank ended the ranking of countries according to an "Ease of Doing Business" index and permanently removing the report's controversial tax and labour indicators (ITUC 2013).



Strikes: case studies

What follows in the sections below are examples of strike actions from across history and the world. Although not all these strikes met their objectives, these examples accomplished at least one of the following:

- Established rights for workers;
- Brought about social change or even altered the political landscapes;
- Garnered immense cross-sector, cross-region mobilisation or support or attention;
- Saw women workers involved as a majority of strikers or in the strike leadership;
- Achieved the demands of strike.

Although most strikes involve labour stoppages, the examples of strikes described in this chapter are divided into four categories: strikes against patriarchy, for women's human rights; strikes against neoliberal globalisation, for workers' rights and economic justice; strikes against militarism, for peace and political change; strikes for environmental justice. This is based on APWLD's analytical framework on women's oppression, which we believe derives from patriarchy aggravated by three structural factors: neoliberal globalisation, fundamentalisms, and militarism.

However, real life is more complicated than such categorisation. Many women's human rights strikes are seeking political change, for example, or address interrelated or overlapping issues such as labour rights for women workers – whether from the outset or as the strike develops, crossing two or more of these categories. Furthermore, as some examples demonstrate, in some cases strikes may not achieve their intended outcome but strikers can still claim some other success.



Striking against patriarchy, for women's human rights

Women have long been central to labour strikes and the labour movement. For example, in 1889, the committee of a workers' strike in London (UK) reflected:

"...in closing this chapter of labour history, we are inevitably prompted to place on record the magnificent courage, patience, and perseverance of the women who were engaged in the struggle. There will probably be no brighter record than theirs...and Trade Unionism owes them its thanks. Had all the strikers and those who came out with them been imbued with the spirit of the women, the battle would probably have been won" (Tully 2014, p. 302).

However, women have also used strikes as a tactic to protest against the inequalities that derive from and sustain patriarchal domination. Here are a selection:

Strikes for equality

Women's strike for equality, USA

26 August 1970

The women's strike for equality in 1970 was called by the National Organization for Women (NOW) to celebrate the 50th anniversary of women's suffrage (right to vote), but also to draw attention to the "unfinished business" of that campaign. It focused on three issues: repeal of anti-abortion laws, establishment of childcare centres, and equal opportunity in education and work, without which women cannot enjoy equality in society. Organisers looked to learn from other mass protests including the anti-war and reproductive rights movements.¹⁴ Media had ridiculed the idea of the strike but thousands of women participated in 90 cities in 42 US states. Tens of thousands marched in New York (at rush hour), far exceeding the numbers authorities had prepared for, lobbied in Washington DC for the Equal Rights Amendment to the US Constitution, and took other smaller actions across the country. One of the slogans, directly addressing gendered norms, was "Don't Iron While the Strike is Hot!" The strike efforts were front page news in several national newspapers and on the top TV networks of the time. However, the women participating in the strike were criticised by more conservative women's groups and others as anti-feminine ("a band of wild lesbians"¹⁵) or communist. There were solidarity marches in Paris, France, and Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The strike amply demonstrated women's dissatisfaction with their position in the patriarchal society (Dismore 2010, Napikoski 2017, Reilly 2017).

Key demands: Anti-abortion law, childcare center, equal opportunity in education and work for women

Outcome: The strike did not achieve all of its aims but it galvanised second wave feminism in the US.

¹⁴ See comment from Ruthann Miller, the staff person organising the strike, in comment on Dismore 2010.

¹⁵ Quote is from a New York Times article about the strike published on the day of the protests, in Napikoski (2017).

Over the following years, US passed legislation Title IX¹⁶ and workplace policies banning sexual harassment and the Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Roe v. Wade* (1973) ruling that laws that criminalised or restricted access to abortions were unconstitutional. Legendary feminist, lawyer and US Representative Bella Abzug introduced a bill in Congress declaring 26 August Women's Equality Day (Napikoski 2017). The demand for affordable childcare remains a demand for US feminists today (Reilly 2017).

Iceland's women strike

24 October 1975



Source: Women's History Achieve: Women's Day Off, Iceland, 1975. Retrieved from <https://kvennasogusafn.is/index.php?page=Women-s-Day-Off-1975>

The United Nations proclaimed 1975 a Women's Year. In Iceland, the Red Stockings, one of the women's organisations involved in planning events to mark the year, proposed a strike to draw attention to the role of women in male-dominated society and the low value and low pay given to women's work inside and outside the home. In order to ensure the widest support for the strike, it was called "a day off" rather than a strike, and on the day in October, about 25,000 women of all ages and from all walks of life gathered in the capital, Reykjavik (Rudolfsdottir 2005). That is about 90 per cent of women who did not go to their paid work and did not do housework, including child-care, for one day. Icelandic men were forced to take their children to work and take care of them since the daycare centres were also closed; the most popular ready meal sold out in the supermarkets (Rudolfsdottir 2005, Puglise 2017). The strike also led to women reflecting on women's underrepresentation in the country's parliament and started the strikers thinking it was time for a women president.

However, gender pay gap and workplace safety for women remains an issue for women in Iceland. On 24 October 2018, which is the 43rd year of the first strike in 1975, women in Iceland decided to call on strike again to highlight the ongoing issues.

¹⁶ Title IX is US federal civil rights law passed in 1972 as part of the Education Amendments to protect people from discrimination on the basis of sex in education programmes or activities that receive Federal financial assistance, see https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/tix_dis.html?exp=0

According to the campaign banner of Kvinnafri (Women's Day Off), women in Iceland were encouraged to leave work at 2:55 p.m. on 24 October 2018, the minute they stop being paid for their work.

According to the latest statistics, the average wages of women in Iceland are paid only 74% of men's average wages. As women are paid 26% less on average than men, women have worked for their wages only for 5 hours and 55 minutes in an 8-hour working day. If the workday begins at 9 a.m. and finishes at 5 p.m., women in Iceland would not be paid for their work from 2:55 p.m.

Key demands: Recognition of women's roles and equal political participation in the society

Outcome: The strike clearly demonstrated that women are an equal pillar of society and a year later the Icelandic parliament passed a law guaranteeing equal rights between men and women. Now, 38 per cent of parliament is made up of women, compared to just three per cent at the time of the strike in 1975.¹⁷ In 1980, five years after the strike, Vigdis Finnbogadóttir won the presidency, becoming the nation's first woman president: she cited the strike as inspiration (Puglise 2017). This was not a one-off: as of 2016, Iceland had had a woman leader for 20 of the last 36 years (Friedman 2016). In 2017, Iceland was ranked number one in the world gender gap index, for the ninth year running. It had closed more than 87 percent of its overall gender gap and is recognised as one of the fastest-improving countries on gender equality in the world (World Economic Forum 2017). However, there remains a gender pay gap and Icelandic women are still campaigning to eliminate it, marking anniversaries of the strike by leaving work early that day, at the time by which, if they were men, they would have earned that day's pay (Rudolfsdóttir 2005, Friedman 2016).

Strikes for services: strikes using reproductive rights

Women hold sex strike for water system repair, Turkey July 2001

Women have long known the power that comes with withdrawing their sexual and emotional labour. In 411 BCE, Aristophanes' comic play *Lysistrata* described the women of Greece engaging in a sex-strike, denying men sex (unless under fear of violence) until the men ended the long-running Peloponnesian war. Women living in a village near Sirt in southern Turkey declared "no water, no sex". Inspired by a 1983 Turkish film which portrays women holding a sex strike over the gendered division of labour, they called a sex strike in protest at the village's water system that had been broken for months as the burden of collecting and carrying water from a fountain fell on the women. Some of whom had to carry the water miles to their homes.

Key demands: Repairment of the public water system

Outcome: Within a month of the sex strike, the men of the village petitioned the local governor and asked municipality to fix the water supply system or provide them the parts to do so (AP 2001).¹⁸

¹⁷ Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in National Parliaments as of 1st January 2018*, <http://archive.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

¹⁸ The strike later inspired two films: *Absurdistan* (Germany/France, 2008), directed by Veit Helmer, filmed in Azerbaijan, and *The Source* (France 2011), directed by Radu Mihăileanu, set in a North African village, see <http://activistwithattitude.com/sex-strikes-and-birth-boycotts-no-laughing-matter/>

The Crossed-Legs Strike: Colombian women use sex strike to pressure government to repair road

June-September 2011 and October 2013

Women of the coastal town of Barbacoas in south-west Colombia, which is situated within what at the time was the conflict area, began a sex strike to protest for a safe road to travel through the province. For years the women had campaigned for and been promised better roads but nothing had happened. The lack of a decent road to the town is not just a safety issue but increases the costs of food and other goods and denies access to services for the people of Barbacoas. Vowing to forego all sexual activity, the women stepped up their action. Ruby Quinonez, one of the strike leaders explained: “Why bring children into this world when they can just die without medical attention and we can’t even offer them the most basic rights? We decided to stop having sex and stop having children until the state fulfils its previous promises.” (Montes 2011) After three months of the “crossed-legs strike” (huelga de piernas cruzadas), the government at local, state and national level pledged funds to rebuild the road but never provided the money and initial efforts to repair the road were abandoned after a soldier working on the road was killed in a guerrilla attack. In October 2013, the women began a second sex strike (Otis 2013).

Key demand: Repairment of the public roads

Outcome: In response to the second crossed-legs strike, the men in Barbacoas began helping to fix the road and the Colombian army engineers started working on problem areas (Otis 2013).

Strike for reproductive rights

Women strike for their right to access abortion services, Poland

3 October 2016



Julia. (@remarksist). (2016 Oct 3). Berlin in solidarity with Poland in the fight against barbaric anti-abortion laws! #BlackMonday #CzarnyProtest. (Twitter Post). Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/remarksist/status/782949560704434176/photo/1>

In 2011, 2013, and 2015 the Polish government has introduced draft legislative proposals that contained total or near total bans on abortion. When the Polish government moved again in 2016 to introduce a total ban on access to abortion in all cases, women across the country mobilised, organising public protests and, on 3 October, going on strike. Poland already had one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe but the government proposed to extend them, permitting abortion only in cases where the life of the mother was at risk. The proposed law would also increase the prison sentence from two to five years for women who have abortions and introduce possible prison sentences for doctors who perform abortions. The strikers, numbering up to 100,000 across 143 locations across the country, wore black to symbolise their mourning for the possible loss of reproductive rights. This gave the protests the name the “black protests” (#czarnyprotest). About 30,000 women gathered in Castle Square in Warsaw, chanting “We want doctors, not missionaries!” and carrying placards bearing messages such as “My Uterus, My Opinion” and “Women Just Want to Have FUN-damental Rights”. The protests were covered by international media, various hashtags profiled the protest on social media, and there were solidarity protests in cities across Europe including Paris, France; Berlin, Germany and Oslo, Norway. Two days after the strike, the situation in Poland was debated in the European Parliament (ASTRA Network 2016, Davies 2016, Reuters 2016).

Key demand: Stopping the total ban on abortion by the Polish government

Outcome: On 5 October 2016, the Polish parliament overwhelmingly rejected the proposal for a total abortion ban, by 352 votes to 58 (Reuters 2016). Ewa Kopacz, a Liberal MP and former prime minister, told reporters the governing party had “backtracked because it was scared by all the women who hit the streets in protest” (Davies 2016). In January 2018, the government again pushed for further restrictions to women’s access to abortion. Women have so far responded with protests in 50 cities, calling for a “feminist revolution” with the hashtag #SaveWomen (Davies 2018, Smith 2018). In March 2018 Poland’s parliament again debated a new draft bill entitled “Stop Abortion” to further limit the already restricted grounds on which women can lawfully access safe abortion services in the country. Women responded with a Women’s Strike – mass protests against the proposal gathered, including at the seat of the influential Roman Catholic bishop in Warsaw. On 2 July 2018, the Polish Women’s Strike and the Warsaw Women’s Strike organised protests outside Parliament as the anti-abortion bill was debated by the Social Policy and Family Committee. After half an hour of discussion the bill was directed to the subcommittee what is commonly understood as a legislative freezer (ASTRA Secretariat).

Strikes against violence against women

Black Wednesday: Women’s general strike to protest femicide, Argentina

19 October 2016

After two years of organising against violence against women under the banner of #NiUnaMenos (Not One Woman Less) and following another case of violence where a 16-year-old girl named Lucia Perez Montero died after being abducted, drugged and raped, women in Argentina called a general strike for 19 October 2016. Declaring it Black Wednesday (#MiércolesNegro), it was an act of protest at the full spectrum of gender-based violence against women including sexual, cultural and economic violence. The strike organisers deliberately framed their action as a strike, making plain the link between the violence and women’s lack of economic agency and bodily autonomy. They tied women’s experiences of violence to the

country's neoliberal structural adjustment programme: "Leaving women without a say is as vulnerable to economic exploitation as to physical violence. Both are part of a political economic program of spectacular death for women" (statement from Ni Una Menos, quoted in Moshenberg 2016). Women wore black and stopped work for one hour. Thousands marched in the capital, Buenos Aires, and other cities. Solidarity marches took place in Uruguay, Paraguay, Peru, Chile, Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, Ecuador, and Spain. Strikers had little expectation of the government acting on the issue (BBC News 2016)

Key demands: Protesting gender-based violence against women including sexual, cultural and economic violence

Outcome: The first national women's strike in the country's history advanced the national and regional discussion on ending violence against women. It challenged the portrayal of women as passive victims and victim-blaming (The Guardian 2016)



Source: Hasse, Javier (@JavierHasses). Today, yet again, #Argentina says NO to Gender Based Violence. #NiUnamenos #MiercolesNegro #VivasNosQueremos #ParoNacionalDeMujeres. (Twitter Post). Retrieved from https://twitter.com/JavierHasse/status/788760059656413184/photo/1?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5E

Striking against neoliberal globalisation, for workers' rights and economic justice

Strikes for workers' rights

As strikes are primarily conceived and understood as tool of the workers, there are innumerable examples of labour strikes. The following selection touch on some of the key developments in the labour movement, particularly related to women workers. These are often in situations of new industrialisation – historic examples in the industrialising north and more recent examples in the global south as increased informalisation has shifted manufacturing production to the Global South, coinciding with an increase in women workers in these low-wage, low-status, often precarious jobs (Silvey 2003).

The Match Girls' Strike, London, UK

1888



Source: *The United States Library of Congress: Group of mainly female shirtwaist workers on strike, in a room, New York, 1910. Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Group_of_mainly_female_shirtwaist_workers_on_strike,_in_a_room,_New_York.png*

In 19th century London the match industry employed women as well as children as workers making matchboxes in their own homes. This homeworking situation prevented workers developing any cohesion

as a collective group of workers and meant that they were not covered by the early unions. Their status as home-based out-workers¹⁹ kept them outside the protection of the labour laws that covered factory work, and made them impossible to organise in the eyes of the trade unions of the time who were focused on skilled men workers. There was also a large surplus labour pool in the east end of London at the time leaving workers little room for negotiation over the terms of their employment. This meant the workers were paid very little. The work was very dangerous and destroyed workers' jawbones from the constant inhaling of phosphorus fumes.

The so-called match-girls who worked for the Bryant & May company went on strike in October 1885 over a pay cut but the strike was not successful. In the summer of 1888 middle-class women meeting at the Fabian Society,²⁰ a democratic socialist society that had formed four years earlier, discussed women's work and cited the poor conditions at the Bryant & May company in particular. Women's rights activist Annie Besant undertook to investigate the working conditions of the match-girls. Her subsequent published report on the situation caused backlash from the company who were pressuring their workers to discover who had talked with Besant; three workers were dismissed. Besant wrote to the newspapers appealing for funds to pay the young women until they found other work and proposed a meeting to protest their sackings. Following this, on 5 July 1888, another worker identified as a leader of the matchmakers was dismissed for disobedience. At this point all 14,000 women walked out and stayed out even after the organiser was reinstated.

The employer and press were hostile to the strike and blamed socialists for fomenting dissent. However, there was widespread solidarity for the women workers: the strike fund was supported by wide sections of the public, and also by the trade unions. The London Trades' Council's called the strike "an almost unprecedented event in the history of labour" (quoted in Beer 1983, 34). An independent investigation into the working conditions at the company was published in the Times newspaper and confirmed the workers' allegations. Keen to maintain their reputation of liberalism and with public opinion against them on 16 July the company owners met with the London Trades' Council and a delegation of the match workers. They reached an agreement the following day and on 18 July the proposed settlement was accepted by the striking match-girls. The deal exceeded the expectations of the socialist organisers who had brought the working conditions to wider attention (Beer 1983).

Key demands: Decent working condition and pay

Outcome: Having won better working conditions the match-girls built on their organising success and formed the Union of Women Matchmakers. They elected some of the organisers who had assisted their strike as officials, including Annie Besant as their first secretary, and sent their first delegate to the Trades Union Congress the following year. The strike did not just benefit the match workers, it was the spark of the 'New Unionism' that inspired other labourers to organise for better conditions (Beer 1983).

19 Known at the time as "sweating"
20 <https://fabians.org.uk>

The uprising of the 20,000: the New York shirtwaist strike, USA

November 1909 to February 1910

In November 1909, after a series of smaller strikes, the women of the shirtwaist factories in New York held a mass meeting of workers from different companies.²¹ The work was home-based or in small sweatshops with long hours, 65 hours a week was standard, and low pay (Sachar n.d.). Men from the union were wary, having a sexist view of women and not believing that they could carry a strike, but a young Ukraine-born Jewish migrant woman, Clara Lemlich, called, in Yiddish, for a general strike – and the largest strike by women workers in the USA to date was underway (Sachar n.d., Women Working, n.d.). Within two days more than 20,000 mostly Jewish, migrant, and other minority women workers joined the strike – more than 60 per cent of the industry’s workforce. A month later, 7000 of the factory workers in Philadelphia joined the strike (Women Working, n.d.). The strike protests were violent: with the factory owners hiring men to attack the strikers, often with help from police officers who then arrested strikers on trumped-up charges of assault. Of the hundreds of arrests during the strike, some women sentenced to the workhouse. Clara Lemlich was arrested 17 times and suffered six broken ribs (Michels n.d.). The strikers asked for the support of the National Women’s Trade Union League of America (NWTUL) which had access to funds, publicity, and middle class support. These middle-class, mostly white protestant supporters linked the strike to the campaign for women’s suffrage, marching alongside the workers and using their privileges to reduce police brutality against the strikers (Boris and Orleck 2011). Their support brought public opinion to the side of the strikers (Sachar n.d.).



Source: The United States Library of Congress: Two women strikers on picket line during the “Uprising of the 20,000”, garment workers strike, New York City. Strikes, ladies tailors, N.Y., Feb. 1910, picket girls on duty, 1910. Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ladies_tailors_strikers.jpg

Key demands: Decent working condition and pay

Outcome: After 13 weeks on strike, thousands of strikers had joined the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) which reached a settlement with most of the factory owners for improved pay, conditions, working hours and paid holidays. In addition to bettering conditions for the shirtwaist workers, the strike established that women were credible labour activists and set a precedent for collective action in the garment sector and the rest of the US economy (Michels n.d., Sachar n.d.).

The Passaic Textile Strike, New Jersey, USA

January 1926 to February 1927



Source: *The United States Library of Congress: Delegation from textile mills, Passaic N.J., 3/17/26 Abstract/medium: 1 negative : glass ; 5 x 7 in. or smaller, 1926. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delegation_from_textile_mills,_Passaic_N.J.,_3-17-26_LCCN2016850878.jpg*

In January 1926, over 15,000 workers went on strike over a ten per cent wage cut across the textile mills of Passaic, New Jersey, in what was to become a historic development in labour history and raise questions about labour rights, immigration, and the violent law enforcement response (Ebner 1977, McMullen 2010). Many of the mill workers (and owners) were immigrants with from central, eastern, and southern Europe: there were more than 30 languages spoken by mill workers in the area at the time of the strike (McMullen 2010). Women and children made up a significant proportion of the workforce (Ebner 1977).

The story of the Passaic strike is in part a story of organising. In the absence of any union organising at the start of the strike, the Workers (Communist) Party established the United Front Committee of Textile Workers (UFC), but this political association was anathema to the mill owners who refused to negotiate

with them (Ebner 1977, McMullen 2010). The American Federation of Labor (AFL) only got involved six months into the strike, at the end of July 1926 (McMullen 2010). Other unions supported the strikers financially and in kind, for example the Bakers Union provided bread and the Shoe Workers Protective Union repaired shoes for free (Russak and Wagenknecht 1926). Finally in November, after almost eleven months of the strike, one of the smaller mills conceded to the workers' demands. The Passaic strikes slowly ended over the next three months as the other mill workers returned to work.

Key demands: Decent wage, freedom of association and the rights to organise

Outcome: The Passaic textile workers achieved their strike demands and established their right to freedom of association securing recognition of their union and collective bargaining rights (McMullen 2010).

The New Bedford strike, Massachusetts, USA April to October 1928



Source: New Bedford's Forgotten History 1928 Textile Strike. Retrieved from <https://www.newbedfordguide.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Textile-Strike-of-1928.jpg>

In April 1928, a year after the Passaic strike (above), mill owners in New Bedford, Massachusetts, announced the same ten per cent wage cut – and met the same response when the textile workers went on strike. There was close to gender equality among the weavers of New Bedford, the largest single occupation in the town, comprising almost 40 per cent of the city's textile workers (DeVault 2006). In addition to the pay issue, the women workers added another issue to their demands – calling for the end of the factory owners' practice of docking workers' pay for imperfect and supposedly inferior work. This, known as 'the fines issue', was only taken up by one of the five textile unions, the weavers' union (DeVault 2006). The

strikers had the support of the community, church, and local media, in defiance of the economic power of the mill owners (Santos 1985). Organisers for the Communist labour movement who had been active in the Passaic strike arrived in New Bedford to support the strike, especially the (so-called) unskilled workers – mostly women – who were not represented by the craft unions (McMullen 2010). They included Ellen Dawson, a Scottish immigrant who had been a textile worker and was now an organiser (and would become the first woman elected to a national leadership position in a US textile union), who focused particularly on working with the women textile workers (McMullen 2010).

In July, the mill owners announced their intention to reopen, hoping that those strikers who were struggling to survive on dwindling aid resources would break the strike. In anticipation of unrest following the announcement, the mayor called in the national guard. The violence that followed ended any police empathy for the strikers, leading to the breaking up of peaceful protests, arrests of strikers, and, for immigrant workers and organisers, the threat of deportation (Santos 1985, McMullen 2010).²²

Key demands: Decent pay and abolition of wage deduction

Outcome: In October 1928, the mill owners, facing a critical press, proposed instead a five per cent wage cut, which the older craft unions accepted. Nonetheless, the community had been an important source of moral and financial support to the strikers.

The New Bedford strike sowed divisions between skilled against unskilled workers, which led to the creation of a new union, the National Textile Workers' Union of America (NTWU). Recognising the number of women textile workers and their potential as agents of social change, the communist-backed NTWU, unique for its time, included in their demands for labour rights, specific women's human rights concerns. These included equal pay (of at least minimum wage) for equal work, four months' paid vacation for childbirth (two months before and after), allowing working mothers time off to nurse infant children, and the provision of free childcare, under the supervision of the union. In a later strike, at Gastonia in North Carolina, USA, in 1929, the NTWU also directly addressed the racism of the workplace, understanding it to be a major barrier to workers' rights, though that too failed to achieve the strikers' demands for better pay and working conditions (McMullen 2010).

Oil industry workers strike for higher wages and benefits, Fiji 7 to 15 December 1959

In the 1950s, Fiji was under British colonisation and Suva is the largest city of Fiji full with local and immigrant workers. However, Fiji labour wages were less than the living cost due to the influx of residents to Suva. Therefore, European rulers are common enemy of all workers whether Fijian or migrants workers from India, Asia and including European. The workers formed labour union called the Wholesale and Retail Workers General Union (WRWGU) in 1958. They wanted to raise the minimum wages for all workers but they started with workers from oil industry (Shell Oil Co. and Vacuum Oil Co.) The strike took nine days and it started with 300 worker from oil companies. WRWGU was able to organise more people by persuading Fijian and Indian drivers to stop seeking gas; coerce bus drivers to abandon their routes which left 5000 commuters at bus stations.

²² Many workers and some organisers were immigrants to the US from the textile industries of countries such as the UK or Portugal.

Key Demands: Wage increase, limit working hours to 40 hours per week, workers entitled to sick leave and two weeks paid vacation per year.

Outcome: The minimum wage was increased from 3 pounds 6 pences to 4 pounds 11 shillings and 4 pences with no other benefits. Although the strike did not achieve all the demands, it was a successful achievement under the colonial government.²³

The Memphis sanitation strike: Entwined struggles racial and economic justice, USA 1968

In February 1968, following the death of two colleagues when they were crushed to death by the hydraulic press of the refuse truck, African American sanitation workers in Memphis went on strike to protest their poor working conditions, occupational safety and health concerns, and the lack of a grievance mechanism. The deaths were not an isolated incident, it was dangerous work and disabling injuries were common (Zimring 2018). The strike directly addressed sanitation concerns: the rubbish that the workers had to handle, without adequate protection, included biological waste.²⁴ It also created environmental risks with piles of rubbish left uncollected in the streets during the strike. Segregation in the labour market and workplace severely limited work opportunities for African American workers and the strike was supported by civil rights activists as well as unions. The strikers enjoyed community support, though some distanced themselves on the basis of socioeconomic status/class and some on grounds of race (Berkley 2011). Accompanied by civil rights activists, Martin Luther King Jr. led a large march in support of the strike in the main streets of Memphis on 28 March 1968, just a week before he was assassinated. For Dr. King, the strike exemplified the concerns of his Poor People's Campaign, which advocated economic justice and rights as an essential part of civil rights. On 3 April, on the eve of his assassination, Dr. King gave a speech in Memphis and alluded to the power of strike action:

“Now the other thing we’ll have to do is this: always anchor our external direct action with the power of economic withdrawal. Now we are poor people, individually we are poor when you compare us with white society in America. We are poor. Never stop and forget that collectively, that means all of us together, collectively we are richer than all the nations in the world, with the exception of nine. Did you ever think about that? After you leave the United States, Soviet Russia, Great Britain, West Germany, France, and I could name the others, the American Negro collectively is richer than most nations of the world. We have an annual income of more than thirty billion dollars a year, which is more than all of the exports of the United States and more than the national budget of Canada. Did you know that? That’s power right there, if we know how to pool it. (Yeah) [Applause]”²⁵

²³ *Fijian oil industry workers strike for higher wages and benefits, 1959, Retrieved from <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/fijian-oil-industry-workers-strike-higher-wages-and-benefits-1959>*

²⁴ *This strike addresses labour rights and, in its links with the civil rights movement, socioeconomic/political change. Given the environmental and health hazards the strikers faced in their work and the segregation that relegated African American men to such unsafe work, some have also classified this as an environmental justice strike.*

²⁵ Retrieved from <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/ive-been-mountaintop-address-delivered-bishop-charles-mason-temple>.

Key demands: Decent wages and recognition of union

Outcome: After four months of the strike, which also saw marches, riots, police violence, hunger strikes, and boycotts of downtown stores, the strikers' demands for union recognition and better wages were met (Berkley 2011, Zimring 2018). In the year of the 50th anniversary of the strike, current labour organising and social justice movements including Black Lives Matter and Fight for \$15, which organises low-paid workers for an increased minimum wage, organised a series of strikes across the USA (Elk 2018). The work remains extremely hazardous (Zimring 2018).

Equality in the workplace: Strikes for recognition of work of equal value and for equal pay, London, UK 1968 to 1978

From the late 1960s through the 1970s there were a series of strikes by working class and migrant women in the UK demanding equal and better pay, improved working conditions, and more broadly, for recognition of women and minority workers as workers on an equal footing with white men in the British working-class and labour movement. This survey cannot cover all of the strikes but highlights three: two strikes that bring a focus to equal pay for work of equal value and one at the moment in labour history when UK trade unions supported the demands and recognised the rights of minority women workers as equal to those of white working class men.

Dagenham Ford factory workers strike for equal grading, UK June 1968

On 7 June 1968, 187 women sewing machinists working at the Ford car factory in Dagenham, east London, went on strike in protest that they were to be classified as unskilled workers, a regrading that would see them paid 15 per cent less than men at the same grade. The women's work was not unskilled: they had had to pass tests to secure their jobs and often brought considerable experience to the role (Goodley 2013). The management feared that the men who were semi-skilled workers would rebel if the women were given the same grading (Cohen 2017). Though the strikers had some support from their co-workers, others were critical of their actions, as were the wives of men who lost work during the strike action. The company threatened to close parts of the factory, hinted at tens of thousands of jobs at risk, and did lay off 9,000 workers (who were subsequently reinstated). The women's three-week walk out for equal grading halted car production at the factory.²⁶ Barbara Castle, then the government's Employment Minister, was brought in to help negotiate a settlement (Goodley 2013).

Key demands: Recognition of work of equal value and for equal pay, improved working conditions

Outcome: The women Ford workers agreed to a pay raise getting them 92 per cent of the higher grade pay that was paid to men (Goodley 2013). That the production-stopping strike was taking place at the same time as mass strikes in France will not have been lost on the government who would not want to see that

Dr. King went on to call for consumer boycotts in support of the striking sanitation workers: "As Jesse Jackson has said, up to now only the garbage men have been feeling pain. Now we must kind of redistribute that pain. [Applause] We are choosing these companies because they haven't been fair in their hiring policies, and we are choosing them because they can begin the process of saying they are going to support the needs and the rights of these men who are on strike."
26 More than forty years on, the strike was the subject of renewed popular interest when the history was the basis of a film (*Made in Dagenham*, 2010, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1371155/>) and play (2014, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Made_in_Dagenham_\(musical\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Made_in_Dagenham_(musical))), and the achievements of the women strikers recognised by the #TimesUp campaign.

unrest move across the Channel to the UK. To end the strike the government promised and implemented an inquiry into the dispute and two years later, passed Equal Pay Act to guarantee gender equality in pay and employment conditions, though this was also in part to fulfil requirements of its membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) (Stevenson 2016).²⁷ During the debates on the bill, an MP acknowledged the Dagenham machinists as playing a “very significant part in the history of the struggle for equal pay”.²⁸ However it took a further 16 years and another, longer (six week) strike in 1984 before the women workers finally got the regrading they had demanded in their 1968 action (Goodley 2013).



Source: Dagenham Ford factory workers strike for equal grading, June 1968. Source: Today in Labour History: June 7, 1968. (wordpress blog) Retrieved from <https://todayinlaborhistory.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/webmedia.jpeg>

Trico factory strike for equal pay, UK 24 May to 15 October 1976

On 24 May 1976, 400 women shop-floor workers at the Trico Windscreen Wiper factory in Brentford, west London, UK, went on strike for equal pay. Though gendered pay equality was the law in the UK since the passage of the 1970 Equal Pay Act, the reality was that employers had found many loopholes in the law to avoid making equal pay a reality – and were not afraid to publicise their tactics for doing so.²⁹ The

²⁷ However, the Act permitted certain exceptions to the law - including women only, non-unionised workplaces that were most likely to be low paid (Stevenson 2016).

²⁸ Dr. Shirley Summerskill, MP for Halifax: "...we must acknowledge in this debate a group of women who played a very significant part in the history of the struggle for equal pay. I refer to that small group of women machinists at Fords who went on strike for their beliefs and their rights. I do not like strikes any more than anyone else, but those women had to take really forceful action to achieve this principle. Like the early pioneers for women's suffrage, they faced abuse, misrepresentation and ridicule, but they demonstrated their great industrial power and their vital rôle in the export drive, so that politicians and public alike were made to realise that working women are indispensable to the economy, and that nine out of 10 of them are being exploited as cheap labour, a fact of which we should have been ashamed. But where the enemy is prejudice and custom, as in this case, those women at Fords showed that letters to the Press and conference resolutions are feeble weapons. Consultations and requests to employers over the years have been similarly ineffective." HC Deb 09 February 1970 vol 795 cc972-982, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1970/feb/09/equal-pay-no-2-bill>

²⁹ Stevenson (2016, 148) reports on a publication, "Equal Pay: An Employer's Guide" that, far from offering advice on implementing the law, provided guidance on avoiding the legal requirements.

women strikers wanted to “defend the advances that women have made”.³⁰ At this time most pay disputes were settled through industrial tribunals but the striking women of the Trico factory refused to accept this individualist approach: they were insistent that the strike was a collective act for the principle of equality. As a representative from another trade union later noted, the Trico strikers “had to resort to industrial action simply to achieve the letter of the law, let alone the spirit”.³¹



Source: Brentford Heritage. (@BrentfordPast). 1976 women's equal pay strike at Trico-Folberth windscreen wipers factory #Brentford. (Twitter Post). Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/brentfordpast/status/429739971738869760>

Although women's employment and unionisation were increasing at the time, they were mostly in low-paying jobs and not represented in trade union structures. About 150 factory men who were also members of the same union as the women strikers, the Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW), did join the strike, but the Trico women did not enjoy the support of the other factory workers (including the husband of at least one of the strikers). This was in part because the shop-floor workers were represented by three different unions, one of which explicitly rejected a call for solidarity action, and because the distinct job roles in the factory were aligned with class differences between the workers. However, the strikers did enjoy support from unions from outside the factory, including financial support, as the strike continued through that summer's heatwave and on into the autumn. Indeed, it is clear that there was wide contemporaneous recognition of the strike's importance for the women workers and the labour movement: dock worker and car manufacturing unions refused to handle Trico's goods,³² and the Greater London

30 Representative from Trico Strike Committee, quoted in Stevenson 2016, 158.

31 Judith Hunt of the Technical, Administrative and Supervisory Section (TASS) speaking at the 1976 TUC Conference, quoted in Stevenson 2016, 155: "Trade unionists, like those at Trico, who are fighting to extract equality from a reluctant American multi-national, must not have their traditional industrial rights undermined by the one-sided deliberations of an industrial tribunal. The spirit of the Act has become increasingly buried in the niceties and sophistications of the law, at the expense of the ordinary worker ... Our members and many other trade unionists have had to resort to industrial action simply to achieve the letter of the law, let alone the spirit."

32 This forced one car company to import windscreen wipers during the strike (Stevenson 2016, 151).

Association of Trades Councils met for the first time since its founding in 1860 to support an individual strike. However the leaders of the Trade Unions Congress and the Labour party did not appear to share this recognition, and did not overtly support the strike.

This strike was also an instance of a strike by workers in a transnational corporation outside the country where the company is headquartered. The employer, the US-based transnational corporation Trico-Folberth, was hostile to the strike, refusing to negotiate and exploring a number of bad-faith options including the blaming the strike for layoffs at its other factories, instead of meeting the strikers' demands. The police broke the picket lines to enable goods to enter and leave the factory; some strikers were arrested in the scuffles that resulted. This police action only strengthened the women's resolve (Stevenson 2016).

Key demands: Equal pay for the women workers and reinstate the workers who were laid-off during the protests

Outcome: After 21 weeks of strike action, and at a time of declining trade union influence, the US management at Trico gave in to the women's demands for equal pay and reinstated workers who had been laid-off during the strike. The women's solidarity from the strike and their understanding of the strength of workers united against their employer were lessons they shared with other women workers: they went on to offer financial and picket-line support to the strike at the Grunwick film processing laboratories (see below) (Stevenson 2016).

Grunwick photo processing plant, UK 20 August 1976 to 24 July 1978³³

A few weeks before the strike at the Trico factory ended (see above), six women workers at the Grunwick film processing laboratories, in northwest London, UK, walked out over compulsory overtime and a number of petty and racist humiliations. Led by Jayaben Desai, the strike built up to a two-year strike of 137 workers, the majority of whom were South Asian women who had arrived from the former British colonies in East Africa that had achieved independence over the previous decade. Media representations of the time portrayed the strikers mainly in terms of their ethnicity, focusing on stereotypes about family and community ties, as well as their clothes. To the media, they were not workers striking for their rights and acting in solidarity with other workers, but women to be patronised, with reporting focusing on the novelty and exoticism of the "strikers in saris" (Anitha and Pearson 2014).

The strikers joined a trade union, APEX (Association of Professional, Executive, Clerical and Computer Staff), and added to their strike demands that the company recognise their right to freedom of association. In September 1976, Grunwick fired the striking workers but offered to reinstate them if they dropped their demand for a trade union: the strikers rejected the offer. By June 1977, the wider trade union movement was supporting the strike and organised marches in support in the area around the Grunwick plant, sometimes involving over 20,000 people, demanding the workers be given their jobs back. The situation rapidly escalated, and certain days saw police violence against the strikers on the picket line; there were over 500 arrests during the strike and one day in November 1977 alone saw over 240 injuries (Bell and Mahmood 2016). Notably, the Union of Postal Workers voted on 1 November 1977 to support the strike and

boycott the postal services to and from the photo processing plant that, as a mail order service, relied on the post. However, by this time both the strikers' own union and the Trade Union Congress (TUC) viewed the strike as unwinnable and wanted it to end. The strikers turned their attention to protesting the TUC, with Jayaben Desai and three other strikers, Vipin Magdani, Johnny Patel and Yasu Patel, going on hunger strike for three days outside their London offices, but they were not able to regain their support and ended the strike (Bell and Mahmood 2016).



Source: Wilson, Amrit. (2016). "We are the lions, Mr. Manager": Revisiting the Great Grunwick Strike. Retrieved from <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/we-lions-mr-manager-revisiting-great-grunwick-strike/>

Key demands: End compulsory overtime, end racial discrimination, and recognition of the workers' freedom of association

Outcome: Two years after walking out on strike, the women called off the action with none of their demands met. Though it failed in this crucial aspect, the strike had demonstrated that migrant workers held an important place in society and would stand up for their rights (Bell and Mahmood 2016). It had also challenged the stereotype of docile South Asian women and is understood as a critical moment in British labour history, which had long been focused on the white working class, to give meaningful support to minority (and migrant) workers, even if it did not translate into a comprehensive anti-sexist, anti-racist approach. As part of this, the strike also saw cross-sector support with support from multiple trade unions, feminist, and anti-racist organisations, and students (Anitha and Pearson 2014). Though they felt abandoned by the trade union movement, they had won some concessions – as Jayaben Desai reflected: "...because of us, the people who stayed in Grunwick got a much better deal. When the factory moved, the van used to come to their home and pick them up because it was difficult for them to get to the new place. Can you imagine that? And they get a pension today! And we get nothing. That was because of us, because of our struggle."³⁴

The Regie tobacco workers strike, Ghaziyya, Lebanon

1970

On 23 June 1970, over 170 tobacco workers (more than 140 women and about 30 men) at the Regie, the French Lebanese Tobacco Monopoly, went on strike at the plant's branch in Ghaziyya, southern Lebanon. The women were mostly employed only as temporary workers and were striking to demand job permanency and better working conditions; their employment as seasonal labourers was in violation of Lebanese labour law (Abisaab 2005).³⁵ Women workers also complained of sexual harassment. The work was gendered to the disadvantage of women workers with the employers referencing women's "delicate hands" and patience required for the work they deemed to be unskilled (Abisaab 2005, 256). The women's refusal to be intimidated by this discrimination and by the social norms that dictated that as women they should not take public action was a rallying point of their action. The women workers demanded respect and also challenged the social order, insisting on their rightful place in the workplace rather than at home. In spite of these experiences of sexism, the women focused on the class issues they faced as workers.

However because of the gendered attitudes of unions, the women were not affiliated with any organised support. The only official union was a company union, Union of Regie Workers and Employees (URWE), that discriminated against workers on temporary contracts and women workers. The Communist Party was supportive of their goals but the women did not affiliate with any of the left political parties, instead organising themselves and drawing on their networks and personal ties (including with some who were part of the Communist Party). As they expanded their actions to include disrupting the highway and occupying the factory, the strikers faced the pressure of rumours that the Regie would just close the branch, jeopardising the jobs of all the workers at the plant, and also violent confrontations with the police that saw several women were injured or arrested. Under the gendered norms of the patriarchal community, several of the women workers reported they were also threatened with death by their own families for participating in the strike. Even after the Regie fired all the strikers about three months in to the strike, the women strikers continued with the public actions (Abisaab 2005).

Key demands: Job permanency and better working conditions

Outcome: Through their actions the women had expanded their public world, but in January 1971 the strike ended in compromise that did not secure the women's goal of permanency but saw them permitted to return to their jobs and the plant kept open. The women never gave up on their goal and in 1980 they finally secured permanent status for all temporary workers at the Regie (Abisaab 2005).

Bataan Free Trade Zone strike, Philippines

8 May to 7 June 1982

The Bataan Export Processing Zone (BEPZ) was the first Free Trade Zone (FTZ) in the Philippines established under Marcos Martial Law in 1969. It had an estimated 9,895 male workers and 11,105 female workers in 53 firms at the time.

It began as a solidarity action to protest the dispersal and subsequent arrest of 54 workers at one of the

³⁵ The 33 men employed at the Ghaziyya branch of the Regie were permanent employees (Abisaab 2005).

company called InterAsia Container Industries inside the FTZ. InterAsia, a Mitsubishi joint venture with the government, then manufactures jute bags on large looms in a dusty, barn-like factory inside the Zone Inter-Asia Management. The management gave orders to 200 workers to handle two more looms each without pay in addition to the four they already operated. After a month of adding the load, the workers went on strike on 8 May 1982 to protest unfair working condition.

Three weeks later, police attempted to disperse the strike while the company management tried to reopen the factory prompting order from the Ministry of Labour for strikers to return to work in 48 hours, which the workers defied. Subsequently, arrest order was handed to the 54 Inter-Asia strikers and they were later detained.

The sympathy strike with the Inter-Asia strikers involved around 20,000 workers from 53 companies inside BEPZ producing for export products ranging from automotive parts to tennis balls.

The arrests sparked anger, sympathy, and a sense of urgency among workers in the Zone. A woman worker turned activist working in a British-owned Intercontinental Garments Mftg corp, and few other leaders from more than a dozen firms - including Ford and Mattel, Lotus Specialist (Reebok supplier), decided to support the strikers of Inter-Asia. They organised the massive protest action that began on the afternoon of 5 June. The sympathy strikes completely paralysed 17 factories inside the Zone from 5-7 June 1982.

Key Demand: Immediate release of the arrested 54 workers, implement the labour protection for the workers equally, stop six loom production, and wage increase

Outcome: The protests took the Zone authorities, management, police and the Philippine government by surprise, but they opted to settle the dispute peacefully to avoid more losses. They agreed to the workers' demands. Factory and Zone authorities agreed to drop the charges against the arrested InterAsia workers, release the arrested, stop the six-loom productions. Participants in the general strike would also be allowed to return to work with no penalty, and the Ministry of Labour committed to conduct hearings on labour conditions in the Zone.

Since the strike, the BEPZ workers joined several protests to defy the no-union, no-strike policies in the Zone. There was a People's General Strike against the Bataan Nuclear plant. Workers also had strike actions against the fuel price increases, rising food prices, for wage increases, and later also united to protest against the Marcos dictatorship.

Foreign direct investment and increased strike activity: Women-led labour organising draws violent response, West Java, Indonesia 1990s-2013

The opening up of the political environment in Indonesia in the 1990s at the tail end of the "New Order" era of the Suharto dictatorship saw an increase in foreign investment in the country, growing the working class, an increasing number of whom were women. Along this economic change, political spaces and women's participation in them were also changing and new labour unions were established. There had been a growing number of strikes and other labour protests since the early 1980s and this became noticeably more common in the large, multinational, export-orientated corporations, particularly in manufacturing

– garment, textile, and footwear factories – than in locally-owned establishments. Women workers’ participation varied, often depending on whether they remained in family and community groups or migrated for work. Where women could enjoy more autonomy, women workers, particularly migrant women, played central roles in this strike activity. However in some areas of Java where women workers remained close to home, the view of women and others in their community, in line with New Order gender ideology of feminine domesticity, that striking was not appropriate behaviour for women (Silvey 2003).

In 1993, the rape and murder of Marsinah, a young woman labour activist and negotiator, generated outrage among workers across the country. Marsinah, who was 24 at the time of her death, had led a protest against the management of her watch factory in East Java and the military command who had abused workers who were demanding better wages and work conditions (Setiawati 2014). Under the Suharto dictatorship, it is widely believed the Indonesian military were involved: “Marsinah’s murder was intended to terrorize women workers and discourage them from participating in labor activism” (Silvey 2003, 138). Rather than stop them, the killing galvanised women workers’ activity in labour protests and they used Marsinah’s story in their organising, including in theatre and music groups, increasing workers’ willingness to strike. The heavy-handed police and military responses to labour disputes was funded by the foreign direct investment with factory management paying them to maintain control over the labour force – incentivising strike provocation, and subsequent repressive response, by the police and military. Other factors also fuelling the strikes included low wages (Silvey 2003).

Key demands: Wage increase, better working condition, end short-term and contractual employment

Outcome: The rate and number of strikes increased further in the post-Suharto Reformasi (reforms). Between 2011 and 2013 millions of workers joined strikes, including general strikes, forcing the government to implement minimum wage increases of an average of 27 per cent per year and increase healthcare provision (Panimbang 2018). One strike on 3 October 2012 coordinated by the Indonesian Labour Assembly saw more than two million workers join a general strike across 35 cities and districts in 20 provinces.

This was the first general strike since the dictatorship ended and covered 80 industrial estates including an Export Processing Zone, which consequently shut down other industrial estates. Striking workers also blockaded several highways. They were demanding better working conditions including wages and safe workplaces, and an end to short term contracts. At the end of the month second general strike on 31 October and 1 November 2013 followed a wave of strikes in industrial zones over the previous week and saw at least three million workers participate. This collective action brought about a sharp increase in the minimum wage (48 per cent) in 2013 and saw the creation of a new alliance, the National Coalition of Labour Movement, to help coordinate the strikes. In addition, following a Constitutional Court judicial review brought by a group of workers in 2012, the government has been mandated to issue stricter regulations to impede employers from recruiting contract and agency workers, limiting outsourcing (Panimbang 2018).³⁶

Twenty-one years after her murder, Marsinah was still inspiring workers’ activism: in 2014 workers organised a march, “Obor Marsinah” (Marsinah’s Torch), to a number of cities in Java demanding justice and the reopening of her case, which was never solved. Protestors also made connections to the discriminatory Marriage Law (1974), which does not acknowledge women as the heads of the family

denying them access to financial assistance, as well as ongoing gender discriminations in the workplace (Setiawati 2014). She continues to inspire the movement (Tri Wasono 2016). Nonetheless, the government is trying to restrict the power of unions with tactics including designating industrial sites as ‘national vital objects’, which has the effect of banning industrial action, including strikes, and even abolishing the annual negotiations over increases to the minimum wage in favour of following a set formula to calculate the wage, weakening organised labour’s bargaining power (Panimbang 2018).

Foreign investment and failure of formal labour relations see a surge in wildcat strikes, first for wages, then over social policy, Vietnam since 2000



Source: Zing.VN: Thousands of workers strike, highway congestion, 2016. Retrieved from <https://news.zing.vn/hang-nghin-cong-nhan-dinh-cong-quoc-lo-tac-nghen-post629785.html>

In Vietnam, the economic reforms (Doi Moi) initiated in the early 1990s saw a shift to export-oriented policy and associated increase in foreign direct investment (FDI). Since then, strikes and other informal industrial actions without the involvement of official unions became more common, with hundreds of strikes per year – reaching 978 in 2011 – involving thousands of people. The strikes are especially common in the foreign-owned sector, though working conditions and benefits are similar: three quarters of the country’s strikes have taken place in the foreign-owned manufacturing companies, 80 per cent in companies with foreign investment. Of the export industries, it is the garment and textile sectors that have been most strike-prone: 34 percent of reported strikes are in the textile and garment industry, part of global supply chains.

The strikes are all unofficial or wildcat strikes as they do not follow the convoluted procedures established for a legal strike. Nor are they organised by official unions, but by the informal organisation and leadership of experienced workers. Nonetheless, the strikes usually secure the workers' immediate labour rights objectives such as wage rises. Many of the strikes prompted "copy-cat" strikes in neighbouring companies with workers in those enterprises seeking to replicate the wage rise achieved in the original strike. Indeed, rather than lead the strike action, the union organisations have been known to inform the unions of other companies in the area and advise them to enter negotiations to match the wage increase in order to prevent strikes. Some government ministers have described the strikes as evidence of the unions and indeed, the whole political system, not adequately representing workers (Do 2017).

Building on these strike experiences and successes the strikes have had a more political focus in recent years. In April 2015, over 140,000 workers in southern Vietnam joined strikes against a government policy on social security. Starting in Pouyuen, a Taiwanese footwear company in Ho Chi Minh City and the largest factory in the country, 90,000 workers went on strike after being informed of changes to their pensions. The change would mean workers would not be allowed to withdraw their pensions until retirement age, rather than taking them when they wanted, a change that had particular ramifications for migrant workers from the rural areas (Do 2017).

Key demands: Wage increase, better working condition

Outcome: The wildcat strikes over wages were mostly successful: 92 per cent of reported strikes have all demands met by the employers. The strikes over changes to the pension system were ended only after the Prime Minister promised to discuss the revised policy at the National Assembly (Do 2017).

Burmese migrant worker strikes, Thailand

8 to 14 September 2010

Over 900 Burmese migrants worker were on employment at Dchapanish Fishing Net Factory in Khon Kaen, Thailand. The employer confiscated the workers' passports and personal documents. The workers had been working in poor working condition with 1.5 hour overtime without overtime compensation everyday for nine months. If they work overtime more than 1.5 hour, they would be paid but less compared to the Thai workers.

The strike started after six Burmese migrant workers were fired for taking sick leave for three consecutive days. They were also deported since their information and photos on the Overseas Workers ID cards did not matched. Moreover, their visa was also cancelled without their knowledge. The strike took place for 7 days. Soon after, a number of meeting took place between the Department of Labour Protection office, the employer, and the representatives of workers - the Migrant Assistance Program (MAP) Foundation.

Key Demands: Implement labour protection to the migrant workers, ensure equal treatment between migrants and national workers, and reinstate visa to the six workers

Outcome: The employer and workers reached a conditional agreement and ended their strike with employer agreeing to implement Thailand's 1998 Labour Protection law: working hours from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., equal paid to both migrant and Thai workers including overtime work paid rate. The workers who wished to hold their own documents would be allowed but with the condition that they are responsible for the loss of their passports. Employer would have right to decide whom to offer the overtime work and the agreement is only

valid until the end of current workers' employment contracts. However, it is an achievement for a migrant labour strike and a step toward ensuring Thailand respecting the rights of migrant workers.³⁷

Cambodian women garment sector workers strike for a living wage 2010-2017

Through the last decade, workers in Cambodia's export-oriented, women-dominated garment sector have repeatedly exercised their right to strike in their campaign for a minimum living wage and against working conditions so bad they reportedly trigger incidents of mass fainting. Cambodia is an attractive base for the industry, including major high street fashion and sportswear brands, due to its low labour costs and the sector is one of the few options paying a reliable wage for women workers (Moore 2014, Murphy 2014). A strike in 2010 started by 60,000 workers, doubled in size by the second day, and a day later had increased further to 210,000 strikers from 95 factories in the capital, Phnom Penh, with workers demanding a living wage (estimated at the time to be US\$93 per month), not the proposed minimum wage of US\$61 (Beaugé 2010, Moore 2010, 2012). Yet such a mass strike – by approximately two-thirds of the sector workforce – did not achieve the workers' demands and saw many union leaders banned from their workplaces, a management workaround of the laws on freedom of association (which they would be in breach of if they had fired the labour leaders). Challenges included the multiple unions, an average of six competing in each factory, who were unable to coordinate a response to the growing list of grievances and fired workers, as well as the lack of women in union leadership roles that meant that women's workplace concerns were not adequately addressed (Moore 2012, Oka 2015).



Source: LICADHO: *Three Days of Terror: State Forces Crack Down on Garment Factory*. Retrieved from http://www.licadho-cambodia.org/album/view_photo.php?cat=61

37 *Burmese migrant workers strike for equal pay and the right to hold their own documents, 2010, <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/burmese-migrant-workers-strike-equal-pay-and-right-hold-their-own-documents-2010>*

There have been many strikes since then.³⁸ On 25 December 2013, workers walked out in response to a government pay offer that would set the minimum wage at US\$95 (at a time when the wage paid was US\$80) when the workers were demanding US\$160. Demonstrations described as some of the largest in the country's history were met hundreds of military police as the garment workers' strike merged with wider political protests. On 3 January 2014 at least five garment sector workers were shot (Moore 2014, Palatino 2014). More than 20 strikers were injured and a further 23 arrested. At another rally a few days later in January 2014 the main park where civil society traditionally held protests was cleared by police, prompting solidarity actions by international civil society (APWLD 2014, Moore 2014). Also that month at least 50 workers were fired from several factories operating in the Manhattan Special Economic Zone in Svay Rieng province in the southeast of the country, allegedly for participating in strikes during December 2013 (CCHR 2014). The industry's response was clear – the Garment Manufacturers Association in Cambodia (GMAC) suggested that this period of protest cost the industry US\$200 million and expressed concern that international buyers would reduce orders, defending the authorities' use of deadly force, and dismissing the killing of the workers on 3 January as “collateral damage” (Peter 2014). This brutal response also ignores that the mass collapses of workers brought on by poor working conditions and the stress of short-term contracts also incur significant costs to the industry (McVeigh 2017).

In September 2014, workers went on strike again to demand a minimum monthly wage of US\$177 (when wage were set at \$100 for the sector). The strike again garnered support from unions and activists outside the country (Palatino 2014). Another strike in December 2015 in response to a pay offer of US\$140 was met with force when police broke it up using water cannons (AFP, Reuters 2015). In 2016 the Cambodian National Assembly adopted a new law on trade unions that brings in strict registration and financial reporting requirements in contravention of international standards, excludes many workers, and includes provisions that would make strike action more difficult (Palatino 2016).

Key demand: Wage increase, better working condition

Outcome: In October 2017, Cambodia announced a monthly minimum wage from 2018 of US\$170 for garment sector workers, an increase of more than 150 per cent on the 2010 pay level though still under the level workers were demanding in 2014. Unions welcomed the figure (Reuters 2017). Worker organisation seems to be succeeding in these global supply chains where private regulation is not, though with the weak institutional environment is not helpful in organising between the many unions competing for members in each factory (Oka 2015). However, the garment sector workforce in Cambodia appears to be in decline and is one of the sectors most at risk from increased automation: one of the garment sector companies noted that machines cannot go on strike (Hor and Sokhorng 2016, Kotoski 2017).

Kerala tea workers strike, Munnar, India

2015

Approximately 5000 women tea plantation workers at the Kannan Devan Hills Plantation owned by Tata Tea, Limited, in Munnar, Kerala, went on strike in September 2015 over pay and a major cut in their annual bonus. Their demands also addressed their poor living conditions, demanding that all estate workers have their own houses. Tea plantation workers are unionised but this has not seen conditions improve

significantly since Indian independence in 1947. Instead of turning to the union, the women formed their own informal collective called “Pembilai Orumai” (Women United), which they transformed into their own trade union once the strike was over.



Source: Jacob, Jeemon. (10 Oct 2015). *Chatch News: On their own: why kerala women workers' strike isn't just for wages*. Retrieved from <http://www.catchnews.com/india-news/on-their-own-why-kerala-women-workers-strike-isn-t-just-for-wages-144473618.html>

The strikers did not enjoy much support from local people, possibly due to ethnic and caste differences, but the strike did receive favourable local and national media attention, support that may have been drawn by the non-oppositional approach taken by the strikers. The women were clear in their communications that this was not a strike against the plantation but for a decent standard of living, a call that they felt garnered them sympathy. The strikers were clear from the outset that they wanted to avoid any violence during the strike, with the husbands of the women strikers physically surrounding them at public demonstrations including a more than week-long sit-in in Munnar town. Strikers reported that even the police were on their side. Legal limitations that dictated only representatives of recognised trade unions could engage in wage negotiations prevented the strikers from negotiating directly with the plantation managers. However the chief minister of the state intervened with the company and secured a wage increase, though it was less than the strikers were demanding. The Kerala tea workers strike also prompted similar strikes across the state on cardamom, coffee, and rubber plantations (Kamath and Ramanathan 2017).

Key demands: Wage increase and better working condition

Outcomes: Though the striking women only achieved part of their demanded pay increase, they succeeded on their own terms and established their right to organise and established their own trade union, the Pembilai Urimai Thotam Thozhilali Union (Women Plantation Workers' Union) to represent women across plantations, not just the tea growers, and continue working for their demands of adequate housing. They took what they had learned from the strike on to challenge the political establishment, winning a seat in the 2016 local (panchayat) election (Kamath and Ramanathan 2017).³⁹

39 See also <http://www.munnarportal.com/2016/06/pembillai-orumai/>; a year on from the strike the Pembilai Orumai merged with the Aam Aadmi

Strike for economic justice

Women's strike sparks the Russian Revolution

Starting 8 March 1917

At events to mark international women's day, women workers in the then-capital city of Russia, Petrograd (now known as St. Petersburg), came out on strike against a shortage of bread. Joining the thousands of women already marching with demands that included increased rations. By the end of the afternoon, over 100,000 workers had come out on strike. The strikers' called for "bread" and also made political calls of "down with the tsar". The police dispersed most of the strikers and marchers but some continued – crossing an icy river to do so – and started looting shops in retaliation for the police action. The cossacks were not trained to disperse a civilian crowd, which encouraged the strikers to return the next day in greater numbers. The following day, at least 150,000 workers marched in the streets, looted shops, overturned vehicles, and fought with police and cossacks. The marchers were joined in the afternoon by other workers, shopkeepers, students and others. A rally in Znamenskaya Square was politically meaningful with speeches calling for the downfall of the monarchy delivered from a statue of Alexander III, the late Emperor of Russia, understood by all to be an important act of free speech and a sign that a revolution was underway (Figs 2017).

Key demands: Increased rations, downfall of monarchy regime

Outcome: The strike against bread shortages started by the women textile workers quickly grew until state authorities could no longer maintain order in the capital, leading to the abdication of the tsar and the Russian Revolution in October of that year.



Source: Central State Archive of Kino-Photo-Phono Documents, St. Petersburg. Retrieved from <https://www.thedawn-news.org/2017/05/24/the-women-of-1917/>

Solidarność: Strikes in response to economic crisis leading to major political change from the Gdańsk Shipyard strike, Poland

1980



Source: Strike at the Vladimir Lenin Shipyard in August 1980. Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Strajk_sierpniowy_w_Stoczni_Gda%C5%84skiej_im._Lenina_34.jpg

In August 1980, in the context of an economic crisis that saw prices rise while wages fell, a woman worker and trade unionist was fired from her job at the Gdańsk Shipyard, the largest shipyard in the country. Anna Walentynowicz was just months away from retirement when she was accused of being a troublemaker. Her firing triggered strikes across Poland involving more than a million workers overall. The shipyard workers stayed out on strike for 17 days before the government agreed, with slight modifications, to the strikers' demands (Beaumont 2010, Donovan 2005, Martin 2010).

Key demands: Pay rise, free speech, rights to unionise, maternity and child care leave

Outcome: Anna Walentynowicz and other unionists who had been fired, including Lech Wałęsa, were reinstated and the strikers' demands for pay rises, guarantees of free speech, and official recognition of the Solidarity union mostly agreed by the government (Martin 2010). In addition, these 1980 Gdańsk labour accords included extensive maternity and child care leave for mothers (Rothschild 2005).

Further: The strikes resulted in the creation of Solidarity (Solidarność), and ultimately, the collapse of communism. Solidarity was the first independent trade union (that was not controlled by the Communist Party) in what was then the Soviet bloc. Co-founded and led by electrician and trade union activist Lech Wałęsa, Solidarity had ten million members within two years. In December 1981, Poland declared martial law and banned Solidarity but the union went underground and continued its work. In June 1989, Poland held the first free elections ever in the communist bloc and Solidarity won the maximum number

of seats allowed in both houses of parliament. Lech Wałęsa was President of Poland for its transition from communism after the break-up of the Soviet bloc (Beaumont 2010, Donovan 2005, Martin 2010). After the fall of communism, the newly democratic Poland retrenched to conservative values centred on heteronormative and patriarchal views of the family (Rothschild 2005). Women's autonomy, including sexual rights, continues to be at risk in the state (see Poland example in Strikes against patriarchy).

Mass strikes in the Eurozone following the 2008 financial crisis

Approx. 2008 to 2014

Following the 2008 financial crisis, many EU states sought to bring in various fiscal policies in the name of addressing austerity. The use of mass strikes as a tactic has been a notable development in labour and political organising with an estimated 39 general strikes across five EU countries in the years 2010-May 2014 (compared with 27 in the preceding ten years). Most of the strikes were symbolic one or two day stoppages to draw attention to the implementation of austerity agendas and the associated cuts in pensions and social security and layoffs in the public sector, often forced through by governments in ways that constitute an attack on democracy. In some countries these strikes have seen groups including unions, Occupy and other activists, and left-wing parties come together (Nowak and Gallas 2014).

Key demands: Reversal of the austerity measures and end to cut in public welfare

Outcome: What was notable about the mass strikes against austerity measures seen in the Eurozone over this period was the scale of participation and cross-movement/sector mobilisation in the strikes. However the mobilisations were largely unsuccessful in achieving the stated aims of the strikes with governments almost never offering substantial concessions in response to the mass strikes in this period (Nowak and Gallas 2014).

Strike against Pension Bill by Free Trade Zone workers, Sri Lanka

24 - 30 May 2011

In 1978, the Katunayake Free Trade Zone was established to set up the industries such as power and water supply, sewage treatment and transportation services. The Free Trade Zone (FTZ) deprived many labour rights that it was termed as slave camps. They did not have definite work hours, no specific scheme of leaves; extra working hours on work that they had to do standing; no supply for protective masks, gloves and uniforms; illnesses were disregarded; have to plead for permission to use washrooms with limited imposed on the number; low remuneration; and prohibited for forming trade union. 83% of workers in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone are women.

In 2011, under the pressure to follow the International Monetary Fund's condition to take 2.6 billion USD loans, the Sri Lankan government introduced a new Pension Bill which would make it more difficult for the workers to take out full savings and benefits. Estimatedly 250,000 garment factory workers of the country would lose out since they averagely work about five years, while the Pension Bill will require them to work at least for ten years to be able to withdraw their savings.

The 25,000 Katunayake Free Trade Zone workers, start walking out on 24 May 2011 against the Employee's

Pension Benefits Fund, ultimately shutting down 70% of FTZ. Many other workers including from other FTZs, hotels and insurance companies, as well as bank workers also demonstrated on the same day at Colombo Port Railway station.

Key demands: End the Employees' Pension Benefit Fund Bills

Outcome: The government organised negotiations with the unions and the employers and later promised to postpone the bill. The Inspector General Police resigned due to the brutal attacks to the workers that happened during the strike.

International women's strike, across the world 8 March/annual



Source: Women raising their voice on the roads, 8 March 2011. Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Women_raising_their_voice_on_the_roads.jpg

The women's strike aims to reclaim 8 March, International Women's Day, from the sort of "lean in" feminism that depoliticised feminism by focusing more on corporate advances to benefit individual working women, and to reconnect with an analysis that located the systemic roots of oppression of women in capitalism and the free market. It aims to renew the radicalism, solidarity and internationalism of earlier women's organising. The strike is intersectional and inclusive, focusing on women who are marginalised by neoliberalism including Native women, disabled women, migrant women, trans women.⁴⁰ In the UK there were strikes by and in support of sex workers.⁴¹ While there is debate about whether the language of

⁴⁰ See International Women's Strike <https://www.womenstrikeus.org>

⁴¹ Women's Strike UK, <https://womenstrike.org.uk/resources/>

“strike” is appropriate, the action does call for women, where possible, to withdraw their labour – in all its forms, paid and unpaid – for the day to demonstrate the costs of “a world without women” (Arruzza and Bhattacharya 2017, Taylor 2017).

Key demands: End discrimination against women, respect women’s human rights, establish gender equality

Outcome: With organising in more than 56 countries,⁴² we are seeing a renewed energy and increased organising on women’s human rights issues galvanised by the connections made and solidarity shown in the women’s strike and other mass protests. The momentum is still building: for example, Spanish unions estimate that more than five million people joined the 2018 strike across the country to “claim a society free of oppression, exploitation and sexual violence.” The manifesto of the Spanish strike, which was supported by most of the country’s unions, called “for rebellion and the struggle against the alliance between patriarchy and capitalism that wants us to be docile, submissive and silent” (Jones 2018, Vonberg and Perez Maestro, 2018).

Strike against privatisation

Cochabamba Water War, Bolivia

15 December 1999 to 10 April 2000



Source: ESCR-Net: Bolivia: 15 Years After the Cochabamba Water Revolt, Echoes in New Cases of Corporate Abuse . Retrieved from <https://www.escr-net.org/news/2015/bolivia-15-years-after-cochabamba-water-revolt-echoes-new-cases-corporate-abuse>

Bolivia was pressured to privatise public goods in order to fulfil loan conditionality from the World Bank during the 1990s. And in September 1999, Bolivian government auctioned off the municipal water system

“SEMAPA” of Cochabamba. Aguas del Tunari was a foreign-led consortium of private investors dominated by the Bechtel Corporation, American company. Then the Parliament set a new water law “Law 2029” to ensure the legality of the privatisation. In the law, it stated that only contracted company will be allowed to distribute water in the territory covered by a privatisation contract.

At that time only half of the Bolivian population used the municipal water system. The rest of population used community water system or small business water system. However, the 2009 water law was going to take over the smaller and community-run water system without any compensation. The company started to Install meters on cooperative wells and begin charging fees. It prohibited residents from gathering rainwater in collection tanks. This became a threat to peasant farmers who used water for irrigation. As a result, the water price hiked, and expropriation spreaded.

Two months after the privatisation, the monthly water bill increased from \$5 to \$25 for workers and farmers who earned \$80 per month. They resisted to pay the bill. Oscar Olivera, the anti-water privatisation movement leader, organised La Coordinadora or defense of Water and Life campaign which led to protest and strike. Demonstrations and strikes lasted four months from 11 January to 10 April 2000. The demonstrators flew banners denouncing neoliberalism, IMF and the World Bank. There was violence between police and people during this four months and six people died. In April, the demonstrators amounted to 100,000 and went to protest in front of Aguas del Tunari office. Police could not guarantee the safety of the water company’s executives anymore so they fled from Cochabamba. The water contract with Aguas del Tunari was revoked since they abandoned their concession.

Key Demands: Ending water privatisation, repeal the water law, and reverse water rate hikes

Outcome: On 10 April, Olivera signed an accord with the government guaranteeing the removal of the privatisation. The agreement includes;

- Returning the control of Cochabamba’s water to public utility SEMAPA, with La Coordinadora representatives on the new board of directors.
- Assuring the release of detained demonstrators
- Modifying the Law 2029
 - * giving legal recognition to traditional communal practices
 - * protecting small independent water systems
 - * guaranteeing public consultation on rates
 - * giving social needs priority over financial goals

Two years later, Bechtel filed a \$50 million lawsuit against Bolivia under the the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID), a closed-door tribunal operated by World Bank. After four years of public protests, damaging reputation and public demands from five continents, the company decided to drop the case. In 2006, Bechtel’s representatives traveled to Bolivia to sign an agreement in which they abandoned the ICSID case for a token payment of 2 bolivianos (30 cents). This was the first time that a major corporation has ever dropped a major international trade case due to global public pressure.⁴³

43 *Bechtel vs Bolivia: Details of the Case and the Campaign.* <https://democracyctr.org/archive/the-water-revolt/bechtel-vs-bolivia-details-of-the-case-and-the-campaign/>

The White Marches: Doctors and medical workers strike against privatisation of the public health system, El Salvador

September 2002 to 13 June 2003

Since 1992, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund were pressuring El Salvador to privatise their health system as part of a structural adjustment plan, to which health workers responded with a series of strikes, blocking the privatisation efforts. These culminated in 2002 when doctors, nurses, and support workers from different unions went on strike against privatisation proposals that would see individuals seeking health services cared for according to their ability to pay, a policy the union described the proposal as “pay or die”. With other public services in the country privatised, El Salvadorans understood the costs of privatisation. Public support for the strike saw as many as 200,000 people take part in demonstrations, dressed to match the uniforms of the striking health workers: in white coats – giving the strike its name, the “Marchas Blancas” (white marches). This broad alliance was disruptive: strikes shut down hospitals, demonstrations blockaded roads, students occupied the buildings of the National University that was empty in readiness for the Central American and Caribbean Games in November 2002. The strike also prompted wider action against privatisation when electrical workers went on strike in protest of the sale of public utilities (Schuld 2003, Engler 2003a,b, Smith-Nonini 2010).

Key demands: Ending privatisation of public health care and public utilities

Outcome: The strike was initially successful with the government passing a decree in November 2002 outlawing the privatisation of health care – but a month later, the government repealed the decree. With now just hundreds of medical workers continuing the strike, the government announced in January 2003 that they would no longer negotiate with the strikers and refused to allow doctors leaving the strike to return to their jobs. Seven doctors went on hunger strike to regain their jobs. In April, the Legislative Assembly reinstated all the strikers and guaranteed that they would not face penalties for their participation in the strike – but the President vetoed the bill. However, the government had seen the scale of public opposition to their privatisation proposals and all parties entered negotiations, securing an agreement ending the strike and the health care privatisation proposal and establishing a commission on health care reform and a moratorium on outsourcing, making this “one of the few cases in which mass mobilizations have set back a privatization agenda backed by both the ruling party and multilateral lending banks” (Smith-Nonini 2010, 248). The victory of the strikers remains significant with health care privatisation still a critical and divisive issue in the country (Schuld 2003, Smith-Nonini 2010, Kowalchuck 2011).

Striking against militarism, colonialism, apartheid, for peace

Swedish workers threaten strike to prevent war with Norway February to June 1905

In 1905, when the Swedish monarch ruled both the United Kingdoms of Sweden and Norway, just the threat of a general strike by Swedish workers was enough to bring Sweden to peaceful negotiations with Norway amid calls for conflict during the dissolution of the union between the two states.

Key demands: Peaceful solution to the conflicts between Sweden and Norway

Outcome: In June 1905, the Swedish King declared that they would not use force with Norway, preventing the war. On 26 October, the two governments concluded their negotiations with the Swedish king renouncing his claim to the Norwegian throne, recognising Norway as an independent state (Hameed 2013).

Women Strike for Peace – against nuclear testing, USA 1 November 1961

Women Strike for Peace (WSP) was a US organisation founded in 1961 to protest against atmospheric nuclear tests by the US and the Soviet Union. WSP members also campaigned to end the Vietnam war and the Equal Rights Amendment to the US Constitution.⁴⁴ On 1 November 1961 they organised women in the US and across the world to strike in protest at nuclear testing. An estimated 50,000 women joined the strike, walking away from their paid and unpaid labour. Then First Lady of the USA, Jacqueline Kennedy, wrote to the organisation in support of their aims (Reilly 2017).

Key demand: Ending atmospheric nuclear tests by the US and Soviet Union, anti Vietnam war

Outcome: President John F. Kennedy signed the Limited Nuclear Test Ban treaty in 1963, in part due to the strike and other campaigning of the WSP (Reilly 2017).

“No Peace, No Work”: Dockworkers in the USA and Iraq strike against the war

May 2008

On May Day (1 May) 2008, 25,000 US dockworkers went on a one-day strike to protest the war in Iraq. Organised by the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) and with the support of several other unions at the docks, the strike shut down all 29 of the ports along the west coast of the USA (Lin 2008). The union members on strike were twice ordered by an arbitrator to return to work, but they defied the orders (The Internationalist 2008a). Truck drivers refused to cross the picket line creating backlogs in the loading and unloading of cargo. In an act of international solidarity with the ILWU action, port workers in Iraq's two main cargo ports (Basra and Umm Qasr) also stopped work and the General Union of Port Workers in Iraq sent a message of thanks to the US strikers (Lin 2008, The Internationalist 2008a,b). The strikers also made the connection with immigrant rights, with posters and rally speeches at the ILWU march in support of migrants and against raids by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), with signs that read, “Stop ICE raids. Stop war.” Unions in other sectors and other parts of the US, as well as in other countries, undertook solidarity actions (The Internationalist 2008a).

Key demands: Ending war in Iraq, ending raids against immigrants

Outcome: Although the strike did not stop the war (and was not expected to), it was viewed as an historic turning point for the US labour movement as it was the first time in more than 70 years that a major US trade union had led a system-wide strike on May Day.⁴⁵ The strike was also notable for making a political demand.⁴⁶

Women bring village peace through sex strike, Philippines

July 2011

In July 2011, over 2000 years after Aristophanes' wrote *Lysistrata* (see Strikes for services), the women of Dado village, Mindanao, in the south of the Philippines, met at their sewing cooperative and planned a sex strike to end separatist fighting in nearby villages. The fighting had created road blockages and cut Dado off from nearby trading centres. The strike required the village leaders to negotiate with their neighbours to end the fighting (UNHCR 2011).

Key demands: End separatist fightings

Outcome: Within a week of the women's strike action, the men negotiated peace in the nearby villages. The violence ended and the road was reopened, enabling the people of Dado to continue rebuilding their village (UNHCR 2011).

⁴⁵ Although deriving from the US labour movement and strike action specifically - the first recognised May Day march was on 1 May 1886 by workers in Chicago striking for the eight-hour working day - the major US unions had stopped using May Day (or International Workers' Day) for such actions as they focused on maintaining relations with employers to facilitate collective bargaining (Lin 2008).

⁴⁶ The Labor Management Relations Act of 1947 (Taft-Hartley Act) enacted in June 1947 is a federal law in the USA that restricts the activities and power of trade unions, including by prohibiting solidarity or political strikes.

Strike against settler colonialism, for Indigenous rights: Native title

The Gurindji (Wave Hill Station) strike, Australia's Northern Territory 1966-1976/1986

On 23 August 1966, the Aboriginal workers – stockmen and domestic workers – of the Wave Hill cattle station in Australia's Northern Territory walked off the job. Of the 200 strikers, most were of the Gurindji people, with small numbers of Walpiri and Mudburra (Tully 2016, Ward 2016). They stayed out on strike for nine years.

The Vestey's Group, the British company that ran the cattle station since taking control of Wave Hill Station in 1914, and other white observers perceived the strike as a protest about the poor living and labour conditions (Tully 2016). However, the underlying issue was Native title: for almost 100 years, the Gurindji people had been dispossessed of their homelands. The strike gained large support from the public, students, and the labour movement, in particular the Communist Party of Australia. This was significant as historically the labour movement had viewed Aboriginal workers as a threat to white Australian's employment and supported racist policy to exclude them from employment (Tully 2016). The strike also brought the racist treatment of Aborigines in Australia's colonial history and contemporary life to a wider audience through TV news coverage.⁴⁷

Key demands: Indigenous people's land rights

Outcome: In August 1975, a portion of their land was returned by the labour government of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam in what was Aboriginal Australia's first successful land rights claim and led to further Native title claims (Tully 2016). When they walked off the job, the strikers and their families walked 13 kilometres to Wattie Creek, for them a place of spiritual significance (Tapp and Mitchell 1996). They named their new community Daguragu and this eventually became the first Aboriginal owned and managed cattle station with the Murrumulla Gurindji Company.

Further: In 1976, Australia passed the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act. It marked the first time that the Indigenous peoples were given legal recognition for the rights to land, to practise their law, language and culture. However, in 1979 the government of the Northern Territory gave notice to the Gurindji to surrender the title to the land that had been returned to them in 1975. It took until May 1986, 20 years after the walk off, for the Australian government (under the Hawke labour administration) to hand over inalienable freehold title deeds to the Gurindji (Central Land Council, 1986, Ward 2016). Key stages in the route the Gurindji and other workers and their families took in their 1966 walk off the station are now recognised by the Australian authorities in the National Heritage List that marks places of outstanding heritage value to the nation.⁴⁸ However, the situation for Aboriginal peoples including the Gurindji remains poor, reliant on an exploitative government work programme.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Central Land Council, *Daguragu station land claim*, November 1986, <https://www.clc.org.au/index.php?/land-won-back/info/daguragu-station-land-claim/>

⁴⁸ See <http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/places/national/wave-hill> and the *Gazetted notice*: <http://www.environment.gov.au/system/files/pages/27e952f9-302a-44d4-80dd-258452eb4e06/files/10589701.pdf>

⁴⁹ See *comments on the Community Development Programme by Professor Jon Altman*, <https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/politics/aboriginal-people-strike-walk-off-at-wave-hill>

Strike against apartheid

Dunnes store workers strike, Ireland July 1984 to April 1987

The struggle against South Africa's apartheid regime garnered international solidarity. One such action took place in Dublin, Ireland, in the 1980s when 11 shop workers, all but one of whom were women, went on strike in protest over the regime. In July 1984, a shop worker at Dunnes Store, 21-year-old Mary Manning, refused to sell grapefruits imported from apartheid South Africa. Although she knew little about the apartheid regime at the time she acted in line with the position of her trade union, the Irish Distributive and Administrative Trade Union (IDATU) (Boland 2013, Bielenberg 2017). Though the customer she was serving accepted Manning's position, the store management did not. Supported by her shop steward, Karen Gearon, both women reported to management and were suspended (Dwyer 2016).⁵⁰ Nine other union members at the store went on strike in support (Bielenberg 2017). Many of the strikers were young workers, some were mothers, and during the strike one had her home repossessed (Loftus n.d.).

At first the strikers did not have much public support. On the picket line, the strikers faced abuse from their fellow Dunnes Stores workers.⁵¹ The Catholic church, an important institution in Irish society, did not support the strike: Archbishop Casey denounced the strike and nuns reportedly making a point of shopping at Dunnes to argue with the strikers picketing the store (Loftus n.d.). Nor did the strikers and their union have the support of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) (Dwyer 2016). The Labour Court criticised the unilateral action and recommended that supermarkets agree a voluntary code of conduct to address the issue, however the chairperson did recognise that "the strike has focused attention in Ireland on the injustice of the system in a way which had never been done before" (quoted in Dwyer 2016). The strikers also had support from the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement and from an exiled former leader of the African National Congress (ANC) who taught them about the realities of the apartheid regime (Bielenberg 2017).

Support for the strike changed when anti-apartheid hero Archbishop Desmond Tutu met with strike representatives and introduced them to the global media when he was in the UK on his way to collect his Nobel Peace Prize in Norway (Bielenberg 2017). He invited them and the store owner Ben Dunne to visit South Africa to witness the realities of apartheid. After public fundraising, eight women and their union representative travelled to South Africa in 1985, but they were not allowed entry and were held under armed guard before being deported back to Ireland (Boland 2013, Loftus n.d.). This caused much media attention back home in Ireland and the strike now had significant public support – as well as the support of public figures, individual politicians and church figures including Archbishop Casey who had previously opposed the strike – but the government were still slow to act (Dwyer 2016, Loftus n.d.). In October 1985, the strikers' shop steward, Karen Gearon, and one of the strikers, Michelle Gavin, were invited to speak before the UN's Special Committee Against Apartheid in New York.

Key demand: Ending apartheid in South Africa

Outcome: The strikers stayed out on strike for three years, until April 1987, when the Irish government became the first western government to institute a complete ban on the import of South African goods. Nelson Mandela was freed from prison three years later. Archbishop Tutu later wrote to the strikers: "You

⁵⁰ In support, 25 workers walked out that day.

⁵¹ From the testimony of the strikers in the trailer for *Blood Fruit* (2014), a film made about the strike.

are part of the history of South Africa's struggle for freedom. Your stand was a beacon of hope during dark days in our history" (quoted in Reilly 2014).

Further: Dunnes Store did not respond well to the strike's success and continued to order produce from South Africa until the day the ban came into force on 1 January 1987, meaning the strikers were unable to return to work until that stock was sold several months later as they still refused to handle goods from the apartheid regime (Loftus n.d.). When they did return to work, they experienced considerable bullying and intimidation and their shop steward, Karen Gearon, was unfairly dismissed and blacklisted (Loftus n.d.). In 1990 Nelson Mandela met with nine of the strikers when he visited Dublin and thanked them for their action; years later several of them were invited to attend his funeral in 2013 (Boland 2013, Reilly 2014). Ben Dunne apologised to the strikers on an Irish radio programme in 2008, over 30 years after the strikers won their fight (Bielenberg 2017). There is a street named after Mary Manning in Johannesburg (Boland 2013).

United Democratic Front, South Africa 1979-1991

The experience of the Dunnes Store strikers, although tough, was entirely different to that in South Africa at the time, where black workers risked beatings, imprisonment and even death for going on strike.⁵² Yet strikes remained one of the tactics employed in the country to challenge the white supremacist regime. The United Democratic Front (UDF) disregarded distinctions between economic and political issues organising rent strikes as well as labour strikes as tactics in their campaign against state policies from 1979 through to the mid-1980s (Swilling 1988). In 1985 alone, the UDF organised more than 390 strikes involving more than 240,000 workers, with significant economic impact on the country and the state's ability to govern (Somerville 2015).

Key demand: Ending apartheid in South Africa

Outcome: In spite of considerable violence in the state response and the detention of many of its leaders, the UDF maintained its campaign of people's power to put sustained pressure on the South African government, contributing the movement to erode its power and bring about the end the political system of apartheid. In the long run, the UDF saw its main demands for a democratic, united South Africa realised and in 1991, in the victory against the apartheid system, the UDF disbanded (Brooks Spector 2013).

Strike for independence from colonial rule

The Black Armada: Workers in Australian docks strike to support Indonesian independence September 1945 to July 1946

Indonesia declared its independence in the days after the end of the second world war. However, the Netherlands refused to recognise its independence and prepared to reoccupy and reassert control over its

⁵² From the testimony of Nimrod Sejake in the trailer for *Blood Fruit* (2014), a film made about the strike.

former colony. Indonesian trade unions appealed for everyone, especially the working class, to boycott Dutch stores and operations (Healy 2006). On 23 September 1945, Indonesian crew walked off Dutch ships in Brisbane and Melbourne, Australia, following the discovery of arms on board a ship in port in Brisbane. The following day, one week after Indonesia's declaration of independence, Australian unions imposed a ban on Dutch shipping in Brisbane and Melbourne. Workers refused to crew Dutch vessels or load or unload Dutch cargo, in order to block support of the recolonisation efforts. In October the pattern was repeated in Sydney: after Indian workers discovered a cache of arms, unions banned working for Dutch ships in the ports of Sydney and Fremantle. In mid-October most of the Indonesian workers returned home to help with the independence efforts (Goodall 2008).

The strike saw over 4000 Australian waterfront workers⁵³ joining the Indonesian and Indian workers to hold up 559 vessels including 36 Dutch merchant ships, three Royal Australian Navy vessels and two British troopships (Healy 2006, Goodall 2008). Although effective in port, the dockworkers could not stop the ships from sailing as those crew, often Indian workers, were not part of the striking unions. However, those seamen had considerable union experience in India – and had their own aspirations for independence from British colonial rule. They implemented a strategy of non-compliance on any ships sailing to Indonesia, walking off the ships when they were about to leave port, forcing the Dutch to delay while they found replacement crews. However in some cases Dutch military forced them at gunpoint to work. The British colonial administration also helped supply replacement workers from British India, others were brought in from Melanesia and the Pacific. On 20 October 1945 replacement Indian workers on a Dutch ship sailing out of Sydney port were chased in a small boat by strike supporters who explained the Dutch recolonisation ambitions and urged them to support the strike, which they did, refusing to stoke the engines and forcing the Dutch to return to port (Goodall 2008).

The ban held for nine months when it was broken by a small unaffiliated union, but demonstrations and token bans continued intermittently until it was finally and formally lifted in November 1949 (Healy 2006, Goodall 2008). International solidarity with the strike was repeated by the American Longshoremen's Union (West Coast), the New Zealand Federation of Labor, the Canadian Longshoremen's Union, and workers in more than 14 countries who refused to allow Dutch ships to berth in port or to load them (Healy 2006).

Key demand: Ending Dutch colonialism in Indonesia

Outcome: The strike played an important role in ending colonial rule and supporting independence in Indonesia. Many of the Indian workers who took part in the strike were blacklisted on their return to India (Goodall 2008). This was also a high point in Australian unionism, representing an important development in solidarity action given that the unions had previously supported racist action and legislation against non-Australian workers (Goodall 2008).

Strikes against environmental harms, for environmental justice

General strike against nuclear dumping, Lampedusa, Italy 8-12 September 1968

In September 1968 workers on the island of Lampedusa, off the Italian coast, including agricultural and fishing workers as well as the local priests, held a general strike to protest the plan to store nuclear waste on the island. The opposition started with the arrival of a ship carrying Italian Atomic Energy Agency equipment for drilling tests to find a suitable storage site. Most of the island's inhabitants turned out in protest, blocking operations at the port. The inhabitants called the general strike when the national agency said the protest would delay, but not abandon, the plan. The ship was forced to return to the mainland when they started to run out of food and water due to not being permitted to land on Lampedusa (NYT 1968).

Key demands: Stop nuclear dumping on the island

Outcome: There are no nuclear storage facilities on Lampedusa (IAEA, n.d.)

Construction workers strike to defend public space, Australia 1970 to 1974



Retrieved from <http://links.org.au/the-house-that-jack-built-jack-munday-green-bans-hero>

The executive of the New South Wales Builders Labourers Federation (NSWBLF) that organised labourers (construction workers) in Sydney, the focus of the Australian development boom of the time, decided in May 1970 to follow the principle of social responsibility for their own labour. This “new concept of unionism” held that workers had a right to ensure their labour was not used in ways that caused social or environmental harm. This principle of denying labour to harmful development projects became known as green bans. As this effectively withdrew builders’ labour from projects that did not meet this principle, the green bans constitute a strike. Union leader Jack Munday explained: “Yes, we want to build. However, we prefer to build urgently-required hospitals, schools, other public utilities, high-quality flats, units

and houses, provided they are designed with adequate concern for the environment, than to build ugly unimaginative architecturally-bankrupt blocks of concrete and glass offices... Though we want all our members employed, we will not just become robots directed by developer-builders who value the dollar at the expense of the environment” (Burgmann and Burgmann 2011).⁵⁴

In Sydney, the green bans started in response to a request from women living in the Hunters Hill area who appealed to the union to intervene to save bushland that had been targeted for development and their appeals to the Mayor and government officials had no effect. The unions agreed, the developers backed off, and the bushland was preserved as an open public reserve. There were other interventions to defend open spaces, including with environmental organisations and on behalf of resident action groups. Another important way in which the green bans were implemented was to preserve working-class residential areas against gentrification efforts to build a more lucrative market for developers. Munday promised that the NSWBLF would always use the tactic “in support of those most urgently in need of quality housing”.⁵⁵ Notable areas saved from gentrification at this time include the Rocks area of Sydney harbour and Woolloomooloo, an area that was home to maritime and fishing industry workers.

The union’s green ban strike tactic also facilitated the first successful Indigenous land rights claim in Australia: the union refused demolition work on houses occupied by Aborigines in Redfern until the area could be purchased by the Labor Government and granted back to the community in 1973 as an Aboriginal housing scheme under Aboriginal control. The National Trust also turned to the union for assistance with its heritage preservation efforts to save sites of architectural and cultural significance from development plans that would have seen them replaced by high-rise office blocks and freeways (Burgmann and Burgmann, 2011).

Key demands: Social responsibility through refusal to build construction projects that will harm communities

Outcome: Overall, there were more than 40 green bans imposed in New South Wales, mostly in Sydney, estimated to be worth about AUS\$ five billion by 1975. In addition to these individual victories, the green bans had a wider effect on environmental legislation including urban planning, and on public attitudes. However some developers had resorted to using criminal gangs to force through their plans; activists in the green bans movement were threatened and one disappeared. By the late 1974 developers were bribing other unions to break the strike and the federal officials of the Builders Labourers Federation worked with employers to ensure that state-level unionists were denied work. The green bans were over (Burgmann and Burgmann 2011).

Indigenous peoples strike against open pit coal mine, Bangladesh 2006-2015

The Phulbari Coal Project is an open-pit coal mine project in northwest Bangladesh. It was proposed by London-based Global Coal Management (GCM) Resources through a subsidiary that was formed solely to implement this project, Asia Energy Corporation (AEC). The company is a signatory to the UN Global Compact.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Quoting a January 1972 letter to the Sydney Morning Herald

⁵⁵ Sydney Morning Herald, 23 August 1973, quoted in Burgmann and Burgmann, 2011

⁵⁶ See <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/about>

The area identified for the mine is home to Indigenous peoples across 23 tribal groups and approximately 50,000 individuals belonging to the Santal, Munda, Mahali, and Pahan peoples. The peoples of this area have been demonstrating against the proposed coal mine since 2006, including by holding demonstrations of tens of thousands of individuals against the project and blockading railways and highways. On 26 August 2006, a paramilitary unit opened fire on one of these demonstrations, killing three protesters and injuring hundreds more. After four days of protests and strikes across the nation, on 30 August the government ruled out the planned coal mine signing the Phulbari Agreement that called for a nationwide ban on open-pit extraction and for the permanent expulsion of AEC/GCM from Bangladesh. However the company continued to try to advance the project, including during a January 2007 period of emergency rule due to political unrest (IAP and WDM, 2012).

In October 2012, the government allowed AEC/GCM to conduct surveys in the area and instructed local officials to cooperate – a development later listed as a highlight in the GCM report to its shareholders. This triggered a march and a two-day general strike on 23 and 24 November in response that shut down the district.⁵⁷ The strikers demanded withdrawal of the call to cooperate with AEC/GCM and that the government adhere to the 2006 Phulbari Agreement (IAP and WDM, 2012).

Key demands: Shutting down the coal mine

Outcome: The strikers' demands were met and further strike action postponed until the end of the year to give the government time to make good on their commitments (IAP and WDM, 2012). In 2012, seven UN Special Rapporteurs issued a statement warning of a range of human rights and environmental threats in relation to the proposed mine, harms that would extend for generations, and followed that up with a joint letter to GCM Resources (OHCHR 2012a,b). In early 2013, the Bangladesh government did request AEC/GCM to leave the country and a Bangladesh parliamentary committee accused the company of not having a valid deal with the government for any exploration or mining in Phulbari (Daily Sun 2013). In 2014, the UK government admonished the company for breaching the OECD Guidelines on Multinational Enterprises in failing to consider how the mine would affect people in the region. The government informed the company they would have to adhere to the standards set out in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, including the principle of free, prior, and informed consent.

The UK government stopped short of calling on GCM Resources to drop the project, however, and activists anticipated the need for the resistance to continue (IAP and WDM 2014). On 23 August 2015, the Bangladesh government announced a decision against open-pit coal mining in the region, affirming a commitment made by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina while in opposition the previous year, prioritising a focus on food security and farm land – though the government did not rule out coal extraction at a future date (UNB 2014, Haigh 2015, New Age 2015). Activists marked the ten year anniversary of the campaign against the mine in 2016 and in May 2017, protesters again reiterated their demand that the government implement the six-point Phulbari Agreement (Phulbari Solidarity Blog 2016, Sarker Sunny 2017).

⁵⁷ The authorities responded to the march by invoking a colonial-era law restricting demonstrations to a maximum of five persons (Section 144 ban, see IAP and WDM, 2012, pp.33-34).

Reflections and lessons

Though there is no succinct “how to” guide to ensure that strikes achieve their demands, there are lessons to draw out from even this brief survey for consideration when planning future action.

Though a notable number of the examples of strike actions described in this paper featured strikes in the garment sector from the earliest organising to contemporary struggles across the world – not a deliberate selection – the case studies show a diversity of experiences and responses. Many strikes involved only the workers themselves, others, particularly those addressing wider social or political issues, saw mass participation. Some strikes enjoyed wide support from others including the public and the media or other unions or social movements, faced public or media criticism and did not enjoy wider support for some or all of their time on strike. Several strikes invigorated the labour movement in the country, but some strikers described being let down by their labour leaders. Discriminations on the basis of sex, race/ethnicity, class, and nationality, were a trigger for many strikes and a reality in the course of workers’ organising.

This is just the beginning: the strike as a tool

A strike is a tool to bring about the desired change – the strikers’ demands. The legislative barriers on the right to strike often in place, the difficulty in organising a strike, the work involved in planning and sustaining the strike (and the strikers), that it is the option usually only when negotiations and other tactics have failed, make it easy to lose sight of the fact that a strike is just a tool, one step in longer strategy, not the overall result.

Strikes are galvanising forces, even if they do not achieve their demands. a

Strikes are galvanising forces, even if they do not achieve their demands. In many of the early case studies included here, the strikes helped build the labour movement. We see how organisers moved from strike to strike in the early years of the US labour movement (Passaic and New Bedford examples, as well as others not included here). Similarly, women who joined the strike at the Trico factory in the UK, shared their motivation and experience with the Grunwick strikers. The women tea planters who went on strike in Kerala poured their motivation from the strike into forming a wider union for all plantation workers as well as into local politics.

What do people do with that energy and morale once the strike is over? It is critical to plan for what comes next. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2017) describes exactly this in relation to the Women’s Strike being part of a process: “We also see this as the beginning and not the end. There will be a tremendous amount of work to do on 9 March and beyond.” For example, she includes action for international workers’ day (1 May) as part of that wider effort, extending the solidarity of the strike to other movements. This can be a challenge, for example when the unions or organisations leading the strike have other work demanding their attention once the strike itself is over. As one NGO organiser described strikes by garment sector workers in Thailand, “when they [union leaders] achieve that particular goal all the organization, the cooperation dissolves” (Mills 2005, 126). The lesson is that we need to strategise for and resource or otherwise support organising beyond the strike itself.

Understanding strikes as a tool rather than a result means asking what we are using that tool for. One answer is better organising: strikes are movement-building opportunities. Unsurprisingly, labour activists and writers think that a strong organising base (union, shop-floor, etc.) is more valuable than any particular win from a strike as it is the basis for further wins (Stevenson 2016). This can be true but it also points up the need to sustain that strength over time, through staff turnover, and often in the face of multiple attacks on workers and their morale. But strikes offer at least a partial answer there too.

It is also important to ensure that everyone participating in the strike understands it as a tactic in a wider strategy. Managing any expectations that the strike will be all that is needed to achieve demands, and quickly, is critical to maintaining participation and motivation over what may be long strike (in the cases of labour strikes) or repeated strikes and other actions (in the cases of some labour disputes and in particular strikes for wider political or social justice causes).

One way to sustain motivation is to make the strikes useful and motivating to those taking part. Strikes can be a learning tool for workers to build knowledge and skills about trade unionism and politics, as well as solidarity with other causes (Stevenson 2016). One Trico striker commented of the strike “you felt like you’d learned something about it I suppose and how to get involved” (Stevenson 2016, p.161). By striking, workers engage in political struggle and gain experience of collective action, absorbing lessons (often passively) that they can apply to future labour organising (Nowak and Gallas 2014). Again, we see that by understanding strikes as a tool and not as an endpoint and investing time and other resources in working

with the strikers, the strike helps to build a strong organising base for future actions – momentum that can easily be lost if there are no plans beyond the strike itself. Strikes can bring in new activists who had not previously engaged with unions or labour (or other) activism. For many workers, who had previously not been involved in labour organising whether through choice or, for women workers, because social norms discouraged women from taking public action or unions were more focused on and more likely to value men workers, this can be an essential element of the strike experience.

As a movement/resistance-building tools, strikes are opportunities for more than just passive learning. During strikes by Thai women textile workers in the 1990s, the strikers held study groups where experienced workers and labour activists and outside speakers from NGOs or universities or labour lawyers discussed labour law and rights issues. The group was a space where women workers' could develop their self-confidence, learn negotiation skills and develop as potential labour leaders (Mills 2005).

Even short periods of striking are valuable for sharpening critical analysis and providing longer-term motivation and this can increase as the strike goes on (Kahle 2015). The inclusion of a distinct learning element in strike organising is especially important as in several of the case studies the strikers did not initially achieve their demands. For example, the garment sector workers in Cambodia held multiple strikes over several years before getting a settlement to which they could agree. The strike by the Ford factory machinists in Dagenham, UK, is often held up as a great example of a successful strike but the women workers had to wait a further 16 years – a generation – before their actual strike demand for their jobs to be regraded was met. What strikers report time and again is that the strikes built solidarity, knowledge, and confidence: strikes are a tool of organising and they can make organisers.

This can be very gendered. It may require women to challenge gender norms of their community or society that dictate that women should not to engage in public actions or take confrontational roles (for example as reported by the some of the women in Java, or the women in the Regie tobacco factory strike in Lebanon, some of whom are striking in the face of fundamentalist views of women's role). In Thailand, in response to a male unionist describing what he saw as women's limited contribution to labour leadership, young women workers broke with the social norms of deference in such public meetings and to an older man and demanded of him: "Who make up the bulk of demonstrators when you call workers out to march and protest? How often have you made opportunities in your organization for women to speak or to take on responsibility? How much have you allowed women in your own home to go out, to study and learn, to get the experience to take on leadership roles?" (Mills 2005, 127).

One of the contributions of this skills-building is building what Nowak and Gallas (2014, 316) call a "grand narrative". This is the bigger picture: an understanding of and focus on the underlying structural forces that give rise to the conditions over which the workers called the strike. We can see often this narrative informing the action of the strikers most clearly in the more politically-oriented strikes, as those are often



Source: APWLD archives. Chinese Mekong protest, April 2010.

explicitly addressing a deeper political analysis. For example in the Wave Hill Station strike where it took ten years for even partial resolution and 20 to secure the freehold title deeds to their land, the Gurindji people fully understood the colonial and land rights issues they were fighting. Similarly in the Phulbari case study, where understanding of the risks to the land drove the campaign and strike actions. In the anti-privatisation strikes of the White Marches in El Salvador, the broad understanding of structural forces driving the push for privatisation and its likely consequences helped build mass support. The threat to women's personal and bodily autonomy keeps the women's strikes going as the Polish government keeps trying to further reduce access to safe abortion services.

However, this understanding can also develop through the experience of labour strikes: one of the strike committee for the Trico strike commented: "The further women are involved in making specific demands for democratic rights such as equal pay, equal opportunity, adequate nursery facilities, etc., and the more we win successive demands, the clearer we see that the root evil is not so much lack of rights but capitalism itself" (quoted in Stevenson 2016, p.163). This analytical shift from understanding a situation in terms of personal hardships to widespread patterns of injustice requires that workers "learn new modes of self-imagining" and have the space and support to do that (Mills 2005, p.125). At its heart, any grand narrative is a power analysis, identifying how structural power is operating to deny rights (McAlevey 2017).

Defining success

This paper sought to explore what we could learn from strikes that had met some degree of success: that means we need to think about what we understand by success. Though we used certain parameters in selecting the strike examples included as case studies (see the introduction to the Strikes section), the story of many strikes cannot easily fit into simple framings of victory or defeat. In campaigning we aim to have specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, time-bound (SMART) objectives, but some of the examples in this paper achieved change different to or beyond their strike demands. Whether or not a strike achieves its stated demand does not, necessarily, determine its ultimate success. There are examples of strikes that do not realise the full demands of the strikers but are viewed – by the strikers and by history – as successful.

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As in any campaign, how a strike's demands are defined is important as it enables planning, monitoring, and eventually assessing the strike's success or failure. However, there is also a time element. Whereas with campaigning we look to have time bound objectives in order to facilitate this sort of evaluation, whether a strike can said to have been won also depends on what counts as the end of the strike: when picketing ends, workers return to jobs, blockades are lifted, may not be the point at which it is possible to assess the strike's ultimate success. A win one year may be overturned the next. Conversely, a strike that does not achieve its stated goal may influence changes later on in line with the strikers' demands or be the instigator of profound political change beyond the original stated intention: as with the Gdańsk Shipyard strike in 1980 that ultimately led to the end of communism in the Soviet bloc.

One of the early strikes of the industrial revolution, the women workers at Samuel Silver's India-Rubber, Gutta-Percha & Telegraph Works in Silvertown, London, UK, in 1889 lost their strike demand relating to a promised pay-rise but the long-term solidarity it generated was such that the strike is seen as being

foundational to the British labour movement and its later successes (Tully 2014). From the case studies above, the Kerala tea pickers' strike did not achieve their full pay demands but it can still be understood as successful, "as spontaneous and bottom-up, mobilizing workers for mass demonstrations for a protracted period of time without the assistance of existing party-affiliated unions and union leaders. These workers held out for two weeks, formed their own union, negotiated with their employer, and secured a considerable wage-hike" (Kamath and Ramanathan 2017, p.3) When they returned to work, the Ford factory machinists in Dagenham, UK, had not achieved their demand for their jobs to be re-graded – but the strike is remembered as successful because of the push it gave the UK government to bring in the law on equal pay. In all of these examples we can see that the external grand narrative of the strikes – labour solidarity, decent standard of living, equality – informs assessments of the strikes beyond whether they achieved their specific demands.



One factor here is the overall character of the strike. Labour strikes will have specific demands set by the strikers themselves and relevant to the working conditions or freedom of association at the workplace against which the strike can be judged. Political strikes – taking that description to cover strikes other than those called over labour rights and working conditions – will have broader objectives relating to economic or social policy.⁵⁸ Those where the strikers are providing an essential service, such as the El Salvador health workers, can cause or threaten a level of disruption that may increase the likelihood of the management or authorities coming to the negotiation table – such leverage being one reason why such workers often face limitations on their right to strike.

Strikes that have a more general aim beyond the specific workplace are more symbolic and often brief, held for just a day or two. Even with mass participation, such demonstrative actions are unlikely in that brief stoppage period to threaten the sort of disruption to social cohesion or capital accumulation to bring about major change (see Nowak and Gallas 2014). With such mass actions not generating material concessions from the government, their success may need to be assessed on other grounds such as mobilisation, in terms of scale or cross-section of participation and particularly the alliances that can build a new social movement unionism, but also including the terms of engagement and learning that can be foundational for further action (especially if there are mechanisms for follow up).

Broad appeal and support

It is easy to think of movements and protests that had huge levels of support but still were unable to achieve their goals – the mass marches against the war in Iraq would be one example. Broad support alone is not enough, but time and again – such as in the Lampedusa strike against nuclear dumping, in the White Marches, (eventually) in the Dunnes Store Workers Strike – we see that making any positive change necessarily means mobilising to build a vision of a better world that is shared across a wide cross-section of society.

Solidarity

Strikes are inherently about solidarity: they are a collective action to press for a specific demand or advocate for or respond to broader policy objectives. The solidarity between strikers is a critical motivating factor and also provides a measure of self-care. But beyond the solidarity of the strikers themselves, most of the case studies show that solidarity helps but that it is not always enough to win the strike. Sometimes it is sufficient to catch the political moment and realise the change the strikers are demanding, but sometimes the power does not transfer across these different contexts and may be dismissed as limited to that particular workplace, sector, or moment (Liu 2015). Strikes achieving cross-sectional solidarity demonstrate to the authorities (or other decision makers/targets of the strike action) that the underlying ideals have a broader appeal. The doctors and health professionals in El Salvador enjoyed broad support for their strike, which aided their cause and also meant that the blame for the disruption arising from the strike stayed focused on the cause of the strike action, the government's health care privatisation proposals.

In some political strikes, solidarity is an important element of the strike – part of the rationale of the strike action. The striking longshoremen on the US west coast knew they were not going to stop the war in Iraq but they could show, and receive, solidarity with Iraqi dock workers. The contemporary women's strike movement is building solidarity to internationalise these strikes: now in over 50 countries. They also received support from other movements and other strikers, including the “bodega strikers” in New York City, workers at the neighbourhood grocery stores who took action in opposition to President Trump's illegal travel ban on people from Muslim-majority countries (Taylor 2017).

Solidarity by groups not directly involved in the strike can provide strength to those who are striking. Such actions also send a message to the authorities as well as to the strikers that those taking action are not alone, and that their concerns are valid and understood or shared by a wider group of people. This can be important in contexts where striking puts individuals or groups at risk: solidarity within the country or internationally: in recognising strikers and organisers as human rights defenders supporters can offer some protection to the strikers and strike leaders. Several of the early labour strikes received financial support from middle-class allies, including the 1888 Match Girls Strike and the 1909 New York shirtwaist strike. The work of the Solidarity trade union in Poland was supported financially by US trade unions and spiritually by Pope John Paul II (Donovan 2005). Groups separate from the strike can also provide support and external pressure – though it should always be undertaken in agreement with the strike organisers.

This is particularly useful when the strike is against a transnational corporation. Activists where the company is headquartered can apply pressure that often those directly affected by the company's actions cannot, such as when UK-based groups in support of the Phulbari strike in Bangladesh submitted a complaint against the company's actions under the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises. Of course, there will also be actors working in solidarity with the employers (or other targets of the strike). In this way, external attention and support can also work, or be used, against strikers. This was the case in the Cambodia textile industry strikes where the manufacturers association cited concerns about reduced orders from international buyers to defend the violent crackdowns on the strikers.

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Sometimes this support comes from unexpected allies, as in the US oil refinery strikes in 2015. In 2015, oil refinery workers in the USA went on strike over workplace safety issues. Over five months the strike spread to include thousands of oil workers from 15 refineries across seven states, becoming the largest US refinery strike in 35 years (Stangler 2015). Many environmental justice activists and leaders supported the striking oil workers. They understood that safe working conditions in the oil refineries was central to ensuring the integrity of ecosystems around the refineries and the health of the human communities, including the oil workers and their families, who live there. Although there was a historical connection between the environmental movement and energy sector workers, it had been broken by the perception that it could only be a zero-sum game of jobs-or-environment. This renewed connection speaks to the bigger narrative of the strike, about class, profits, and corporate power. It positions the oil workers as defenders of their communities and environment, making space for dialogue on environmental as well as economic justice (Kahle 2015).

There are also solidarity strikes, for example in support of oppressed groups, such as the strike by workers at Dunnes Store, Ireland, against the apartheid regime in South Africa. They achieved success beyond their workplace, changing Irish government policy on the importation of South African goods (and only then saw the change at their workplace). Their solidarity was also felt by anti-apartheid activists in South Africa. Sometimes acting in solidarity is the point. For example, several groups responded with solidarity strikes when President Trump announced on 27 January 2017 a ban on travel to the USA by nationals of seven Muslim-majority countries. The New York Taxi Workers Association called a work stoppage for one hour in solidarity with the people protesting the ban at New York's JFK airport. Similarly, the Yemeni-American bodega owners in the city called a strike in solidarity with the people from Yemen and six other countries who were targeted by the ban (Chandler 2017a, b).

However, a lack of solidarity may not signal defeat. The workers who achieved their demands in the 1976 Trico strike enjoyed a strong solidarity amongst the strikers (mostly women) and their union, but not from the main institutions of the labour movement, and not from many of their co-workers (mostly men) who made it clear that they viewed the women's strike as "more worthy of derision than solidarity" (Stevenson 2016, p.150).

Media

Another element that can drive or undermine solidarity for strikers is the media. In the examples of strikes there are those that saw favourable media for the strikers (Kerala tea planters, New Bedford textile workers) or the underlying issue (failings of the UK Equal Pay Act that triggered the Trico strike) but not all of these strikes achieved their objectives. Media support is not fully in the control of the strikers. Timing plays a role: the Silvertown strike in 1889 (described above) saw wide cross-sectoral support for the strikers but public and media support for strikers was waning following strong support for an earlier strike by dock workers (Tully 2014). The media swung behind the Dunnes workers strikers after they were denied entry to South Africa, helping to turn public opinion in their favour and putting further pressure on the government. Wider societal issues are also relevant: the media also traded in the prejudices of the day, for example ridiculing the 1970 US women's strike for equality and dealing in racist stereotypes in their coverage of the Grunwick (UK) strike.

Inclusion

Just as any strike benefits from broad support, it also needs to have a broad base. However, the labour movement, including unions, have not always worked intersectionally for social justice. Labour activism has included efforts to limit access to work for example to women and/or immigrant workers, in favour of citizen men workers of the dominant racial group (Barnsley 2011). The dockworkers strike in Australia in support of Indonesian independence was a break from past racist policies to restrict work and solidarity to white Australians, although reports of the strike for years erased the contributions of Indian workers to the strike (Goodall 2008). The Grunwick strike in the UK marked the first time the union had given meaningful support to minority and migrant workers.

Women workers have had to struggle to be taken seriously as workers by the men they work with and the unions who represent them, as well as for power in the labour movement (Boris and Orleck 2011, Stevenson 2016, McAlevy 2017). Many of the strikes

Women workers have had to struggle to be taken seriously as workers by the men they work with and the unions who represent them, as well as for power in the labour movement...



described in this paper, including the Dagenham and Regie strikes, are by women whose jobs have not been graded equally to men though they do equivalent work or work of equal value. The deeply embedded devaluing of women's work and feminised labour sectors remains a barrier to opportunities to bring feminist and labour movements together (McAlevy 2017).

Gendered perceptions of women's role in society is a limiting factor for some men in the workplace and some unions, as to women's potential participation in labour organising: we saw this in the strikes by garment sector workers in Thailand (Mills

2005), and it has been a regular feature seen too in the early strikes such as the New York shirtwaist strike. Not only is this limiting women's participation, such attitudes are also limiting on any union's potential reach and influence. It is not just about ensuring that more women join unions, but ensuring women organisers of all backgrounds are in leadership positions. Unions, like other organisations, need to address their discriminations including sexism and racism. As current mass women's human rights organising demonstrates, women are entirely capable of building powerful movements with minority women in the lead (McAlevey 2017).

Many of the strikes described in this paper engage with intersectionality, though not always successfully. Early strikes by women workers saw the development of cross-class networks such as in the match worker strikes and the New York shirtwaist strike. However there have also been tensions and disputes through labour history between working class women and the middle and upper class (white) women who have taken up their cause and had more access to power and influence. Similarly there have been difficulties between working women across classes who have had different analyses and objectives in labour organising, for example with some mostly middle-class women workers more focused on a "lean-in"-style of equality prioritising an individual equality with men rather than addressing collective needs and rights (Boris and Orleck 2011).

The intersectionality of the Grunwick strikers – as South Asian, migrant, women workers – proved to be central to its place in history but as "competing histories" rather than an intersectional organising approach: "The Grunwick strike is focus for many different issues and struggles. For trade unionists it is a struggle for trade-union recognition; some fix on police brutality; feminists point to the oppression of female workers; while democrats denounce gross violations of the human rights to work, to speak freely and to associate. To many, Grunwick is part of the struggle against racialism and imperialism... Others regard the racial aspect as minimal and rally behind a simple class struggle by the under-paid. It is the importance of the Grunwick Strike that it embraces all these issues."⁵⁹

Alliance-building

In addition to the benefits to a strike of cross-sector and other solidarities, strikes of all kinds but especially political strikes – those that address wider social and economic policy concerns – benefit from deliberate alliance-building by groups with a unifying narrative and shared analysis.

Solidarity is important for strikers but if it is too narrowly focused it may undermine opportunities to build alliances and therefore widen support for the strike. For example, for a range of historic and contemporaneous reasons, there can be divergence between goals of the women's movement that is more focused on sexism and misogyny, and those of the labour movement that is focused on class solidarity and labour rights: both have missed how these struggles intersect and reinforce each other (Boris and Orleck 2011). This is not always the case, and when feminists and unions work together both benefit (Boris and Orleck 2011). For example, women from all the political parties and the unions involved in the 1975 Iceland women's strike had felt able to work together (Rudolfsdottir 2005), to great success.

No group can or should cover everything: to bring the sort of systemic changes we want to see requires organised power beyond any one organisation or movement.

⁵⁹ Graham Taylor, a member of the Executive Committee of the Brent Trades Council, quoted in <https://hatfulofhistory.wordpress.com/2014/02/26/the-intersectional-politics-of-the-grunwick-strike/>

Divisions are not limited to the feminist and labour movements: similar gaps exist within and between many movements sometimes for historical reasons of organisations establishing themselves on issues or in space that was not already being addressed by others, or often for simple reasons of capacity. The different constituencies and way of working of unions and NGOs have also been a source of tension, for example with NGOs providing for free information and services for which unions require members to pay dues. No group can or should cover everything: to bring the sort of systemic changes we want to see requires organised power beyond any one organisation or movement. It will be important that we address some of these divisions to build meaningful connections between movements that are as interconnected “as the systems of oppression they confront” (Ferree and Roth 1998, 628). As two activists involved in the women’s strike noted: “Within this coalition women coming from different traditions and political cultures are rediscovering the joy of solidarity and trust among different struggles and different voices” (Arruzza and Bhattacharya 2017). The learning opportunities of such alliances are obvious and one of the significant benefits of the work for the current and future organising.

This involves building what Ferree and Roth (1998) call inclusive solidarity, recognising multiple forms of oppression, as a political decision. Enacting this solidarity requires active bridge-building work to build a coalition politics that is intersectional and makes room for different groups to organise around their issues of concern while centring those who have long been marginalised (Ferree and Roth 1998). This is important to break down existing class, gender, race, and other hierarchies that often drive a top-down approach to organising. In addition to reducing barriers to engagement and opportunity for other, this can also remedy the distance that grows between organisers and constituencies as unions, NGOs, etc., expand and professionalise, leading to priorities and strategies that may not meet the needs of workers (Mills 2005 on Thailand garment sector strikers; Kamath and Ramanathan 2017 on the Kerala tea pickers who formed their own union because they did not see the existing trade union responding to their concerns).

This is not just about political principles, there are myriad practical benefits including burden sharing of the work of instigating and maintaining strikes, building alliances with groups that have different areas of focus, growing different understandings that can make for more complete analyses and effective strategies, and different ways of working.

This alliance-building work also requires working with donors. Good coalition work is about making organisational links and relationship-building – and working to maintain those. Supporting those connections also sustains work over the long term to achieve the overall goal, for which strikes are just one tactic (see strike as tool, above). This work is hard, it is time consuming, it is likely to be problematic at times, and it is less visible than many other areas of an organisation’s work in terms such as donor reporting, but it is essential. Furthermore, good coalition work requires compromise and giving up a degree of ownership over the work, another move that does not play to clear causal claims on impact assessments. Where movements have historically or are still engaged in a struggle for autonomy, this can be a particular challenge. Ferree and Roth (1998) describe a strike of daycare workers in Berlin, Germany, where the union would not use a framing of “women’s strike” because that would necessitate mobilising the women’s movement and sharing credit for any settlement.

What is not always so well documented in the published records of strikes is the work to initiate and sustain them. Though some strikes, particularly in the early years of unionising, were spontaneous, this can disadvantage the strike. Aside from laws in place in many countries against spontaneous strikes, preparation, including pre-existing strong workplace organising and a strike fund, is a more solid basis for taking strike action, especially where it is planned as more than a symbolic short stoppage. This greatly

benefited the Trico strike for example, and was cited as one of the factors in the failure of the 1888 strike in Silvertown (Tully 2014, Stevenson 2016). Though the living space was one of the factors triggering the strike, the Kerala tea plantation workers benefited from having that space for communal organising (Kamath and Ramanathan 2017). Achieving mass movements without much preparation and resourcing can be done – the 1970 Women’s March for Equality was organised by a relatively new organisation on a small budget (Dismore 2010) – but it probably requires catching a particular moment when the strikers’ demands coincide with other factors, such as other movements, government priorities, etc.

Communication within the strike as well as publicly and to the strike’s target is particularly important as strikes can fail through communication breakdowns between different constituencies. For example in a strike of daycare workers in Berlin in the late 1980s, the (man-dominated) trade union instigated a strategy that upheld conservative gender relations and in doing so, alienated the strikers (Ferree and Roth 1998). Communication is also the first step to constructive coordination between groups: in the Cambodia garment sector strikes the multiple unions in the factories competed for members rather than collaborating on activities in support of the overall objective, undermining the strike (Oka 2015).

Few of the strikes in these case studies focused energies only on action at or outside the target of the strike (usually the workplace). Strikers used a range of tactics to communicate their grievances to the decision makers (management), those who may influence them (including the media), and the wider public. Many strikes moved from the workplace location to blockade public highways or demonstrate in a town centre – the Regis tobacco factory strikers in Lebanon disrupted the highway; the Kerala tea pickers moved off the plantation and staged a week-long sit-in in the town; thousands of Grunwick strikers and supporters marched in the streets around the factory in northwest London, UK; in 1990s Thailand, garment sector workers formed an all-women band and appeared at rallies performing covers of political songs as well as an original composition describing the experiences of rural–urban migrant workers (Mills 2015). Some of the Grunwick and Memphis Sanitation Workers’ strikes resorted to hunger strikes.

When planning strike action it is important to try to minimise the negative consequences as far as possible, and to share information about the possible risks...

Building broad appeal and solidarity for the strike is different to securing mass participation in the strike. Joining a strike carries risks for the individual strikers – of dismissal (especially in a labour strike), of financial hardship if the strike endures, of violence particularly by state authorities, or being blacklisted or unfairly dismissed. Migrant workers – who drove a lot of the strikes described in these case studies – may risk deportation as a result of taking strike action.⁶⁰ Shorter, symbolic strikes, particularly those brought by an alliance of organisations and unions, can minimise some of these risks, not requiring participants to make a major financial sacrifice (though it may still be significant to the individual) and likely posing lower risk to their job, especially if a large proportion of their colleagues join the strike. This low participation threshold can secure mass involvement (Nowak and Gallas 2014).

⁶⁰ For example, under the UK’s “hostile environment” anti-migrant policies, working visas limit the amount of leave a worker can take from the job, meaning that longer strike actions risk violating the terms of the visa, resulting in deportation, see: McDonnell John and Sally Hunt. 2018. Home Office rules mean immigrants can’t go on strike without risking deportation. Post-Brexit, this will include EU workers, Independent, 11 May 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/home-office-hostile-environment-strike-trade-unions-brexit-a8346461.html>

Addressing negative associations

When planning strike action it is important to try to minimise the negative consequences as far as possible, and to share information about the possible risks to ensure that workers can make an informed choice about whether or how to participate.

Labour organising has always been tainted with negative associations by those who want to profit off cheap labour, but there are also tensions within organised labour that can stop it fulfilling its promise. As the power of the majority always poses a threat to the elite, workers' organisations are often perceived by governments as posing a threat to the social order they often position them as subversive. In 18th century England the government passed a law (Combination Acts 1799) banning any type of collective action by workers for 25 years (Kang 2012). US unions were tainted by the accusations of corruption and links with organised crime against the Teamsters' union in the 1950s. Various unions have been accused of being too close to political parties, especially communist parties, or organisers risk accusations of being a "foreign agent". This last point – attributing the disruption to outside agitators or foreign agents working within the country to undermine workers' organising has been seen in some of the strikes, including general strikes, in Bangladesh (see for example Shingavi 2010). On a more individual level, strikers can be branded as trouble makers and fired (as in the act that triggered the Gdańsk Shipyard strike in Poland, and when the shop steward in the Dunnes Store strike in Dublin was unfairly dismissed) or blacklisted (as were many of the Indian strikers who took part in the Black Armada, the strikes in Australia's docks in support of Indonesian independence).



Many labour organisers of those early textile worker strikes were communist and the affiliation was an explicit challenge in negotiations during the Passaic Textile Strike in the late 1920s for example. The association has cast a long shadow on labour and other organising: it was one of the criticisms of the US Women's Strike for Equality in 1970. The party was also supportive of the Regie strikers in Lebanon in the 1970s though the women were not explicitly affiliated with them. It remains a challenge for activists in many countries. In Thailand being branded as communists could have serious consequences for activists (Mills 2005). There remain many laws (as well as prejudices) against communism that are obstacles to social justice organising, for example in Indonesia an environmentalist who had been protesting gold mining was sentenced in January 2018 to 10 months in prison under a criminal code provision banning the spreading of communist or other leftist ideologies (AFP 2018).

For women, engagement in labour organising and activism more broadly often incurs attacks on their sexual autonomy (Rothschild 2005). Such pressures have been reported by women strikers in countries including Indonesia (Silvey 2003), Lebanon (Abisaab 2005: the case study of the Regie workers in Ghaziyya), and Thailand (Mills 2005). The claim to public space and the

visibility inherent to strike action and other organising tactics can expose workers/activists to significant personal risks. In many contexts this is a gendered risk with women socialised to be modest and not expected not to display the assertiveness of strikers (Mills 2005). Therefore for women to join a strike is to be perceived as transgressing gender norms and engage in masculine-associated behaviour, challenging the patriarchy and opening them up to criticism and depictions as “abnormal” (Abisaab 2005, 251). These gendered expectations may deter some women from joining a strike or may require women to expend energy gaining the confidence to do this and dealing with any consequences of their decision, for example within their family. This may be a factor for women working close to their family or wider community, such as was the case for some of the women strikers in the Java examples (Silvey 2003). Women strikers can face accusations of improper behaviour, particularly sexual behaviour, that may include accusations of promiscuity or lesbianism, as in the 1970s Women’s Strike for Equality (Mills 2005, Rothschild 2005). Dealing with this takes time and attention and can undermine women’s labour activism, including by limiting opportunities for alliance-building.

Violence

Strikes at individual workplaces and those over wider policy issues have been subject to violence by agents of the state and sometimes by non-state actors brought in by the company. Strikers frequently face state violence: they are arrested, beaten, killed. In some cases the strike leaders are specifically targeted; for the immigrant labour leaders of the New Bedford Strike that included actual or threatened deportation (McMullen 2010), the specifically gender-based violence in the Java strikes were intended to scare women away from striking or protesting (Silvey 2003). Concern about violence may prevent some joining a strike or may be used to pressure on women not to join the strike, citing patriarchal gender norms (Mills 2005). The Regie case study in Lebanon saw a serious example of this where several of the women strikers reported that their parents had threatened them with death were they to strike as it was not seen as being appropriate conduct for women (Abisaab 2005). Violence against striking workers is a deliberate act that has consequences beyond the specific violent moment. The Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association identifies violence against workers as “both a reason for and a consequence of the global weakening of workers’ rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association” (UN General Assembly 2016, para.76).

The striking tea plantation workers in Kerala strategised to minimise the risk of violence and ensured their husbands played a physically protective in public protests (Kamath and Ramanathan 2017). The response of the police to the strike is often influential in the solidarity shown to and experienced by the strikers, whether the police act in support (as in Kerala, see Kamath and Ramanathan 2017) or as company agents that can radicalise the strikers and strengthen their resolve (as in the Trico strike, see Stevenson 2016), or bring in outside support in solidarity with the strikers (as in the 1909 New York shirtwaist strike, Boris and Orleck 2011).

Conclusion: Time for Global Solidarity Strikes?

We are living in an era of unprecedented wealth coupled with unprecedented inequality. Richest one per cent of the global population owns the 82% of the wealth created in 2017.⁶¹ Sixty nine of the largest 100 economies in the world are corporations and 10 corporations are richer than 180 countries combined. This concentration of wealth is fuelled by an extractive economy that prioritises consumption, growth and profit over social and environmental good. Consequently, we are experiencing a climate crisis that threatens hu-

manity and has the most catastrophic consequences for women in the global south.

When governments do want to make policy decisions that are in the public interest, they are constrained by rules, conditions or rankings set by the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank or credit rating agencies. Even more explicitly, investor rights contained in trade and investment treaties allow foreign corporations to sue governments when policies and laws might have an impact on investor profits. The tribunals these cases are heard in are able to ignore democratically drafted laws, constitutions and domestic courts. Suits commonly relate to the regulation of water resources, energy and environmental protections in the public interest. Corporations have also been able to sue governments for raising the minimum wage, for introducing affirmative actions laws and at least 24 countries have been sued in relation to taxes imposed, amongst many others.

So amidst this global crisis and drastic inequality in the world, how can we address the problems of neoliberal globalisation, militarism, and fundamentalism and ecological crisis? It is through the revival of global solidarity through the form of global solidarity strikes where social movements working around inequality, democracy, environmental justice, and human rights & women's rights come together to disrupt the current order and make our demands for Development Justice.⁶²

Do the impossible, again

Many of those early strikes had been thought impossible until they happened. Sex discrimination meant that employers and labour organisers thought it was not possible to organise women workers – so the women organised themselves. Homeworkers and factory workers initiated strikes and organised labour rushed in to catch up (Barnsley 2011, Beer 1983). A turning point in British labour history came in 1888 when the match workers (the so-called match girls) went on strike: “[t]he fight-back of the East End workers began where it was least expected: among unskilled female match-workers, many of despised Irish birth or extraction” (Tully 2014, 284). Clara Lemlich, another in a long line of migrant women organisers, one of the leaders of the strike of shirtwaist workers in New York's garment industry in 1909, observed: “They used to say you couldn't even organize women. They wouldn't come to union meetings. They were ‘temporary workers.’ Well, we showed them!” (quoted in Arruzza and Bhattacharya 2017). This pattern of change being demanded and brought about by migrants in precarious work offers lessons and hope for current labour and other organising challenges.

Nearly 70 years after these early strikes, women at the Trico factory were still having to assert their identity as workers and struggled to get their coworkers to take their strike seriously. This pattern continues, with women workers across the world ignored by organised labour who deem them unorganisable because they do not fit into pre-existing union models and ways of working (Ferree and Roth 1998, Mills 2005, Stevenson 2016).⁶³ None of this is surprising as – then and now – women's work is not valued and so “[t]his workforce

It is through the revival of global solidarity through the form of global solidarity strikes where social movements working around inequality, democracy, environmental justice, and human rights & women's rights come together to disrupt the current order and make our demands for Development Justice.

62 *Development Justice is a new development model demanded by civil society in the Global South. It is a development framework aimed to asserts the rights to development for all people over profits. Development Justice comprises 5 transformative shifts: Redistributive Justice, Economic Justice, Social Justice, Environmental Justice, and Accountability to the People.* http://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/2016_Development_Justice_Briefer.pdf

63 *Around the same time “Clericals, flight attendants, and domestic workers contested the dominant assumption within the [US union federation] AFL-CIO that women workers were unorganizable” (Boris and Orleck 2011).*

is deemed less valuable to the labor movement, because the labor it performs is considered women's work" (McAlevey 2017). This gendered ethic of care is exploited not just by low wages but by the use of part-time work which often excludes workers from certain benefits such that, in a reversal of the strikes of early industrialisation, care workers are amongst those have gone on strike to secure more work hours in order to earn enough to live on (Jaffe 2013). As with the women workers of the past, precarious and migrant workers are not waiting for traditional unions to adapt their models to include them, they are organising, forming and joining new unions, and they are achieving their demands (Mellino 2017).

The media ridiculed women striking for equality in the US in 1970 (as it had ridiculed the suffragettes). The men working at the UK Trico factory in 1976 derided their women coworkers when they went on strike. No one thought migrants, especially south Asian women, would stand up for their rights but the Grunwick strikers proved them wrong. At the time of the Wave Hill Station strike, the colonisation of Indigenous lands and oppression of Indigenous peoples was not questioned by the dominant society but the Gurindji people changed that. Young women and rural migrant workers who are preferentially hired to the export-oriented factories of the global south because they "are considered fundamentally obedient and respectful toward authority" and therefore will not be susceptible to labour organising have proved to be "some of the most militant and vocal protesters" (Mills 2005, pp.117-8). Time and again governments think they can store nuclear waste where they want, sanction developments such as construction or mining as they wish, but the people of Lampedusa, the construction unions and the Indigenous peoples of Phulbari and supporters proved otherwise. Collective organising – strikes – had repeatedly demonstrated that marginalised people can accomplish what authorities thought they could not or would not do.

Follow women

With most of the global workforce now in precarious jobs and most of those workers women, it is time for women, including ethnic minority, migrant, disabled and young women, to be leading the organising. This has long been the reality throughout the world, but it has not always been recognised as it is often located outside of formal structures, as well as being part of the perennial erasure of women's work. Women have been leading strike organisers throughout these case studies: in the early homemaker and factory strikes, for equality in and out of the workplace, that contributed to peace at the local and the international level, and to the fall of apartheid, to resolve community needs, and in the ongoing struggle for women's human rights.

The increased precarity of work with the gig economy and the breaking of the social contract about work and pensions is seeing more women and young workers organising against labour abuses, including through unions (Boris and Orleck 2011, Chen 2018). In the US, whereas younger workers have been less likely to join unions in the past, workers under 35 make up the bulk of a recent surge in union membership (Chen 2018). In Indonesia, young workers mostly under 25 are a major force in the unions since the end of the dictatorship in 1998, with strikes a regular tactic of their organising (Silvey 2003, Panimbang 2017). Young workers also played a significant role in the Cambodian garment sector strikes over the last decade. As well as bringing new energy to labour organising, a younger generation of organisers in leadership positions can transform the conservative culture of the union (Panimbang 2017).

This is another turning point in labour history. The current economic/labour situation is also seeing a return to strike actions that many had dismissed as no longer effective. One reason may be that the lack of legal aid for employment law cases makes it impossible for most workers to bring claims, such as equal pay

claims, to tribunals (Tickle 2018). If individualised action, which had been one of the organising tactics that had replaced strikes (and was rejected by the strikers at the Trico factory, for example), is no longer an option, collective action is the answer.

An example where strikes are unexpectedly not just happening but winning is in the USA where teachers and nurses among others are striking. These feminised social service sectors have growing economic importance, giving the workers structural power (Boris and Orleck 2011, McAlevey 2017).⁶⁴ And they are changing labour organising. Women, many of them migrants, lead struggles against sweatshop conditions (Boris and Orleck 2011). A wildcat (unauthorised) strike by 20,000 teachers from every county in West Virginia, USA, achieved their demand for more pay in March 2018. These are workers who do not have collective bargaining rights, in a state that helped elect the current US President, what is often referred to as “Trump country”. The strikers pooled resources to cover the costs of school meals that their students, many of whom live in poverty, would otherwise miss during the strike (Barkan 2018, Democracy Now 2018, Hayes 2018). One commentator described the strike as “a testament to the turbulence of the political moment we live in that whole new vistas of mass action are certainly coming into view and I would venture that there is yet more over the horizon” (Hayes 2018).



64 Though as Nowak and Gallas point out, public sector workers going on strike saves the state money (2014, 314).

Annex: International human rights and labour law

The right to strike has been recognised in international human rights and labour law for decades. It is a critical element of civic space but in legal terms, it is primarily conceived of as an element of workers' freedom of association. This section will look briefly at the main points of international law in relation to the right to strike, as well as wider issues of freedom of association.

The right to strike

“Both trade unions and the right to strike are fundamental tools to achieving workers’ rights, as they provide mechanisms through which workers can stand up for their interests collectively, and engage with big business and government on a more equal footing. The State is obligated to protect these rights for all workers” (UN General Assembly 2016, para.54).

In international human rights law the right to strike is explicitly provided for in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), part of the international bill of rights.⁶⁵ The right to strike is also part of the fundamental principles and rights at work of the International Labour Organization (ILO). However, the core international labour conventions including the Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize, 1948 (No. 87) and the Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98), though both protect and promote unions and workers' right to organise, do not explicitly reference the right to strike. This textual absence has led to challenges to that right in the last few years.

The ILO Committee of Experts and the Committee for Freedom of Association – independent expert bodies that provide clarification and authoritative guidance on the implementation of ILO conventions – have for decades (since the 1950s) understood the right to strike as “a central element and indispensable logical consequence of the right of association” (Hofmann 2014).⁶⁶ For example, the ILO's Committee on Freedom of Association has clearly stated that “dismissal of workers because of a strike constitutes serious discrimination in employment on grounds of legitimate trade union activities and is contrary to Convention No. 98” (ILO 2006, para. 661). Although they are widely ratified, as fundamental ILO conventions, the expert Committees can examine cases brought from countries that have not ratified Conventions 87 and 98, as they are binding on each member state by membership alone.

The ILO supervisory bodies have established a set of principles outlining the limits within which the right to strike may be exercised (ILO 1998). Under international labour law, the right to strike is for the purpose of “furthering and defending the interests of workers” (ILO Convention 87, Article 10). This is a broad framing and the ILO expert committees have rejected limiting the right to strike to industrial disputes that could be resolved by signing a collective agreement. Thus international labour law allows workers to strike over wider economic and social policy questions (Gernigon et al., 2000). Similarly, the expert committees have rejected outright bans on sympathy/solidarity strikes and ruled that workers should be

⁶⁵ In Article 8.1(d)

⁶⁶ Both the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association and the Committee of Experts have interpreted Article 3 of Convention 87 that makes provision for workers' organisations to “organise their administration and activities and formulate their programmes” as encompassing protection of a right to strike.

able to take action “provided the initial strike they are supporting is itself lawful” (Gernigon et al., 2000, p.16). However, international principles developed by ILO expert bodies do not extend the right to strike to purely political strikes (van der Heijden 2013).

Over time, the ILO Committee of Experts has developed the following principles with regard to the right to strike (from van der Heijden 2013, for a more detailed discussion see Gernigon et al., 2000):

- The right to strike is a fundamental right that derives from the right to freedom of association;
- The right must be exercised peaceably;
- It applies to employees in both the private and the public sectors – but it does not include the police and the army, federal employees who exercise authority in the name of the state, or employees working in essential services (in the strict sense of the word);
- Any discontinuation of these services arising from strike action must not endanger lives, safety, or health of the whole or part of the population;
- If personal safety, accident prevention, and the protection of equipment and instruments are at issue in or as a result of a strike, then a minimum level of services may be compulsory;
- The right to strike is not absolute – it does not apply in situations of acute national crisis;
- The right also does not apply to purely political strikes.
- There may be procedural requirements, such as timely announcement of the strike, the obligation to collaborate with reconciliation efforts, and access to voluntary arbitration.

Under the UN human rights system, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights qualifies the right to strike as providing “it is exercised in conformity with the laws of the particular country.”⁶⁷ Over recent decades, states have often adopted legal, administrative and practical restrictions on the right to strike with some of the requirements for legal strike action deliberately onerous and used as political means to suppress strike action (UN General Assembly 2016, Xhafa 2016). As this can undermine workers’ efforts to organise collectively for their interests, these restrictions may constitute a violation of workers’ rights to freedom of assembly and of association (UN General Assembly 2016).⁶⁸ The UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, has asserted that: “protest action in relation to government social and economic policy, and against negative corporate practices, forms part of the basic civil liberties whose respect is essential for the meaningful exercise of trade union rights. This right [to strike] enables them to engage with companies and governments on a more equal footing, and Member States have a positive obligation to protect this right, and a negative obligation not to interfere with its exercise” (UN 2017).

States’ interest in limiting or undermining the right to strike is often driven by the interests of corporations. Under the tripartite structure of the ILO, the Employers’ Group argued at the International Labour Conference in June 2012 that there was no right to strike under international labour law (specifically under

⁶⁷ Article 8.1(d)

⁶⁸ Under international law the state may restrict the right to strike for essential services and civil servants engaged in the administration of the state but, as with all restrictions, these should be the exception rather than the rule (see UN General Assembly 2016, para.68).

ILO Convention No. 87).⁶⁹ Beyond the ILO system, this attack on the right to strike emboldened some states and employers to pursue anti-union action (Vogt 2016). Nonetheless, the weight of legal opinion is firmly behind the right to strike – it has become international customary law (UN General Assembly 2016). States too have recognised the right to strike as an essential element of freedom of association: the Government Group at the ILO recognised that “without protecting a right to strike, freedom of association, in particular the right to organize activities for the purpose of promoting and protecting workers’ interests, cannot be fully realized.” (Government Group Statement in ILO 2015a (Appendix II), para.4).

Wider issues of workers’ right to freedom of association

The rights of workers to freely establish, join and run organisations of their choosing, without unjustifiable interference from the state, is protected under international labour law in ILO Conventions No.87 (Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise, 1948), and No.98 (Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining, 1949). Under the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (1998), all member states of the ILO are obliged to respect principles of freedom of association whether or not they have ratified the appropriate convention. Furthermore, the ILO’s decent work agenda has as one of its four pillars engagement in genuine social (tripartite) dialogue.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) require that states ensure that people can organize and join workers’ associations that address their concerns, including unions.⁷⁰ The provisions in the ICESCR implicitly requires states to promote trade unionism among workers (UN General Assembly 2016, para.55). The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) requires states to eliminate racial discrimination so that everyone can enjoy their right to form and join trade unions.⁷¹

The International Migrant Workers Convention affirms that the right to form or join associations and trade unions also applies to migrants.⁷² Further, states are required to give particular attention to women workers, including domestic workers, rural women workers, women working in female-dominated industries and women working at home, as well as disabled workers, workers in the informal economy, unpaid workers and other specific groups of workers who are often deprived of their trade union rights, freedom of association and right to strike, without which they cannot obtain and defend just and favourable conditions of work.⁷³ Under international human rights and labour law workers are also protected from anti-union discrimination and guaranteed the right to bargain collectively.

The rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association in the context of wider strike actions

The rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association are guaranteed to everyone without distinction and enable people to voice and represent their interests. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the ICCPR guarantee rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association.⁷⁴ International human rights law also affirms the right of individuals to express their opinions, even if these opinions are

69 *This was not just a challenge by employers of the right to strike, but on the mandate and status of the ILO Committee of Experts (van der Heijden 2013).*

70 UDHR Article 23; ICCPR Article 22; ICESCR Article 8.1(a). Subsequent paras.(b) and (c) provide for conditions for these bodies to operate.

71 ICERD Article 5(e)(ii)

72 *International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, Articles 26 and 40.*

73 *Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, General Comment No. 23 (2016) on the right to just and favourable conditions of work, E/C.12/GC/23, 27 April 2016, see in particular para.47*

74 UDHR Article 20, ICCPR Articles 21 and 22

unpopular or in opposition to government views or policies.⁷⁵ The right to freedom of peaceful assembly is an essential vehicle for people to express their opinions, and this right cannot be limited based solely upon an assembly's message or content (UN Human Rights Council 2015). Therefore it is essential that the state enables an environment that allows for the robust exercise of these rights in order to ensure that governments, trade agreements, contracts for natural resource exploitation etc., are fair, transparent and accountable.⁷⁶ However, millions of workers are left outside of labour protections at the national level, including those in the informal economy, day workers, domestic workers – sectors in which women as well as migrant workers often predominate – meaning they are unable to exercise their rights to associate or assemble, and are left without access to justice and remedies when their rights are violated (UN General Assembly 2016).

75 ICCPR Article 19

76 On the context of natural resource exploitation specifically, see UN Human Rights Council 2015

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