

# Workers' movements and strikes in the Twenty-First Century

Tuesday 12 June 2018, by [BIRKE Peter](#), [DUTTA Madhumita](#), [NOWAK Jörg](#) (Date first published: 30 May 2018).

Twenty-first century working class struggles have seen alliances of working people in response to issues such as climate change, immigrant rights, informalisation of work and the political-economic crisis across the globe. A glance at protests over the recent years shows the increasing relevance of strike movements within social movements in general, but research and media reports on work and working conditions rarely look at this big picture. Rather, strikes are most of the time seen as “non-movements” (Asef Bayat). They are more often conceived of as spontaneous unrest in everyday life rather than as important *political* events. In contrast, our new book collectively edited by [Jörg Nowak](#), [Madhumita Dutta](#) and [Peter Birke](#) entitled *Workers' Movements and Strikes in the Twenty-First Century*<sup>[1]</sup> asks how to make sense of a seemingly decentralised, even fragmented, and massive although sometimes hidden, sometimes very visible world of labour conflicts.

## A Resurgence of Strikes?

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw a comeback of labour strikes and working class struggles. The bulk of those struggles were located in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It was in the context of the onset of the global financial crisis and as an integral part of the general picture of renewed social movements that the resurgence of strikes took place. A list might start with the general strikes in Guadeloupe and Martinique in spring 2009, followed by the largest strike wave, since the 1980s, in China in 2010. Such a list would include the massive garment worker strikes in Egypt in 2010, which prepared the grounds for the toppling of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011, and the public sector and miners' strikes in South Africa in 2010, 2012, and 2015. In addition, a series of strikes against austerity in Western Europe has to be noted, starting with the French strike against pension reforms in 2010, followed by general strikes in the UK, Italy, Greece, Belgium, Portugal, and a general strike in Europe in November 2012. Some of the struggles extend over a period of time, for instance the series of strikes in Indian automobile and auto parts companies unfolding since 2005 and continuing until today. Or like the biggest strike wave in the last four decades in Brazil, which started in 2011 and is still gaining momentum. Or a series of general strikes in Argentina after 2008; the enormous strikes by copper miners in Chile in 2015 and 2016; strikes and struggles of teachers, state electricity workers, and peasants in Mexico—the list could go on with various other countries and sectors, and it would still be incomplete.

These new movements were accompanied by massive changes in the configuration of workers' resistance. Many new and independent trade unions, workers' organisations and collectives emerged; young female workers played a significant role in these collectives. Conflicts in established trade union federations grew and even some of the big actors had to look for new political and organisational impulses. At the heart of these new forms of resistance are the rise of newly industrialised countries and the profound restructuring of work processes across the globe.

The most remarkable phenomenon of the conjuncture in the early twenty-first century is the relocation of the bulk of industrial manufacturing. The vast majority of industrial workers now live in countries that are often misleadingly called the global South. This epochal shift has occurred under the guise of a general restructuring of labour relations worldwide. Large multinational corporations

provide stable employment for core workforces while a larger chain of subcontracted workers work under different kinds of employment and precarity. One of the main characteristics of labour relations presently seems to be an increasing individualisation—unions might strike deals for certain workforces with production power, but the vast majority of workers fall outside of any collectively negotiated conditions. But, while the number of industrial workers grew in absolute numbers over the last forty years, industrial workers are a smaller segment of the entire waged workforce than they used to be due to technological advancement and automation.

Between 2010 and 2012, almost all major countries in the global South had been affected by large-scale strikes in the most important industries, while in Europe strikes were often concentrated in relatively poor countries (other than, notably, the United Kingdom) and mainly in the public sector. Strikes in the United States are still infrequent and weak, and a few notable examples were only seen after 2014. But while those strikes erupted more or less simultaneously all over the world, strikers rarely established strong connections across national borders. The European general strike in 2012 formally remained an exception, but even here it was concentrated in a few crisis-ridden countries in southern Europe. In most parts of the world, strikes are happening in a political vacuum and in full-fledged confrontation with the state, right-wing governments, fascist or fundamentalist thugs, or paramilitaries and employers.

The overall picture leaves us somewhat puzzled: there is no question that there has been a massive resurgence of labour unrest, strike movements, and social movements in the first two decades of the new century. But while those movements played a major role in the rebellions and revolutions of the recent years, they obviously tend to fragment and even sometimes vanish under the triple pressure of fragmentation (like in Germany), institutionalisation (like in Greece) and repression (like in Turkey, Brazil, Argentina, India, and China). And even worse—counter-revolutions such as in Egypt and civil (world) wars like in Syria seem to destroy a lot of old memories and new hopes. To reflect upon the role of working class struggles in such different, but related, contexts seems to be even more urgent than it had been earlier.

Given this, one of the main aims of our book is to discuss shifts in the spatial and demographic composition of strikes, thereby following the idea of an unequal, asymmetric but nonetheless entangled development. How can we bridge this gap between the global and the local? How is labour unrest connected in time and space, and on a micro- and macro-level? While this problem is what research on strike movements is all about, finding answers is difficult. The starting point of such examinations may be, just as it is in research based on world-system theories, the observation of unexpected similarities of the forms strike movements develop on a world scale.

Having said this, it must also be noted that we can observe different tendencies regarding the strikes in the global South and the global North in the current conjuncture after the global crisis. Strikes in the South are more often economic and sectoral. They often turn into protracted and intense conflicts that only end when some material result is attained. In order to use Rosa Luxemburg's typology, they can be labelled as "fighting strikes", meaning that the symbolical aspect of the manifestations ranges second. Strikes in the North are more often defensive, political, general, and demonstrative: some of them include large masses on the streets, but often only for a day or two, and mostly end with defeats. But at the same time, there are other types of strikes occurring in each of these regions, thus we do not claim these are uniform tendencies and we can easily find links between the agendas of strikes in different world regions.

However, except for the European general strike in November 2012, which anyhow remained a tentative enterprise, there have been no transnational mobilisations. This is despite the fact that most of the companies affected by major strike waves operate at the transnational level. The construction of transnational solidarity remains one of the decisive challenges for future working

class resistance. Another challenge is at the political level. Although the European general strikes directly address national governments and multilateral financial organisations, and even though many of the economic and sectoral strikes in the global South get politicised very quickly due to massive police and/or military interventions, there is a political vacuum in the new wave of working class resistance. A mistrust of labour-based political parties is also discrediting the neo-corporatist unions that have gained power in the 1980s and/or 1990s in Brazil, South Korea, and South Africa.

There is massive dissatisfaction and a spirit of resistance among workers across the globe, but there is little open political debate or discussion about different models of political organisation, let alone about models of alternative, post-capitalist societies. These aspects, and both the advantages and limitations of new worker unions and organisations are addressed in detail in various chapters in this volume. If we can conclude something from this first collection of facts and constellations, then we could say that we are in a phase of the constitution of a global working class; we are facing a multitude of strikes and struggles inside and outside the workplace, but there is a huge gap in terms of political organisation and ideological orientation. This is also due to a legitimate scepticism towards older forms of progressive organisation like political parties and trade unions, for example in countries such as Brazil and South Africa, where the last generation of progressive forces has been or remains in government, in more or less corrupted variants.

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## Jörg Nowak

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## P.S.

Progress in Political Economy

<http://ppesydney.net/workers-movements-and-strikes-in-the-twenty-first-century/>

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## Footnotes

[1] [[https://www.rowmaninternational.com/book/workers\\_movements\\_and\\_strikes\\_in\\_the\\_twentyfirst\\_century/3-156-bd7b53fe-7ab6-420c-9d0a-e485fbc3ba2b](https://www.rowmaninternational.com/book/workers_movements_and_strikes_in_the_twentyfirst_century/3-156-bd7b53fe-7ab6-420c-9d0a-e485fbc3ba2b)]