

SPECIAL FEATURE

# The Future of Strikes and Trade Unions

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## Abstract

In early modern times, workers, especially the unskilled, in many countries were already striking against low wages and long working hours before the advent of the trade union movement. These modern trade unions on the other hand were mainly a form of organization invented by skilled labor from around 1800. Trade unions became a part of the labor movement or the workers' movement. For over a century the movement of the workers and the workers' movement merged although this marriage was not always a very happy one. There have been periods of tensions between the two. Since the crisis of the 1970s both have been on the defensive, which can be seen from lowering union density rates and the plummeting of strike activity in most Western countries.

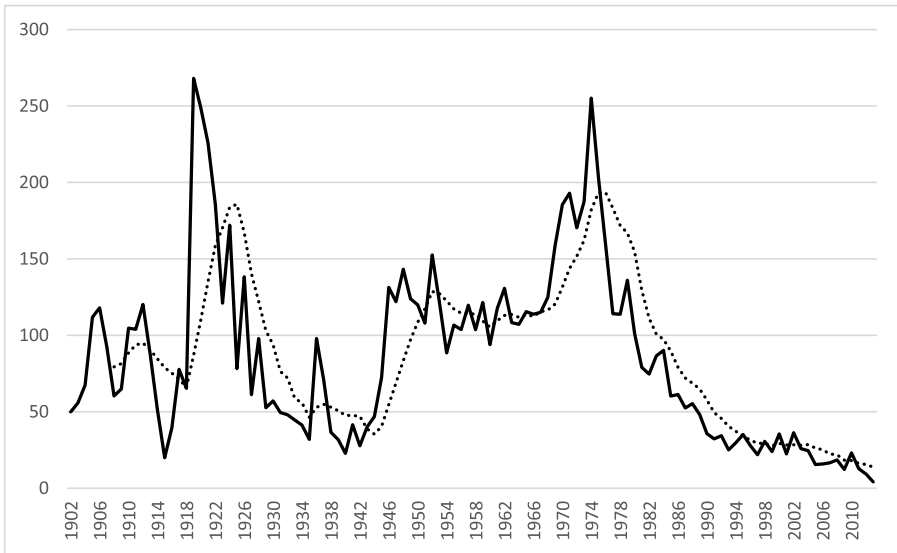
Many trade unions have been connected to the political part of the labor movement (more specifically social democracy) which in turn grew into the existing political and socioeconomic form of capitalism.<sup>1</sup> Can a bureaucratic trade union movement that is so embedded in capitalist society be able to become the advocate of a future rise of working-class struggles? Is there a future for trade unionism or will another form of organization arise? And will the strike as a weapon of the working class really disappear as was predicted so many times? And was there a moment in time when both strikes and trade unions took the path that took them into the dangerous direction where they ended up in such life-threatening circumstances. Let's go back in time to look for answers to these questions.

**Keywords:** Strikes; trade unions; history; future

## Strike history: a short overview

Since the collection of strike statistics began, researchers have looked for patterns. The first extensive statistical study of strikes was published in 1939 by John I. Griffin.<sup>2</sup> He relied exclusively on data from the USA but his findings are still worth reading. He found the obvious yearly fluctuations. Apart from the fluctuations, he also described an overall growth and peaks in the post-World War I (WWI) period and at the end of the 1930s. Data from other countries show similar developments.

A minor peak that occurred around 1890 was studied for England, France, and Germany.<sup>3</sup> Although the union movements involved in these strike movements were different in character, they were similar in scope. The strikes strengthened collective



**Figure 1.** Weighted strike index of 17 Western countries, 7-year moving average, 1902–2012<sup>a</sup>.

Source: <https://datasets.socialhistory.org/dataverse>.

<sup>a</sup>The index is calculated for the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, France, UK, Italy, Norway, Austria, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Netherlands, and Japan. See for the way the index is calculated Van der Velden, S. (ed.) (2012) *Striking Numbers. New Approaches to Strike Research*. IISH, p. 168.

interest of organizations on both the sides of workers and employers, social conflicts became more politically controllable because of state intervention and politics in general became more open to the public.<sup>4</sup> Another and much bigger strike wave occurred at the end of WWI while a new upsurge took place at the end of World War II (WWII). Although at the end of the 1950s there was a feeling amongst some researchers that the strike as a phenomenon was withering away<sup>5</sup> reality proved this idea to be wrong. The late 1960s and 1970s witnessed strike movements in many countries like France, Italy, Argentina, Senegal, and the United Kingdom. Researchers hastened to understand this new and unexpected developments<sup>6</sup> but again history took another course as can be seen in Figure 1.

Strike activity in the West after 1980 started a decline from which it has not recovered since. We may wonder if this decline will be turned in the future or if we now really have entered the final withering away of the strike. And what does this mean for the future. As early as 1998 Western and Healy concluded that the weakening of labor (measured by the influence of social democratic governments and union density, but the decline of strike activity goes hand in hand with these two) a wage slowdown in OECD countries.<sup>7</sup> Did the over-all weakness of labor<sup>8</sup> cause the often-concluded growing inequality in society? And if so, will labor be able to turn the tide by using strikes or any other show of force? So far, there are only a few signs for this in the West, but what is happening in the developing countries?

Do they follow the Western pattern of a growth of strike activity during the starting years of industrialization? What is going on in this part of the world where the first

strikes in history occurred? After all, the Western world only started to play a decisive role in world history in rather recent times. It is likely that the same is true for the history of strikes from which we can only know since written accounts have existed. It is commonly agreed that the first strikes we know of occurred in Egypt in ancient times. The best-known example is the strike of tomb builders in Deir el Medina in 1155 BCE.<sup>9</sup> Also in that long-disappeared society people in a subordinate position resisted existing and worsening labor conditions.

Since this first strike many years have elapsed. Strikes in early modern Italy, Holland, England, and other European countries were noticed and studied.<sup>10</sup> We know less of other parts of the world although some studies have been undertaken into strikes in e.g., imperial China.<sup>11</sup> These and other examples indicate that striking was not uncommon in what is now often labeled the developing countries. But will they follow the pattern that is now endemic in the West where the strike seems to have lost its attraction to workers? Or will developing countries take over the lead in global strike activity? Calculating a comparable index as used for the developed countries is hindered by a lack of data.

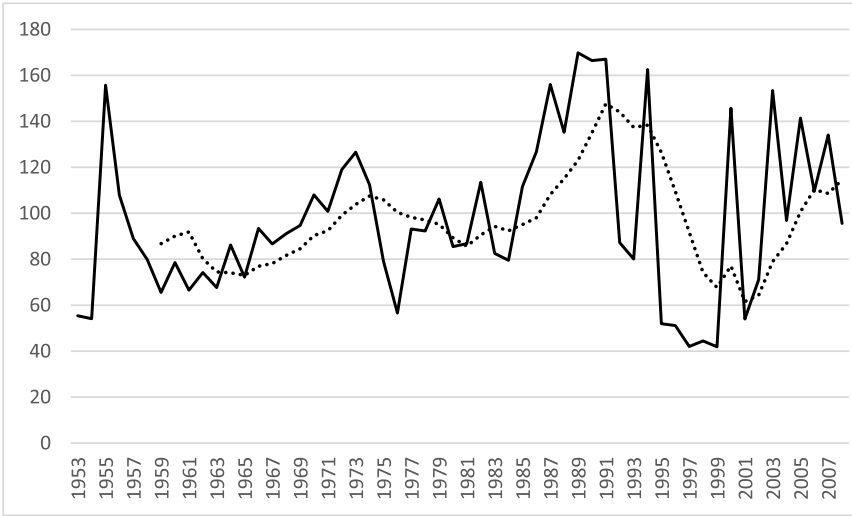
The International Labour Organization (ILO) has tried to collect similar data as the existing ones for western countries for all other parts of the world, but this was difficult. "Luckily" many now independent countries were a colony of Western powers when the ILO started its labor statistics, hence information on labor conflicts was collected then and published in the ILO's *Yearbooks*. But before 1945 data is only available from India, Chile, Mexico, and South Africa. In recent years, strike data became more abundant.

On the basis of these data an index for non-Western countries was calculated and is shown in [Figure 2](#).

Obviously, this index only gives a very rough view on events in such different countries and regions. Although because of a lack of earlier data the index necessarily starts only in 1953 it does give an idea of the development of strike activity in non-Western countries. This index shows a pattern that differs from the Western index in the same period. While an initial downward movement since the mid-1970s is also visible, the strike development recovered from the early 1980s until 1990. Then the index plummeted again also to recover from 2001. In short, the strike development in these 27 countries differs from what happened in the West.

On a global scale the plummeting of strike activity in the West may be countered by a rise in developing countries. It is good to realize that strikes are only one indicator of what we call labor unrest. Unofficial data for China indicate not only that workers are showing their force there too.<sup>12</sup> We lack sufficient data if we want to make a sound judgment on this, but let's have a short look at the Chinese data before returning to global developments.

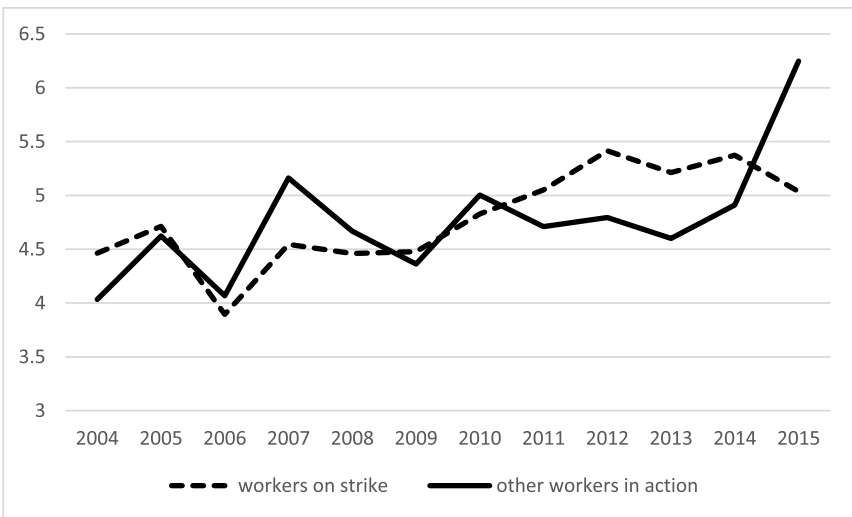
The Chinese data also includes informal forms of labor conflict while the ILO data for strikes is just formed by the sum of strikes and lock-outs. [Figure 3](#) makes it clear that both numbers have been rising in China, but also that the number of workers involved in conflicts that are not labeled as strikes, has for some years been higher than the number of strikers. These may have been blocking roads, demonstrations or sit-ins, in short, a variety of forms. These high numbers are an indication that alternative actions are an important show of force by workers besides strikes and lock-outs. Let me give an anecdotal indication of this from my home country. In 2004, Dutch workers



**Figure 2.** Strike index of 12–27 countries in Africa, Asia, Central America, and South America, 7-year moving average, 1953–2010<sup>a</sup>.

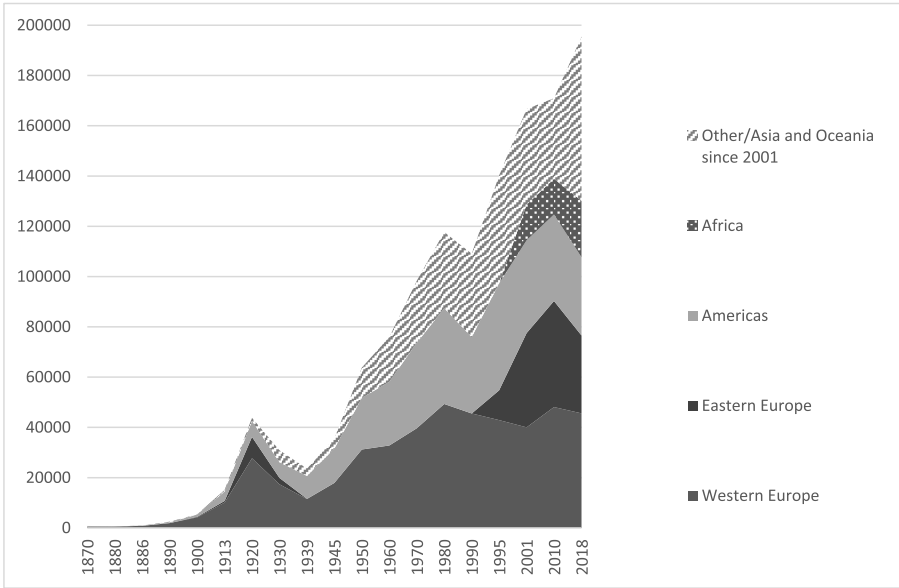
Source: <https://datasets.socialhistory.org/dataverse>.

<sup>a</sup>From the ILO data the starting year is the year when for the first (1953) and last time (2007) information for more than 10 countries were available. The countries are in alphabetical order: Algeria, Burkina Fasso, Burundi, Cameroon, Chile, Hong Kong, Egypt, Ghana, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Malawi, Mali, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Singapore, South Africa, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, Venezuela, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. For only a few of these countries the time series are complete. As the fourth indicator, total population is used. Unfortunately, no reliable data are available for China despite efforts undertaken by independent researchers. Russia is also left out of the index because of a lack of data.

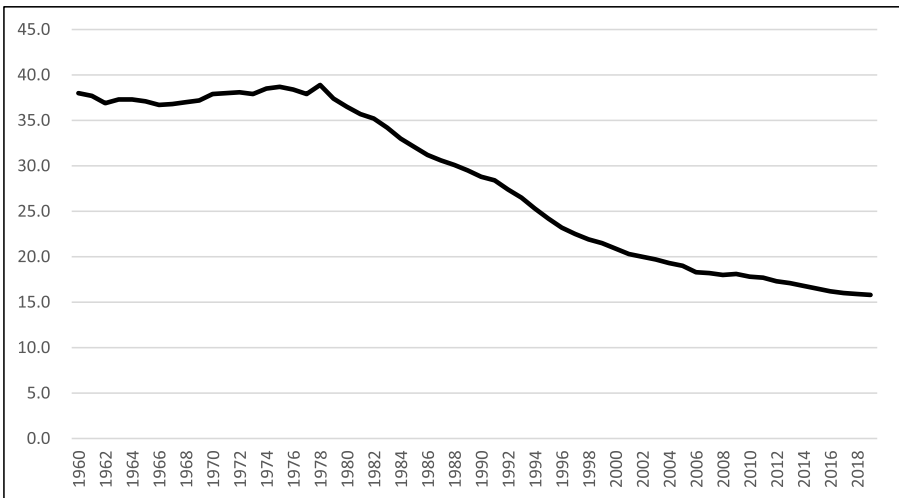


**Figure 3.** Striking workers and workers involved in other collective labor conflicts, China 2004–2015 (log-transformed).

Source: <http://maps.clb.org.hk/strikes/en>.



**Figure 4.** Trade union membership around the world, 1870–2018.  
 Source: Van der Velden, S. (2021) *Historical Dictionary of Organized Labor*. Rowman & Littlefield, p. xi.



**Figure 5.** Unweighted overall union density OECD countries, 1960–2020<sup>a</sup>.  
 Source: <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TUD>.  
<sup>a</sup>The average of all countries is calculated, regardless of their size.

demonstrated in big demonstrations that accompanied partly successful strikes but the 300,000 who took to the streets are nowhere visible in official statistics published by Statistics Netherlands and hence the ILO data on the Netherlands. Unfortunately, this problem emerges in other countries as well. Despite the ILO recommendations that

urge that “The programme should attempt to cover all strikes and lockouts. Where relevant, it could also cover other action due to labour disputes,”<sup>13</sup> information on the “other action” is almost never collected. For most countries we don’t have data at our disposal that contain more conflicts than strikes and lockouts.

Let’s go back to the history of strikes. On a global scale the plummeting of strike activity in the West seems to be slightly countered by a rise in developing countries. There are hardly any signs that strike activity in Western countries has been recovering<sup>14</sup> but what about the development of the trade union movement?

### Union history: a short overview

A trade union is a “continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining and improving the conditions of their working lives.” This definition is taken from Beatrice and Sydney Webb in their *History of Trade Unionism* published in 1894<sup>15</sup> and although an old one it is still a valuable definition. The ultimate weapon trade unions have at their disposal to attain their goals is the strike but apart from going on strike they also use the force of their numbers while negotiating for better collective agreements. The best strike is the strike that turns out to be unnecessary because employers give in before the outbreak.

Trade unions have existed only in the last 200 years – that is, with the advent of modern capitalism – but before that labor has also organized itself. Take for example the wool-carder Brandini who with his two sons founded an assembly in Florence in 1345. They successfully tried to group together workers from the woollen trade. Brandini was arrested and hanged<sup>16</sup>.

It was no accident that England, as the first industrial nation in the world, was the birthplace of organized labor. There the modern institutions of organized labor had their origins. The first 25 years of the nineteenth century were difficult for organized labor. The Industrial Revolution gathered pace, and with it came a host of technological changes that benefited some groups in the labor force and destroyed the livelihood of others. The legal suppression of strikes encouraged illegal outlets, such as the organized destruction of machines in the woollen industry by the Luddites between 1811 and 1813. Despite the legal efforts to prohibit strikes, trade unions continued to survive.

Outside of Britain before 1835, trade unions seem to have existed only in a limited number of countries. European visitors to England in the 1860s were impressed by its trade unions. In Britain, the supportive response of the British government to the moderate trade unionism of the 1860s and 1870s contrasted with its earlier hostility. The growth of unions, especially moderate ones, was implicitly encouraged by governments in a number of European countries with the object of reducing support for socialism and the announced proletarian revolution.

The history of the twentieth century with two world wars and a number of severe economic backdowns had its impact on the history of trade unions. A part of the impact was determined by national circumstances, but there were also general developments that can be seen in the development of union membership.

The growth of organized labor (see [Figure 4](#)) is one of the success stories of modern world history but we must not forget that the growth in numbers is misleading because

only a small proportion of the workers was a union member. In 1913, only Australia (31 percent) had more than 20 percent of its workers in trade unions. Between 1913 and 1920, there was an explosion in world union membership based on high inflation largely caused by military expenditure, falling real wages, and the recruitment of large numbers of white-collar workers such as teachers. It was a period of wartime dislocation and political revolution. By 1920, organized labor could claim 44 million members worldwide, three times what it had been in 1913. The vast majority of them were in Western Europe. The year 1920 was a high point with about half of the employees in Germany, Austria, and Britain belonging to unions, a reflection of their governments' needs to enlist the support of organized labor to fight WWI.

After 1920, the fortunes of organized labor fell considerably. By 1930, it could claim only 31 million members worldwide, a net loss of 13 million members. The economic crisis of the 1920s and the revived hostility of the employers cost labor dearly. With the rise of fascism and the onset of the Depression, the growth of organized labor ceased. After WWII, organized labor became embroiled in Cold War politics when governments in many countries started protecting collective bargaining rights and at the same time intervened in trade unions to counter the influence of communist parties in the union movement. At the same time labor parties in Western Europe became major political players because the ideas of government intervention in the economy became more popular also among Christian democrats and even liberals. This was a direct reaction to the economic crisis of the 1930s and the resulting emergence of authoritarian politics which led to WWII. The trade union movement grew considerably in this sympathetic environment and the growing postwar economic boom. Because of the new role trade unions now played in politics and the economy they lost more contact with the rank-and-file than can be explained from bureaucratization alone. This became clear when at the end of the 1960s huge strike waves came as a surprise to both the state and union leaders. Apart from a short upsurge during the 1970s this relationship remained problematic in later years.

Two broad observations may be made about the course of the history of organized labor between 1870 and 1980. First, union membership has grown mightily, if unevenly, from lowly beginnings in hostile political and legal environments to a position of strength where governments had to take account of its views. Second, through its political struggles, organized labor has changed society for the better by fighting for improved working conditions and greater sharing of the gains of economic growth.

### **Trade unions and strikes, their relationship**

Since 1980, organized labor in most of the Western world has been on the defensive. The topic that was labelled the "crisis of labour," that is, the decline of union membership and power in Western countries, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom where union busting became a phenomenon. The recession of 1981–1982 greatly reduced employment in industries in which organized labor had traditionally been strong, such as coal mining, steel, and manufacturing as a whole. General economic problems enabled organized labor to be blamed by conservative governments and their economic advisers in the United States and the United Kingdom as barriers to economic efficiency.

Many economic trends adverse to traditional organized labor since 1980 have been evident. They include a fall in the proportion of well-paid, full-time jobs with benefits; the end of reliable career ladders or long-term employment outside of government service; the increasing use of contractors and the decline of the employer–worker legal relationship; competition from especially the export processing zones in the developing countries to workers in Western economies and the broader phenomenon of globalization; and major shifts in employment away from manufacturing towards the service sector and away from blue-collar workers to white-collar and managerial jobs. Because the trade union movement has from its early beginning been an effort of mainly higher educated blue-collar workers to promote their interests, the gradual disappearance of industrial work is a threat to union life. New groups in the labor force need to find their way to the unions of other forms of empowerment.

The victorious years of free-market advocates saw a significant fall in the number of union members in Western countries. Between 1980 and 2010, their numbers in Western Europe fell from 49.3 to 48.3 million and in North America from 23.5 to 10.3 million, trends that seem to support a widespread view that organized labor was a movement with a past but no future. This view however overlooks the growth of union membership in Africa, Asia, and Latin America from 118 to 175 million.

As said before the sheer number of union members is only one side of the coin. This side may cause optimism but the other side, the development of union density or the number of members as a part of the total number of wage workers, is less promising. In the total of Western countries this number has also fallen dramatically since 1980 and even 1960 (Figure 5).

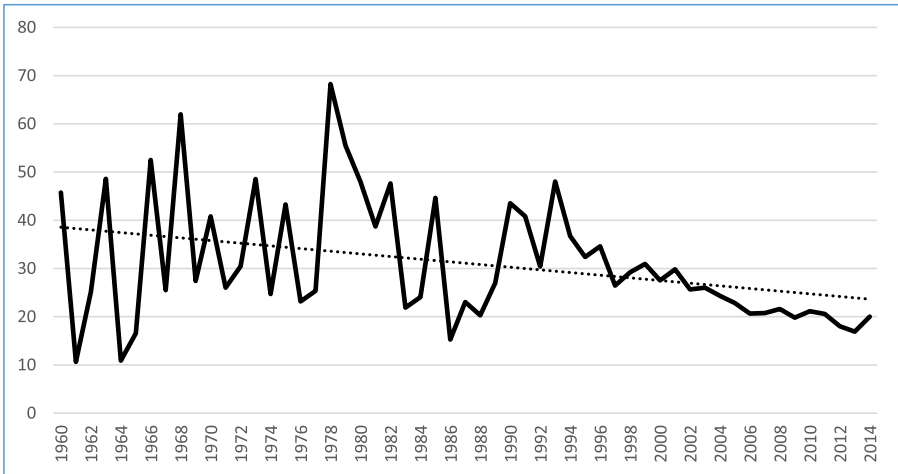
There are of course big differences between countries. Especially the Scandinavian countries (union density 60.8 percent) and Belgium (49.1 percent) haven't suffered from the general decline as a result of the strength of collective bargaining but mainly because in those countries trade unions are partly responsible for the payment of unemployment benefits. Iceland had the highest density in 2018 with 90.7 percent and Estonia the lowest (5.1) but the overall picture is evident. The union movement has lost much of its attraction to the workers in OECD countries. With strikes we noticed a difference between Western and non-Western countries. We may wonder if this is true for the development of union density as well. Figure 6 presents the data from 18 countries that reflect this.

So, also in non-OECD countries the trend slopes downwards. Can this be explained from high levels of unionization in Eastern European countries at the beginning of the period, before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989? No, if these countries are skipped from the figure the trend remains the same. So, there is a worldwide fall of union density although the membership numbers are still rising. How to explain this?

Do workers leave the unions because they are better off without them? That would be a good reason and explanation for the plummeting of union density. Given the development of inequality in these countries this doesn't look like a good explanation.

Although we cannot conclude from Figure 7 that there is any causality between the two it is tempting to think that a weak union movement leads to more inequality. The correlation coefficient between the two  $R = -0.81$ , a high value indeed.

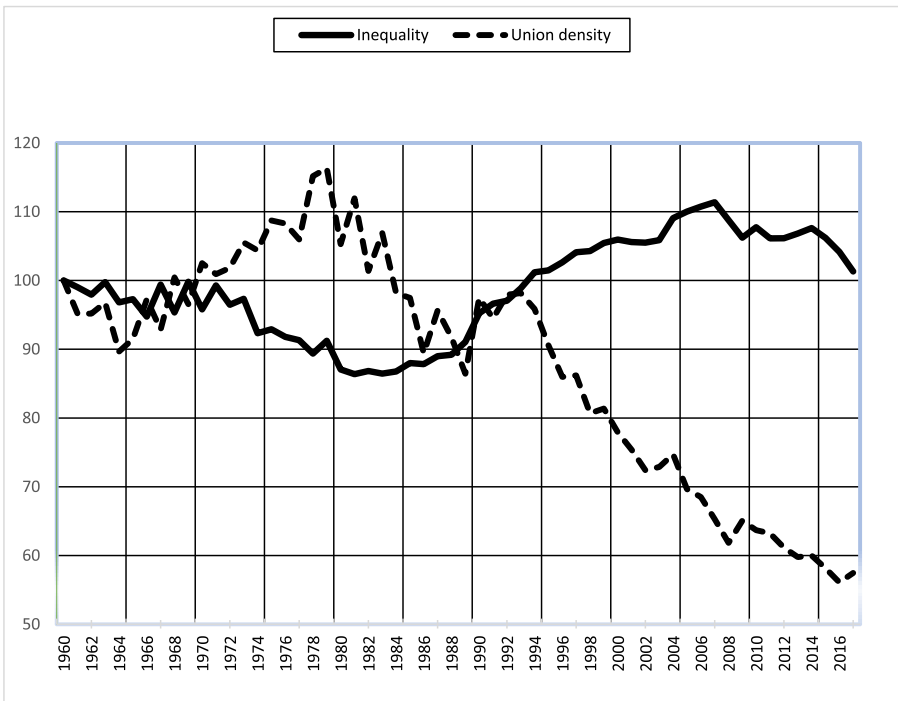




**Figure 6.** Union density in 18 non-OECD countries, 1960–2014<sup>a</sup>.

Source: Visser, J. *ICTWSS Database. Version 6.1.* (2019) Amsterdam Institute for Advanced Labour Studies (AIAS), University of Amsterdam (11). Open access database at: [uva-aias.net/en/ictwss](http://uva-aias.net/en/ictwss).

<sup>a</sup>Argentina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, Croatia, Czech Republic, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Philippines, Poland, Romania, Russian Federation, Singapore, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, South Africa, Turkey.



**Figure 7.** Inequality and union density in OECD countries, 1960–2017.<sup>a</sup>

Source: <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=TUD>.

<sup>a</sup>Inequality measured as part of pretax income received by the top 10%.

So, a weak union movement goes together with a growth of inequality and reverse. Then why do workers leave the unions? Although the general economic trends in the developed countries of the past 30 years have been unfavorable to organized labor, they are not the only reason for the declining union density. All too often, the leadership of organized labor has made the defense of the labor union as an organization their first priority. Amalgamations of unions protect the edifice of organizations by making them more efficient, but may be detrimental to the direct interests of the members at the grassroots because within such organizations bureaucracy and the emergence of an oligarchy seem unavoidable<sup>17</sup>. Similarly, unduly close relationships between the leadership of organized labor and governments can too easily lead to the neglect of the interests of members because tripartite social dialogue as developed in especially Western Europe sometimes became a goal in itself. A return to the core business and attitude of the unions may possibly be a way to overcome the “crisis of labour.” In the final analysis, the only resource organized labor can trade is the wages and working conditions of its members.

Unions are also primarily reactive in character. Typically, they work to preserve and protect the pay and conditions of members. Strikes are generally a last resort of unions when other measures have failed. Periods of inflation are especially productive of labor disputes because they upset the distribution of real wages across and within the employed labor force. This was particularly evident in most countries between about 1910 and 1920, and in the 1970s. Similarly, in periods of rising prosperity, unions seek to gain what they see as their share through strikes for improved wages and working conditions.

Union membership size, although important, is no guide in itself to bargaining strength with employers. Numerically large unions representing relatively poorly paid employees may have little bargaining power, while others, particularly those in key industries such as transportation and communications, may have a lot. Even so, few unions are powerful enough in their own right to be able to bargain effectively on a large scale (e.g., with governments). Organized labor learned long ago to cooperate through national bodies.

Despite all the predictions to the contrary, unions continue to go about their work and have remained institutions of the working class. This is not to say that all members participate in their activities all of the time; usually union activities are confined to the committed few, but unions do offer the possibility for all to participate if they choose to do so. If the membership or workers in general are unsatisfied with the leadership they can vote with their feet. Have workers in an environment where their trade unions became weaker perhaps been on strike regardless of trade union policy? There have been earlier waves of wildcat strikes such as during the post-WWI and WWII years and in the 1960s and 1970s. Unfortunately, there are no good international statistics available on the role of wildcat strikes in the overall strike activity. Hence, we look at the strike activity we used before compared to union density over the years 1960–2017.

Figure 8 makes it clear that after the huge growth of strike activity in the 1960s and 1970s that was often pushed by wildcat strikes the plummeting was even stronger than that of union density, which was to be expected. To say it simply, the two downward developments go hand in hand but union density is more stable.

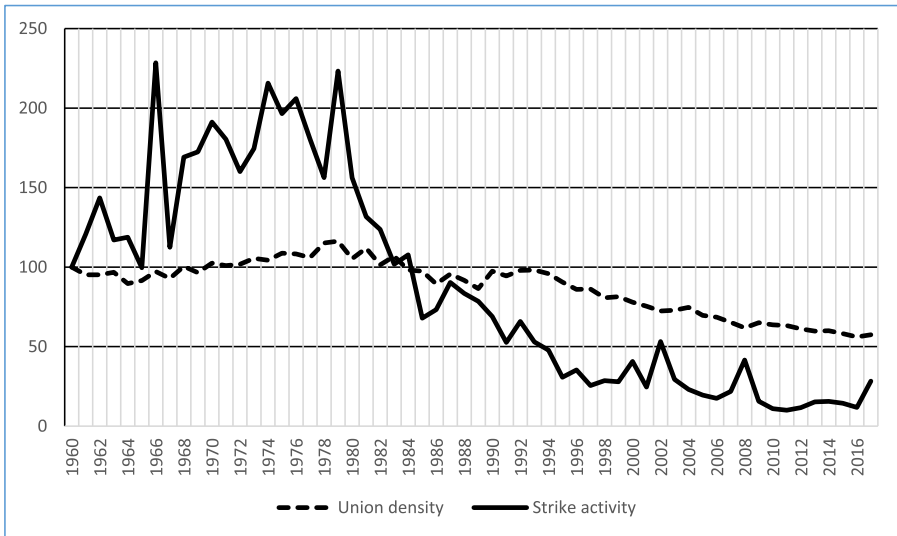


Figure 8. Union density and strike activity in OECD-countries, 1960–2017.

### The future of strikes and trade unions

The going down of especially union density has been a point of interest for union leaders and researchers. In 2019, the well-known collector of international data on labor relations Jelle Visser was asked by the ILO to investigate scenarios for the future of the trade union movement. Visser published a report<sup>18</sup> with his findings which I consider a good overview of international discussions. First, the unions can be marginalized and slowly fade away, a plausible possibility given the problems unions face worldwide. Maybe, the union movement was a part of the development of capitalism necessary to give the working class a place in society. Attacks on that place by right-wing politicians and companies are a threat to the gains the unions made. As we have seen, the weakening of the unions went hand in hand with the growth of inequality. Who will be there to stop that if there are no unions?

The second scenario mentioned by Visser is what he calls “dualization,” a further split up of the union movement along the lines the employers have pressed upon the labor market. We can think of company size and contract type. In fact, this split in the union movement is only a new form of earlier and often still existing divisions. We can think of the division that stood at the beginning of the union movement, that between the skilled and unskilled. But there were and have been other divisions. For example, between blue-collar and white-collar unions and between unions based on religious denominations. But there were more. In some countries along the lines of race and ethnicity. Maybe the most important division was that between moderates and revolutionaries. Especially when the moderate trade unions at the end of the nineteenth century in most countries decided that it was better to fight for improvements in everyday life instead of hoping for and waiting for the revolution that would change the world and do away with capitalism. This pragmatism was a bifurcation point in the

history of trade unionism. The change in the rules by which work was governed was from that day on put in the hands of collective bargaining instead of fighting for an unclear future.

Jelle Visser mentioned two more possible scenarios. A substitution of trade unions by other forms of social action and representation. He was not very optimistic about this possibility because none of the already existing groups are able to perform the services unions can to their members. Even weak unions fare better than nonmembership groups while the latter often also rely on the strength of existing trade unions. They act more like a warning to the union leadership that something has to be done. The last scenario is revitalization of the union movement. This can be brought about by new groups that have recently entered the labor market and although in much lower numbers strengthened union membership. Think of women and employees in the tertiary sector. An effort to revitalize is also made from the unions themselves: organizing. This method started in the United States<sup>19</sup>. The model of organizing opposes the service model union in which the organization acts in the interest of the members but without active participation of these members themselves. Specially appointed organizers try to build up confidence and networks within the workforce. Employees are often visited at home where long hours of talk serve as means to win confidence and collect information. During industrial action, the emphasis is on the responsibility of the workers and the use of creative tactics. As such the model looks like a return to the times when the union movement started in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and has been a success. It hasn't turned the downfall so far but the sometimes newly organized organizations may be successful if, as Hiatt put it "many of these new independent unions will likely conclude that they will not be able to thrive without affiliating with an existing, established union."

### Final words on the future of strikes and trade unions

Of course, I don't have the final answer to the question whether the tide can be turned and more importantly how to do that. Therefore, my final words cannot be more than sketchy. After the union movement came into existence it chose not to engage too much with revolutionary ideas and practices that wanted to make an end to capitalism. Unions opted for improvements in the lives of their members and the rest of the working class in the present instead of hoping for a better life in the future. The only way to accomplish those improvements lies in negotiating and cooperation with political parties, employers and the state. The workers gained a lot from that attitude. Whatever the just complaints about every day live people may have today, the improvements since 1900 are clear. And not only in the West.<sup>20</sup> Are these improvements under attack? Yes, and maybe only a strong union movement can stand up for defending the workers of the twenty-first century.

Rather than jumping to final conclusions this chapter aims at giving some food for thought on the question why both strikes and unions have been faded away since the 1980s. One thing is clear. Because the strike dates back thousands of years ago it is not likely it will totally disappear as we have already seen at the end of the 1960s. For trade unions the odds are worse because they are a product of workers in action

under specific circumstances. Maybe these new circumstances need new forms of organization for the working class.

## Notes

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