

Arrighi, Giovanni (Binghamton, N.Y.) 1990

World-Scale Patterns of Labor Unrest, 1870 to the Present

The World Labor Research Working Group (WLG) at the Fernandel Braudel Center began this project in the early 1980's convinced that labor unrest was an especially salient aspect of the world-system. Nothing we have learned since then has disabused us of that conviction. We are more certain now than before that the spatial and temporal patterning of labor unrest uncovered by our research has enriched our comprehension of the shifting relation-ship between the various regions of the world-economy. The past century of world history may have altered or erased facets of the classical Marxist portrait of capitalist development but open or latent conflict between capital and labor, managers and workers, the reapers of profit and the direct producers, continues to shape the world-system.

The WLG also began this project convinced that our understanding of the dynamics of labor-capital relations, and of the evolution of the contemporary world-system, has been limited and distorted by the overwhelming past focus of labor studies on core regions of the world-economy, and the tendency to generalize to the world from the experience of a handful of intensely-studied core countries. In particular, the decline of labor movements in most core countries in the 1980's was contributing to a sense that class and class conflict also were declining in significance. But once we widen the focus of the analysis beyond the core, the picture changes substantially. Labor militancy has been very much on the rise in the periphery and semiperiphery. Moreover, once we lengthen the time horizon of the analysis to cover the entire century, the wisdom of extrapolating from recent declines in labor militancy in the core is called into question.

Thus, we believe that labor-capital relations remain central to the dynamics of the world-system. We welcome the research and writing of those who examine no-class bases of human relations in a world-historical dimension. Their scholarship has enhanced our understanding of the past and the present beyond measure. Yet due regard for the role of race, gender, ethnicity, or religion in structuring the world-system does not preclude acknowledging the importance of class relations. If our findings partly establish in the minds of our readers the salience of labor unrest and workers' movements in the formation of the contemporary world-system, we will be satisfied with our accomplishments.

The WLG was formed in the early 1980's. By the mid-1980's we had come to the realization that our research objectives could not be accomplished by relying solely on existing data sources. The temporal and spatial scope of standard statistical compilations was simply inadequate for research on labor unrest in the world-system.

Thus, in 1985 we set out to create a new database that would be appropriate for long-term, world-scale studies of labor unrest. After discarding various alternative strategies, we determined that the best solution was to collect data systematically on labor unrest around the world from the indexes of the *Times* (London) and the *New York Times*.

Why did we choose to rely on these two newspapers' indexes, rather than on more traditional or varied sources, to measure the incidence of labor unrest in the twentieth-century world-system? First, and most obviously, the *New York Times* and the *Times* (London) were the only two daily newspapers whose existence spanned our chronological time period; whose coverage bridged the globe; and whose reports were completely indexed in a usable form.

Secondly, traditional sources simply did not provide all the data that a project of our nature demanded. Large areas of the globe, especially Africa, East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East and even parts of Europe and Latin America, lacked the sorts of statistical data that scholars had customarily used to track labor unrest (measured usually through the incidence of strikes) in western Europe and North America. And even in parts, of western Europe (Germany and Italy during the Fascist/Nazi era); and for a time in the United States (1906-1915), official statistical data are lacking. The newspaper indexes, however, provided usable data for the entire world and for the complete time period of their publication.

Thirdly, conventional data about labor unrest usually failed to distinguish the ephemeral from the transformative, the traditional from the innovative, and they omitted many forms of labor unrest. Newspaper indexes, by contrast, tend to neglect the ephemeral and highlight the transformative; they also include a variety of labor actions—for example, boycotts, demonstrations, riots, and forms of political protest—that are not included or measured in traditional statistical time-series on labor unrest, most frequently simply defined as strikes. Our research strategy thus enabled the members of the WLG to plot labor unrest across the entire world-system over the twentieth century better than any alternative strategy could have allowed us to do with the limited resources at our disposal.

The members of the WLG (the authors of the articles in this special issue) spent most of 1986 developing and testing procedures for recording labor unrest data from the newspapers' indexes. In 1987 and 1988 we proceeded with the mammoth task of recording from the two newspapers' indexes all the mentions of labor unrest throughout the world for over a century. This work was accomplished through the volunteer energies of the faculty and (at the time) graduate student members of the WLG. "Self-exploitation" was the only way in which this project could be carried forward since convincing funding agencies that this was a valid and realistic project was difficult.

The project design and data collection, however, was just the tip of the iceberg. The more than 80,000 mentions of labor unrest that we had recorded on coding sheets had to be entered into computer databases, the reliability of the data as indicators of the actual temporal-spatial patterning of labor unrest assessed (Part II of this special issue), and the world-scale patterns of labor unrest revealed by this major new

source analyzed (Part III of this special issue).

At this critical stage of the project, we received in 1989 a research termination grant from the World Society Foundation (Zurich). This grant provided the spurt of material and moral support necessary to move forward again with the project. Without the World Society Foundation's assistance it is unlikely that this project would have ever reached fruition.

Published: Silver, B. J., Arrighi, G. & Dubofsky, M. "Labor unrest in the world-economy, 1870-1990. *Review Fernand Braudel Center*. Vol.XVIII, No 1, 1995, Binghamton University: Binghamton NY.