
Sustaining or abandoning 'social peace'?

Strike developments and trends in
Europe since the 1990s

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Kurt Vandaele

Working Paper 2011.05

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Contents

1. Introduction: a renewed interest?.....	5
2. Comparing the 2000s with the 1990s.....	7
3. Clustering countries and interpreting the evidence.....	13
4. Accounting for the contemporary decline	26
5. The inability of traditional strike data: tertiarisation and method displacement?.....	32
6. General strikes and the economic crisis	34
7. Conclusions.....	38
References.....	40
Glossary.....	46
List of country codes	46
Appendix 1: A short methodological note on strike data.....	47
Appendix 2: Evidence of the feminisation of the strike weapon in Belgium	49
ETUI Working Papers.....	51

Abstract

Providing a simple quantitative overview and a short macro-comparative analysis of strike activity in Europe since the 1990s, this working paper assesses whether three strike trends observed in the 1990s continued in the next decade. First of all, there was a continued drop in strike activity measured by days not worked due to strikes. Relative 'labour quiescence' was thus also the underlying feature of the 2000s in Europe. Secondly, the rank order in the European 'strike league table' shows remarkable stability over a 20-year period. Albeit with a tendency towards convergence, possible future dynamics of workers' collective action and its meaning will thus almost certainly continue to vary across Europe. Finally, politically motivated mass strikes and demonstrations, especially in the public sector, directed against (planned) government action and legislation to alter employment law were on the increase in the 2000s, with noteworthy effects due to the current socio-economic crisis. However, it remains to be seen whether an increase in public sector strikes, commonly defensive in nature and seeking to maintain existing employment regulations, will change the continued proliferation of neoliberal policies or stimulate trade union revitalisation.

1. Introduction: a renewed interest?

The study of strikes has recently been put on the academic agenda again. In the 1990s and early 2000s, however, the opening sentence of almost every study lamented the paucity of academic research on the strike phenomenon and the declining scholarly interest. Today, there may no longer be a need for such regret. Mass strikes, demonstrations and other, sometimes positively tragic forms of individual or collective action by workers have naturally captured the attention of the media since the outbreak of the financial and economic crisis.¹ Equally, recent decisions of the European Court of Justice (*Viking*, *Laval*, *Rüffert*, *COM vs. Luxembourg* and so on), which have favoured European 'market freedoms'² above national regulations on (cross-border) employment, have called into question the fundamental (national) right to strike in some countries and provoked academic, public and parliamentary debate (Bücker and Warneck 2010; Dølvik and Visser 2009). More broadly, the focus on the membership dimension and the 'organising model' in the trade union revitalisation literature has also put union mobilisation in the research picture once again (e.g. Martin and Dixon 2010). In particular, the role of trade union activists in encouraging workers' mobilisation has attracted renewed research attention (Buttigieg *et al.* 2008; Darlington 2006). Those union activists are seen as crucial in a sequential process of framing which involves identifying potential issues of conflict in the workplace, making workers aware of social injustice and attributing it to management; fostering group identification; and defending strike action as an effective means of mitigating or undoing perceived social injustice when the opportunity arises.

Turning to current strike research (since 2000), by and large, the focus is on explaining country differences and similarities in strike activity – often from a medium- to long-term historical perspective – in Western Europe. Reference is made to purely economic determinants (Goerke and Madsen 2004) or combined with institutional explanations (Dribbusch and Vandaele 2007; Hamann and Kelly 2008; Piazzi 2005; Scheuer 2006; Teague 2009) and government 'intervention' in employment regulation (Kelly and Hamann 2010) or sectoral variables (Akkerman 2008; Bordogna and Cella 2002; Silver 2003). Country studies on the influence of the business cycle on strike

1. In recent years, these 'other forms' have included holding management in 'conclave' – so-called 'bossnappings' – until a solution is found for the workers affected, plant occupations and even suicides (in the case of France Télécom).
2. 'Freedoms' is put between quotation marks here because of course some are freer than others in this respect.

behaviour in the short term seem to be less in vogue nowadays. While strike trends and developments in the 1990s in Western Europe have been fairly well studied, research on the following decade is only partial (Carley 2008, 2010), simply due to a lack of available data on strikes at the time of study. Studies on strike activity in countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) are underrepresented (however, see Alemán 2008).

From the literature one can distinguish at least three contemporary trends. First of all, the 1990s were marked by a decline in strike activity in most West European countries, which raised the question of whether this was part of a long-term trend or just a temporary downswing. In addition, it has been claimed that this decline was accompanied by a shift in strike activity from manufacturing towards services. In CEE countries, at least before the socio-economic crisis, it looked as if, particularly in the public sector, workers had been raising their voices more through strikes (threats) and other forms of collective action since the mid-2000s (Meardi 2007), although the evidence is fairly patchy. Second, considerable differences in strike activity are still present between countries and groups of countries, although a trend towards convergence is emerging. Third, there is recent evidence of an increase in general strikes, probably since the 1980s (Kelly and Hamann 2010; cf. Gall and Allsop 2007: 63-66).

Providing a simple quantitative overview and a short macro-comparative analysis of strike activity in Europe since the 1990s, this working paper assesses whether the three trends continued in the 2000s. The following research questions are addressed: (1) To what extent did strike activity decrease or increase in the 2000s? (2) Was there continued 'path breaking' convergence between the European countries with regard to their levels of strike activity? (3) To what extent has the socio-economic crisis had an impact upon strike activity since the end of 2008? Although the paper focuses on Europe, the quantitative analysis is for the most part limited to Western Europe since official strike data for CEE countries are not available (for example, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic or Slovenia (until 2008)) or incomplete (see Appendix 1 for details). The following section compares the levels of strike activity in the 2000s with the previous decade and across European countries. In Sections 3 and 4 the explanations for the country differences and changes in strike levels are examined. The caveats of the official strike indicators for measuring conflict at work are assessed in Section 5. Section 6 deals with the current socio-economic crisis and its (possible) impact on strike activity. Section 7 concludes.

2. Comparing the 2000s with the 1990s

Strikes are a multi-dimensional social phenomenon: the incidence of strikes, the number of workers involved and strike duration are all important for studying the strike phenomenon (Bordogna and Cella 2002: 587–588). Different indicators are emphasised by different social science disciplines, largely depending on the latter's basic research questions (Fransozi 1989: 354). For example, while economists mainly use strike frequency to research the impact of strikes on the economy and the business cycle, sociologists concentrate on the number of strikers involved to analyse the degree of worker mobilisation, their organisational capacity and their reasons for going on strike. In order to measure the general impact of strikes on the production and political systems political scientists prefer to look at the number of days not worked (DNW) due to strikes, which is derived by multiplying the number of workers in a strike by its duration. DNW rates corrected for number of workers involved per annum is the most commonly used indicator for country comparisons. This comprehensive indicator standardises for employment levels and is considered more reliable for comparison. In the next two subsections and throughout the paper, this relative measure will be used mainly for the cross-national comparison of strike activity and its development since the 1990s.³

Continuing decline...

Previous research has shown that DNW rates in general fell markedly in Western Europe in the 1980s, compared to the high DNW rates in the previous decade, ushering in a period of 'labour quiescence' (Shalev 1992; Aligisakis 1997: 82–83). However, sceptical voices cast doubt on this interpretation, claiming that strike analyses based on official statistics 'have underestimated the level of strike activity ... such that greater diversity in strike trends, levels and trajectories ... should be recognised' (Gall 1999: 358). Furthermore, the interpretation of 'labour quiescence' also depends on the periodisation or the historical period chosen for comparison (Edwards and Hyman 1994: 258–259) and, one might add, the set of countries concerned. Hence, extending the period of observation to previous decades reveals that the fall in strike activity in the 1980s is not general and is more nuanced for some countries (Bordogna and Cella 2002: 595–596).

3. Examining the impact of the socio-economic crisis on strike activity will not be covered in this section but in section 6. It is almost needless to say that this examination is thwarted for most countries by the partial or non-availability of official strike data after 2009.

Compared to the 1980s there is little doubt that the decreasing trend continued into the next decade, however (Brandl and Traxler 2010: 2; Goerke and Madsen 2004: 397–399; Piazza 2005: 289–290; Scheuer 2006: 149–155). But there was some speculation whether this trend would continue in the next decade. On the one hand, it looked as if it stabilised at the beginning of the 2000s ‘given that the level of conflict in most countries seems to have declined sharply from the 1970s to the 1990s, *but from then on has not fallen much further*’ (Scheuer 2006: 158, author’s emphasis). On the other hand, a study by the Dublin Foundation reports that ‘the early and mid 2000s [was] clearly ... a period of relative industrial peace in many EU15 countries’ (Carley 2008: 15; cf. Gall and Allsop 2007: 53–62). Another study concluded that strike activity has generally declined in most countries in Western Europe, but that ‘trends in the central European economies have moved in the opposite direction, with a modest rise in days lost through strikes over the past 20 years’ (Hamann and Kelly 2008: 141).

Table 1 Average DNW rates in 15 European countries, 1990–2009

Country	1990–99	2000–09	Absolute change	Relative change
Austria	4.0	40.1	36.1	894.8%
Belgium ⁽¹⁾	94.9	70.5	-24.4	-25.7%
Denmark	162.3	97.0	-65.3	-40.2%
Finland	175.9	61.1	-114.8	-65.3%
France ⁽²⁾	65.6	108.4	42.8	65.2%
Germany	11.4	4.3	-7.1	-62.4%
Ireland	117.7	44.1	-73.6	-62.6%
Italy	135.5	70.1	-65.4	-48.3%
Netherlands	22.2	8.1	-14.1	-63.4%
Norway	80.9	46.4	-34.4	-42.6%
Portugal ⁽³⁾	34.3	19.6	-14.8	-43.0%
Spain	263.4	125.7	-137.7	-52.3%
Sweden	47.5	18.8	-28.8	-60.5%
Switzerland ⁽⁴⁾	2.1	3.2	1.1	52.4%
UK	27.9	26.3	-1.6	-5.9%
Simple average	83.0	49.6	-33.5	-40.2%
Standard deviation	75.7	38.7	-37.0	-48.9%

Source: See Appendix 1.

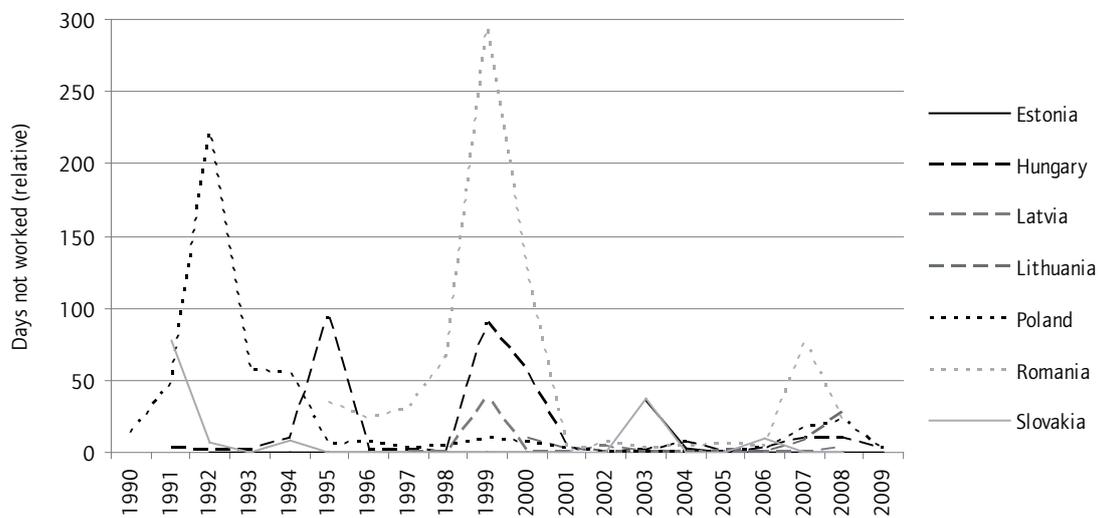
Notes: ⁽¹⁾ 1990 is missing; ⁽²⁾ 2009 is missing; ⁽³⁾ 2008–2009 are missing; ⁽⁴⁾ 1990–93 are missing.

Table 1 shows the annual average DNW rates for each of the two previous decades. Using the same set of countries as previous studies, the comparison of the DNW averages for the 1990s and 2000s points to a further cross-national decline in aggregate strike activity.⁴ The simple average strike rate in the 2000s sets a new level of quiescence, with only 50 days not worked due to strikes, about 40 per cent lower than the previous decade. For almost all countries in Table 1 there is a continued drop in DNW rates in the 2000s; relative ‘labour quiescence’ is thus also the underlying feature of the 2000s in Western Europe. Only Austria and France are significant exceptions to this broad trend; the increase in the Swiss DNW rate is negligible in absolute terms. The substantial

4. Data on some smaller countries such as Luxembourg, Malta and Cyprus are covered in the next section.

fall in the standard deviations in Table 1, from 75.7 in the 1990s to 38.7 in the 2000s, indicates that cross-country variation has become smaller and the countries are tending to the same DNW level in Western Europe (cf. Scheuer 2006: 154).⁵ One might anticipate that the almost general decline since the 1990s accounts not only for short-term conjunctural determinants, but also common structural determinants (cf. Shalev 1992: 125). Their impact might be mediated by the system of employment and traditions of employment regulation, however (cf. Brandl and Traxler 2010: 11–14; McCormick Diduch 1998: 24–30).

Figure 1 DNW rates in seven CEE countries, 1990–2009



Source: Eurostat.

Note: Missing years: 1990–91 and 2002 (Estonia); 1990–96 and 2009 (Latvia); 1990–99 and 2009 (Lithuania); 1990–94 and 2009 (Romania); and 1990 and 2009 (Slovakia).

Official data on strike activity in CEE countries are very erratic. Strike activity punctuated certain years in the 1990s in Hungary (1995 and 1999), Latvia (1999), Poland (1992), Romania (1999) and Slovakia (1991), as Figure 1 shows. By and large, strike activity stood at a very low level in the 2000s, although with a slightly raising trend at the end of the decade in some of the CEE countries covered here, 'suggesting the spreading of employee assertiveness in the region' (Meardi 2007: 513). In the five countries for which a comparison can be made between the 1990s and 2000s – Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia and, to a certain extent, Romania – the DNW rates are lower in the 2000s, than in the previous decade, with the minor exception of Estonia. At first sight, the significantly low strike activity in the private sector in most of the low-wage CEE countries puts some doubts, at the very least in the short run, on the hypothesis or prediction that 'the main location of working-class formation and protest shifts *within* any single industry along with shifts in the

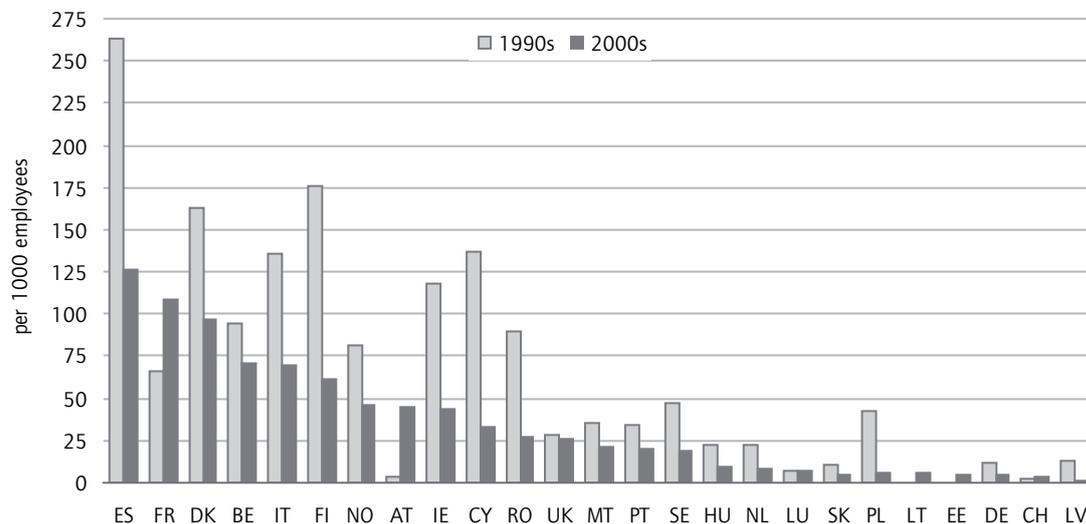
5. The coefficient of variance stands at 91.1 per cent in the 1990s and at 78.0 per cent in the 2000s.

geographical location of production’ (Silver 2003: 75, emphasis in original). In other words, it seems that the geographical re-location of industrial capital has not led (so far) to a strike wave in the CEE countries. While undoubtedly true, this does not imply that workers in CEE countries have not reacted against the (foreign) capital investments since strike action is far from the only or even main form in which workers’ resistance to being treated as a commodity is expressed (idem: 184–188; cf. infra).

...but relatively stable country differences

After the strike wave of the late 1960s and early 1970s there has been a ‘diversity of national responses to the political-economic climate of the 1980s’ (Shalev 1992: 109). Unsurprisingly, research for the 1980s and early 1990s has found marked country differences in the form of strikes and DNW rates (Edwards and Hyman 1994: 252–255; Shalev 1992: 121–124). Fairly similar to unionisation levels over time (at least before the 1990s) (cf. Visser 1994), the variation in DNW rates across countries, despite the downward trend and high volatility of strike data, appears fairly stable when the average rates of the 2000s are compared with the rates of the previous decade. In Figure 2, the countries are ranked by their average DNW rates in the 2000s to evaluate their relative position in the 1990s.

Figure 2 Comparing DNW averages of the 1990s and 2000s



Source: see Appendix 1.

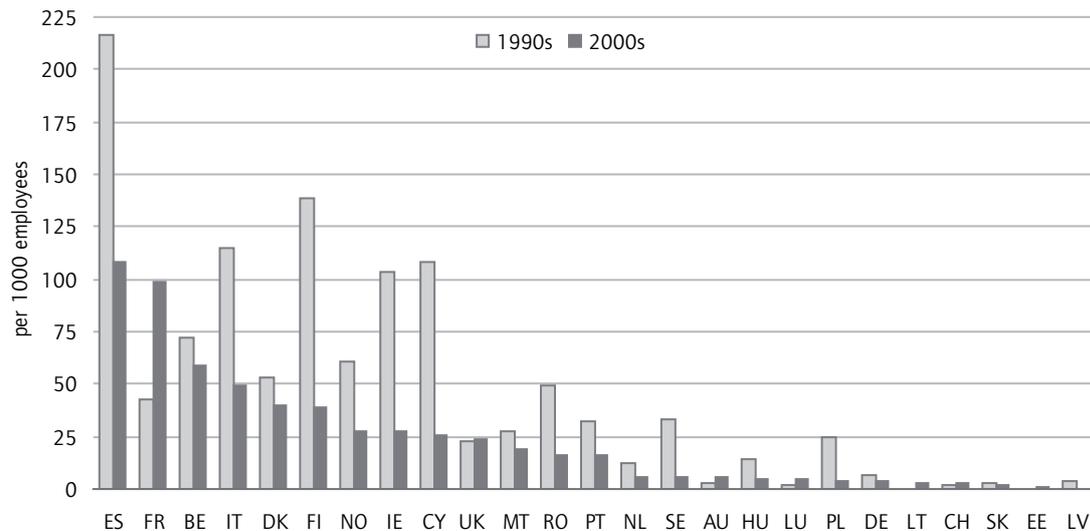
Note: Sorted on the basis of 2000s data.

The data in Figure 2 indicate that Spain clearly leads the European ‘strike league table’ in both decades, whereas France, Belgium and, surprisingly, to a certain extent also Austria moved to the upper part of the ‘league table’ in the 2000s. Furthermore, Denmark, Italy and Norway have been relatively steadily near the top in both decades. This is not the case for Finland, which

dropped a few places in the ranking, although it could still be considered a 'strike-ridden' country. In the 2000s the average DNW rate also declined in Cyprus and Ireland, both countries moving to the middle of the 'league table' of European strike proneness, having been in the upper part of the table in the previous decade. The same holds for Romania. Finally, all other countries that are in the middle or at the bottom of the 'league table' more or less kept their relative position in the 2000s. Poland and, to some extent, Sweden are notable exceptions, however.

Overall, there is substantial continuity in the relative positions of the countries between the 1990s and 2000s. The high degree of inter-temporal invariance is confirmed by a significant Spearman's correlation coefficient of 0.80 ($p < 0.0001$) between the rank orders of the 1990s and 2000s.⁶ However, from a more long-term perspective, previous research on cross-national variation in DNW rates found that some countries have (significantly) changed places on the 'strike league table' since the 1970s, whereas other countries persistently kept their position (Scheuer 2006: 155; cf. Dribbusch and Vandaele 2007: 368).

Figure 3 Comparing 'adjusted' DNW averages of the 1990s and 2000s



Source: see Appendix 1.

Note: Sorted by 2000s data.

One of the explanations for the changing position of countries might be the decline of macro-corporatist arrangements and wage coordination, particularly in some of the Nordic countries, whereas 'high levels of

6. Spearman's rho is a measure used to detect a linear correlation between two variables when one or both variables are ordinal (categorical and ordered). The following countries are included in the calculation of Spearman's rho: Austria, Cyprus, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the UK. Greece, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania are excluded due to a lack of data.

coordination had significant moderating effects on strike activity' (Ludsteck and Jacobeggingshaus 2005: 16). Another explanation is that mass strikes contribute extensively to the aggregate strike statistics so that they tend to dominate the DNW rate. Therefore, it might be worthwhile calculating the country averages by replacing the outlier year with the highest DNW rate with the average in that particular decade (cf. European Commission 2011: 47). Although a purely mathematical exercise, calculating the adjusted DNW rates might make it possible to 'detect' better the middle-term trend of the DNW level or the 'floor level' around which strike action fluctuates. With lower averages for each country Figure 3 shows that the ranking order of some countries has changed only slightly. Furthermore, it comes as no surprise that the rank orders of the 'adjusted' DNW averages in the 1990s and 2000s show an even higher Spearman's correlation of 0.87 ($p < 0.000001$).

The most remarkable change is in the position of Austria. Whereas the country stood in the middle of the European 'strike league table' in the 2000s, based on unadjusted DNW averages, Austria is now at the low end for both decades. It clearly demonstrates the impact of union mobilisation against the unilateral government decision, involving the right-populist *Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs*, to instigate major state pension reform in 2003 (Adam 2004). The adjusted DNW average puts Denmark in a lower position but still at the high end of the 'strike league table' in Europe, whereas Belgium and Italy move up one place. Some other countries in the middle and at the lower end also switch places, but here the rank order appearing in Figure 2 remains relatively intact. The rank order for the unadjusted and adjusted averages, at least for the 2000s compared to the previous decade, thus shows relative stability. At the same time, it indicates again that almost all countries are affected by the general downward strike trend already observed. In other words, the continued overall decline of the DNW level in the 2000s and the smaller variance also point to further convergence between the countries (of Western Europe) (cf. Bordogna and Cella 2002: 602–604; Hamann and Kelly 2008: 142). This *current* convergent trend clearly *contrasts* with the growing variability after the strike wave of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

3. Clustering countries and interpreting the evidence

Given the relative stability in the country ranking order, it might be worthwhile to cluster the countries with a view to explaining the persistent differences. On the one hand, the basis for comparison should account for the multi-dimensional nature of strike activity and its complex dynamics. On the other hand, the basis should make a clear distinction between the country clusters but should also be flexible – that is, it should allow that strike patterns could differ relatively within the same cluster. In other words, looking for a basis of comparison for grouping the countries with regard to their strike rates also means finding a balance between stability and allowing for change.

Grouping countries

The simplest and most straightforward way is to proceed inductively by clustering the countries with the DNW level – that is, the average within a certain time span – as the indicator for comparison. The exercise might lead to substantial heterogeneous country groups, however.⁷ It would be difficult in that case to find common meaningful explanations within the country groups given the fairly distinctive employment systems and traditions of employment regulation. Moreover, countries can clearly deviate from their ranking order in the 'strike league table' because one or more strike indicators – frequency, size and duration – can change significantly across time (Shalev 1992: 104–110). An alternative basis for grouping the countries into clusters is by regulation of strike activity, but this is unlikely to yield fruitful explanations since 'the difference between direct and indirect rights to strike does not hold much significance' (Scheuer 2006: 5). Clustering the countries by geographical region might be another option. Figures 2 and 3 make clear that some southern European countries (France, Italy and Spain) belong together, as do certain countries in northern Europe (Denmark, Finland and Norway). Most countries in continental Europe are also playing in the same 'league' (Austria, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Switzerland), as are most of the CEE countries (Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Slovakia), while DNW rates for Cyprus, Ireland, Malta and the UK were also at the same level in the 2000s. At first sight, the geographical basis for clustering countries looks 'neutral', but geographical determinism might lurk around

7. One could also try to bring several strike indicators together into one index (cf. Aligisakis 1997: 80–81) but the problem remains largely the same.

the corner. This determinism could make it difficult to allow for or explain change over time, particularly with regard to why some countries deviate from their medium term in respect of the DNW level within their country-group, as Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate. To make use of the Varieties of Capitalism (VoC) approach looks more promising since it is expected that ‘variations in the role of markets across countries’ would imply different ‘forms and degree of organization of the industrial relations actors and their relationships’ (Hamann and Kelly 2008: 135).

Within the VoC toolkit it is assumed that approaches to securing the workers’ commitment and the interest of employers in trade unions differ in coordinated and non-coordinated market economies.⁸ Whereas in liberal market economies unions are weaker and worker commitment is sought through financial incentives, the orientation in coordinated market economies towards longer-term decision-making suggests that employers have an interest in strong unions, they will invest more in the workforce and their relations with the workers will be less adversarial. The VoC approach, with its focus on employer strategies, is a valuable alternative in strike analysis since the role of employers ‘both directly in the handling of disputes and indirectly in their management of the employment relationship has often been neglected’ (Edwards and Hyman 1994: 251). However, applying the grouping based on these two ideal-types of capitalism yields meaningful results only if the large group of coordinated market economies in Western Europe is subdivided into three, according to geographical distance (Hamann and Kelly 2008: 141). Finally, most of the CEE countries, with a mix of institutions characterising liberal and coordinated market economies, can be clustered in a separate country group (King 2007). In this way, the outcome does not look very different from the geographical grouping but it does provide a more nuanced approach than the simple dichotomous classification of the VoC approach. But even then, it is not easy to explain individual country differences in DNW levels by referring to the systemic approach of the VoC classification given its macro-focus, whereas the incidence of strikes is often associated with the duration of collective agreements at lower levels, such as the sectoral or company level (Bamber and Pochet 2010).

Likewise, other classifications and typologies concerning employment systems and employment regulation (in Western Europe) tend to overlap with the geographical approach and the more sophisticated version of the VoC model. Most of these classifications and typologies take into account rather the role of the state (and political parties), in interaction with employers and trade unions, in moulding the employment regulation system and its traditions (for example, Crouch 1993). By default, these approaches are better equipped for explaining change since employment regulation is shaped by relations between the state, the employers and workers and their representative organisations (Edwards and Hyman 1994: 269–270). Reflecting the power relations between

8. In general, employers active in sectors in economic decline might have an interest in strikes since the ‘lost’ days due to strike activity imply that they do not have to pay wages and can temper the fall of profit margins.

those 'actors' employment regulation is continuously called into question – whether manifestly or otherwise – by workers at several levels: the workplace, the enterprise, the sector and within capitalist society as a whole.

Table 2 Average DNW levels in 25 European countries, 1990–2009

Country	1990–99	2000–09	Absolute change
Spain	263.4	125.7	-137.7
Italy	135.5	70.1	-65.4
France ⁽¹⁾	65.6	108.4	42.8
Portugal ⁽²⁾	34.3	19.6	-14.8
Simple average	124.7	101.7	-43.8
Standard deviation	81.0	47.1	-54.6
Finland	175.9	61.1	-114.8
Denmark	162.3	107.1	-55.2
Belgium ⁽³⁾	94.9	70.5	-24.4
Norway	80.9	46.4	-34.5
Sweden	47.5	18.8	-28.7
Simple average	112.3	58.8	-53.5
Standard deviation	54.8	29.0	-25.9
Cyprus	137.5	33.1	-104.4
Ireland	117.7	44.1	-73.6
Malta	35.4	21.4	-14.0
UK	27.9	26.3	-1.6
Simple average	79.6	31.2	-48.4
Standard deviation	49.8	9.8	-46.2
Romania ⁽⁶⁾	90.0	27.1	-62.9
Poland	42.5	5.3	-37.2
Hungary ⁽³⁾	22.4	9.0	-13.3
Slovakia ⁽³⁾	10.3	5.3	-5.0
Latvia ⁽⁵⁾	12.4	0.8	-11.6
Lithuania	n.a.	5.4	n.a.
Estonia ⁽⁴⁾	0.0	4.4	4.4
Simple average	29.6	8.2	-21.4
Standard deviation	32.9	8.7	-24.2
Netherlands	22.2	8.1	-14.1
Germany	11.4	4.3	-7.1
Luxembourg ⁽²⁾	7.2	7.7	0.5
Austria	4.0	40.1	36.1
Switzerland ⁽⁷⁾	2.1	3.2	1.1
Simple average	9.4	12.7	3.3
Standard deviation	8.0	15.5	7.5

Source: See Appendix 1.

Notes: Country clusters and countries within the clusters sorted by 1990s data. ⁽¹⁾ 2009 is missing;

⁽²⁾ 2008–2009 are missing; ⁽³⁾ 1990 is missing; ⁽⁴⁾ 1990–91 and 2002 are missing;

⁽⁵⁾ 1990–96 are missing; ⁽⁶⁾ 1990–94 are missing; ⁽⁷⁾ 1990–93 are missing.

Applying a classification based on the 'industrial relations regime', one can distinguish the following groups in Europe: 'centre-east' (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Romania and Slovakia), 'centre-west' (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands and Slovenia), 'north' (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden), 'south' (France, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain) and 'west' (Cyprus, Ireland, Malta and the UK) (EC 2009: 49). Although for most countries in the country clusters the DNW level is in the same range, there are several 'ambiguous' countries that add to heterogeneity within the country clusters. The DNW rates of Portugal and Sweden are significantly lower than those of the other countries in Southern and Northern Europe, whereas the Belgian and Romanian DNW

rate is higher than the CEE countries. With the exception of the Belgian ‘mixed case’, which will be categorised in the group of Nordic countries (cf. Dribbush and Vandaele 2007: 375) – explained below – this subsection and the next subsections will follow the classification described above, based on the industrial relations regime, as can be seen in Table 2.

The rank order of the country groups in Table 2 is stable, so that the groups clearly stand out from each other, except for the centre-east and centre-west region, which switched places in the 2000s. The simple averages in the table teach us that all European regions registered a decline in strike activity in the 2000s, except for the centre-west, which is due to an Austrian DNW rate increase that raised the standard variation for the centre-west. Furthermore, the simple averages for the countries in Southern Europe were the highest in the 1990s and 2000s. The Nordic countries and Belgium follow Southern Europe: the decline in the simple average for those countries caused a wider gap with Southern Europe in the 2000s. The countries in the west also experienced a decline in DNW rates, although Malta and, especially, the UK saw a relatively moderate decrease. Despite the decline, the strike-rates in the west were still higher than in the centre-east and centre-west (Belgium excluded). Those two regions changed places in the 2000s, which can be attributed to the rise of the DNW level in Austria. Finally, the coefficient of variance is becoming smaller in Southern Europe, the west and the CEE countries; slightly increasing in the cluster containing Nordic Europe and Belgium; and growing in the centre-west of Europe. Reference is made to the levels of employment regulation that are considered most significant for understanding the DNW levels in the country clusters presented in the following subsections.

Southern Europe

In the southern states, including France, strikes are often ‘a weapon of protest and demonstration’ (Edwards and Hyman 1994: 253). Historically, the opportunity structures for trade unions in this part of Europe have been marked by long-lasting employer hostility towards union recognition (Hyman and Gumbrell-McCormick 2010: 317–318). Therefore, unions have had to turn to the state to grant their demands, which has profoundly affected their repertoire of collective action, which has come to be dominated by demonstrations and mass strikes. Since strikes are often considered a means of political protest in these countries, they very often have a mass character, demonstrating the mobilisation and organisational capacity of unions (Aligisakis 1997: 78–79 and 89). Furthermore, the union landscape in all these countries is still notably fragmented along ideological-political lines (Ebbinghaus and Visser 2000), with the exception of Greece, although the main Greek union is equally internally divided by rival ideological-political factions attached to different political parties (Kritsantonis 1998: 517–518). In addition, the very weak institutionalised collective bargaining system with weak articulation between the different levels, autocratic employers impeding free collective bargaining and the importance of the public sector and government ‘intervention’ into the wage-setting system have all been seen as contributing to the historically

very high Greek strike level (idem: 519–526). A process of institutionalisation of employment regulation has denoted a declining trend in strike activity since the early 1990s – although interposed by, in particular, public sector strikes – and, hence, the position of Greece in the 'European strike league table' has not changed very much. Its position is unknown after 1998, however, since official strike data are no longer collected by the authorities.

Similar to Greece, the high DNW level in Spain can be attributed primarily to the weakly developed bargaining institutions, whereby strikes 'almost ritualistically' accompany the collective bargaining process at the sectoral level (Rigby and Marco Aledo 2001). Moreover, this is combined with regional strikes, reflecting the strong regional economic and political focus in Spain, and general strikes targeted at governments that use national social dialogue in a rather pragmatic and ad hoc way. Although the instability of the employment system still prevails, keeping Spain at the top of the 'strike league table', the (predicted) declining trend of the DNW level in the 2000s can be explained by the decrease in multi-employer agreements and the decentralisation of bargaining structures; the reluctance of a growing share of temporary workers to go on strike; and the development of a *cultura del diálogo* and a trend towards longer-term collective agreements.

Turning to that other country on the Iberian Peninsula, it looks as if Portugal is an anomaly in the southern group since its DNW level is far below the rate of the other countries. However, the lower Portuguese level might be partly explained by the exclusion in the official strike statistics of general strikes at the national level and strikes in the public administration (Gall 1999: 370). Furthermore, in 1988 the unions' defeat of the largest ever general strike against government reforms was 'a major turning point for Portuguese trade unionism' (Stoleroff 2007: 217). Unions' mobilising and organisational capacity declined further due to the economic crisis at the beginning of the 1990s. At the company level workers' committees tend to 'specialise in forms of relationship that are less likely to lead to conflict' (Dornelas 2010: 110), whereas the sectoral level is dominant but tends to be more adversarial. Reinforcing a trend towards 'a whittling away of union representation at workplace level' (Stoleroff 2000: 464), since 1987 all Portuguese unions have been incorporated in the tripartite *Conselho Permanente de Concertação Social* at the national level, established in 1984, fostering an 'institutionalisation of social conflict' which might further explain the downward trend in DNW rates. In all other southern countries, trade unions tend to be involved in a more ad hoc and less institutionalised manner in employment regulation at the national level. Nevertheless, the largest trade union confederation in Portugal, influenced by communism, favours a more 'conflict-based strategy' (Dornelas 2010: 111).

Until the early 1990s, conspicuous 'high voluntarism and low institutionalisation of industrial relations' characterised Italian employment regulation, both fostering 'recourse to conflict by both the confederal unions and the small groups which operated independently of, and in opposition to, them' (Regini and Regalia 2000: 369). Since the 1990s, there has been a revival of centralised trade union action – as in the period between 1979 and 1984 – due to a

re-emergence of concertation at the national level. In 1994, the unilaterally decided pension system reform of the right-wing Berlusconi government provoked a general strike, resulting in a union victory. At the same time, the employment regulation has been strengthened, with a reduction in DNW rates as a result. In sectoral collective bargaining there has been an increasing degree of formalisation, whereas at the workplace level the renewal of union-dominated workplace representative bodies has enabled 'efficient channels for voice (from below) and for consultation initiatives (from above)' (idem: 382). A law regulating strikes in essential public services was introduced in 1990, adding further to the decline in strike activity in the public services sector, while a newly introduced agency, the *Commissione di garanzia dell'attuazione della legge*, was set up for mediation and evaluation (idem: 384). A proposal of the second Berlusconi government for labour market reforms led again to a general strike in 2002. Nevertheless, afterwards, two of three main Italian trade unions signed the 'Pact for Italy' that introduced a 'shift from political negotiation (or strong concertation with the social partners) to smoother forms of "social dialogue", as the new method for institutional reforms' (Negrelli and Pulignano 2010: 150).

Finally, France can be put in the middle of the European 'strike league table' in the 1990s – see also the grey bars in Figures 2 and 3 (cf. Groux and Pernot 2008: 116–119). The French position in this decade is thus behind three of the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland and Norway), which are often considered conflict-free countries in trade union circles outside those countries. The country's position changed in the 2000s, due to the increased strike activity in the public sector. Having a weak tradition of collective bargaining at the sectoral level, strikes tend to be 'either local or linked to a particular enterprise or occupation or state organization or, on the other hand, national' (Bouquin 2007: 259). Indeed, French strike activity is particularly influenced by the political sphere. Especially right-wing governments' proposals for reforming labour market and welfare arrangements tend to provoke strike action, as was the case for pension reforms in 1995, 2003, 2008 and 2010 and for labour market reforms in 2005. In 2009, trade unions also organised mass demonstrations demanding measures to mitigate the consequences of the socio-economic crisis (Robin 2009a, 2009b). In addition, strikes are concentrated in sectors in which trade unionism remains representative and deep-rooted, for example, in large (state) companies and the public sector. Concurrently, although they exist, procedures for the settlement of dispute are rarely put into practice, whereas it looks like alternative forms of collective conflict by workers (demonstrations, drafting of petitions, go-slows and work-to-rules) are on the rise (Goetschy and Jobert 2010: 188–191).

Northern Europe and Belgium

A first reason to place Belgium in the Nordic group is that the country shares a similar 'Ghent system' (although the role of the Belgian trade unions in the administration of unemployment insurance is more limited than in the other 'Nordic' countries) (Vandaele 2006). Together with union access to the

workplace and sectoral bargaining structures, the Ghent system contributes to a relative stability of the unionisation rate at a high level over time in Belgium, Denmark, Finland and Sweden – Norway has no Ghent system but there are similarities regarding union access to the workplace and bargaining structures – providing the unions with significant organisational capacity (Nergaard and Stokke 2007). When the change in the level of strike activity is tested for the negative impact of the neoliberal globalisation wave upon strike-reducing labour market institutions, such as centralised collective bargaining, it comes as no surprise that Belgium and the Nordic countries belong to the group of 'countries where unions are strong and have grown despite globalization' (at least until the 1990s) (Piazza 2005: 307). Indeed, all these countries, including Belgium, share well-developed collective bargaining structures at the sectoral level which prevent, to a certain extent, major strikes since they are more costly for unions than strikes at lower bargaining levels (Clegg 1976: 82). This common practice of sectoral wage bargaining and peace obligations is a second reason for putting Belgium together with the Nordic countries.

Although fairly similar bargaining structures to those in Belgium are in place in Germany and the Netherlands, the link between the bargaining cycle and strike action is far less prominent, presumably because of the stronger pacifying effect of centralised bargaining. While in most aspects of employment regulation Belgium does not differ very much from the other countries in central-west Europe, Belgian trade unions have stronger union-dominated access to the workplace and their decision-making structures can be characterised in terms of more pronounced bottom-up decision-making. In Germany, the *Warnstreik* or warning strike is the most important strike action, which can be defined as a short strike 'to demonstrate the determination of the union and its ability to mobilise' linked to sectoral wage bargaining (Dribbusch 2007: 270). In Germany and the Netherlands, macro-level employment regulation is historically the product of an 'institutionalisation of cooperation', whereas in the Nordic countries and largely also in Belgium employment regulation has rather evolved as a result of an 'institutionalisation of conflict' (Therborn 1992). Hence, much as in the Nordic countries (Goerke and Madsen 2004: 397 and 413), there is a clear temporal pattern of strike activity in Belgium linked to the collective bargaining process at the sectoral level.

Strike action in Belgium largely tends to follow the schedule of renegotiations of collective agreements at the sectoral and enterprise level. If two large strike movements in 1993 and 2005 are excluded, the relationship between DNW rates and the two-year bargaining cycle is also clear for Belgium.⁹ As can be seen from the percentages in the table, the DNW share is much higher in the first semester of the uneven years, exactly the period when most collective agreements are renewed at the sectoral level, thus reflecting the institutionalised bargaining rhythm and adding to the predictability of the use of the strike weapon. In the even years, when wage negotiations are nearly

9. These two major strike movements took place in the second semester of 1993 and 2005, disturbing the diametrical picture in Table 3. Including those years yields the following percentages for the uneven years: 45 per cent in the first semester and 55 per cent in the second semester.

absent, strike activity is almost evenly spread across the semesters. Just like its union density, the Belgian strike rate at the aggregate level has also been relatively stable in the past two decades. The fact that the mass strike in the fourth quarter in 1993 (757,206 DNW) was larger than the one in 2005 (504,592 DNW) largely explains the decline in DNW rates in the 2000s.¹⁰

Table 3 DNW distribution per semester in even and uneven years in Belgium, 1991–2010 (%)

	First semester	Second semester
Even years	45.4%	54.6%
Uneven years ⁽¹⁾	67.7%	32.3%

Source: Vandaele (2010b: 32) and author's own updates.

Note: Last quartile of 2010 is missing; ⁽¹⁾ 1993 and 2005 excluded.

The differences in strike rates between the Nordic countries are to a large extent explained by the 'tolerance level among employers' and the 'legal reactions' to wildcat strikes (Stokke and Thörnqvist 2001: 256). In Norway, neither side of industry accepts wildcat strikes; in case of a wildcat strike the legal sanction consists of compensation for actual damage. In Sweden and Finland, fines for wildcat strikes are merely symbolic, whereas in Denmark short strikes are considered not to violate the peace obligation in collective agreements. Although still at the higher end of strike action in Europe, strike activity in Finland and Sweden significantly declined in the 1990s compared to the previous decade, whereas strike action decreased a bit in Norway but rose considerably in Denmark (Piazza 2005: 290–291; Stokke and Thörnqvist 2001: 248). The remarkable decline in Finland can be explained by the increase in unemployment, the reduction of wildcat strikes through new procedures for handling workplace discontent and dampened union rivalry (Stokke and Thörnqvist 2001: 257 and 260). In 2010, negotiations were unsuccessful between the employers' organisation and the trade unions for 'reforming' the workers' right to strike in order to further diminish strike activity (Jokivuori 2011).

The considerable fall in strike activity in Sweden could to a large extent be attributed to the mass unemployment that struck Sweden at the beginning of the 1990s, while collective agreements have been initiated that leave 'little room for local negotiations' (Thörnqvist 2007: 335) and the newly adopted bargaining procedure has thwarted the use or threat of the strike weapon (cf. Teague 2009: 510–512). In 2009, ongoing negotiations for a new main agreement, replacing the existing central agreement *Saltsjöbadsavtalet* of 1938, between the 'social partners' failed mainly due to the employers' intention to change the rules of industrial action, particularly the right to solidarity strikes (Lovén 2009). In contrast to the other Nordic countries, the collective bargaining structures in Denmark are characterised by a 'fragile balance between decentralisation and centralisation', contributing to

¹⁰ The average stands at 210,316 DNW for the 1990s (including the first three quarters of 1993) and at 199,897 for the 2000s (including the first three quarters of 2005).

heightened strike action at both the sectoral and local level (Birke 2007: 225–226 and 234–237). In the 2000s, strike rates declined in all Nordic countries, although with a less prominent decrease in Denmark, which is undoubtedly due to some long-lasting conflicts over the renewal of collective agreements in the public sector in 2008 that accounted for 98 per cent of the total DNW (Jørgenson 2008).

West

DNW rates remained fairly stable in the 2000s in Malta and particularly in the UK, compared to the preceding decade, while both Cyprus and Ireland witnessed a considerable drop, bringing both countries close to the others in this country cluster. Historically, employment regulation in this group of countries has been characterised by 'voluntarism' and by decentralised structures with enterprise-based collective bargaining and a prominent place for shop stewards at the enterprise level in the private sector. This complex of features, particularly the weak tradition of institutions for workers' representation, has been associated with frequent strike action in companies with a union prepared to challenge management or the employer (Edwards and Hyman 1994: 271–272). In both Cyprus and Malta employment regulation at the macro-level has been characterised by tripartite cooperation for quite a long time (Natali and Pochet 2010: 294–295, 301–303). Equally, in Ireland a national centralised system of social partnership has been in place from 1987, but which fell apart in 2009 when negotiations between the government and the public sector unions failed on public spending reductions (McDonough and Dundon 2010). Nevertheless, in order to understand the fall in DNW rates in Ireland attention should also be paid to the various public dispute agencies which have seen a 'significant increase in rights-based employment grievances alongside the decline of large-scale industrial relations disputes' (Teague 2009:505). In other words, these agencies have increased in importance since the rise of non-union workplaces, due to the membership losses of the trade unions and the increase in the number of individual workers who are no longer represented by union officials and due to the substantial growth of employment legislation weakening the traditional voluntarist system of employment relations.

Furthermore, collective bargaining also takes place at the sectoral level in Cyprus, which tends to explain – although only to a certain extent – why the Cypriot DNW rate is higher than the Maltese one since the size of strike actions tends to reflect the scope of the bargaining unit. The breakdown of wage negotiations in 2006 in the Cypriot construction sector illustrates this particularly well: of the 26,898 days not worked almost 25,000 days can be attributed to the one-day strike action in the construction sector, involving about 95 per cent of all workers in the sector (Soumeli 2006). However, in the past decade, mediation services by the Ministry of Labour and Social Insurance have played an increasingly important role in maintaining social peace when collective agreements have to be renewed. In Malta, strike action declined drastically after the strike wave of the early 1970s and most strike activity today is concentrated in the public sector (Baldacchino 2009: 29–30).

In addition, the union landscape is fragmented along ideological-political lines in Cyprus, with a prominent communist trade union confederation, and in Malta, including a moderate Catholic trade union confederation, while fragmentation at the confederal level is not the case in Ireland and the UK.

Turning to the UK, neoliberal state ‘intervention’ in strike legislation has marked recent decades. A major ‘psychological turning point in the confidence of the trade union movement’ (Lyddon 2007b: 340) was the defeat of the miners’ strike in 1984–1985. This twelve-month-long strike is emblematic of the unremitting diminution of manufacturing employment and the tough stance of Conservative governments against strike action, passing laws restricting the unions’ ability to organise strike action in the 1980s and early 1990s (idem: 340–345). When New Labour took office in 1997 it kept almost every aspect of Conservative strike legislation (Lyddon 2009: 316). The complicated law on strike ballots has led to employers pursuing and winning court injunctions (against strikes) for very minor irregularities; this trend was becoming very serious but successful Appeal Court judgments have reversed some of these decisions (see Prassl 2011 for British Airways cases; LRD 2011 for the March 2011 railway cases). So far, strike legislation has remained unaffected under the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government (Hall 2010), in office since 2010, although the government has taken the initiative to reform employment tribunals (the bodies that adjudicate certain individual employment disputes) (Carley 2011). This initiative is not coincidental since the number of individualised expressions of conflict at work has increased together with a decrease in collective expressions of conflict since the 1980s and de-unionisation (Dix *et al.* 2009).

Centre-east

Generally speaking, most (but not all) trade unions here do not have a strong tradition of militancy and identification with unionism is nearly absent among workers in CEE countries (Ost 2009). Union mobilisation and organisational capacity is hampered not only by the low union density in most CEE countries but also by their own lack of self-confidence: ‘[u]nions for the most part feel so battered down by postcommunist reality that they go on strike only when the workforce demands it and only on behalf of very limit goals’ (Ost and Crowley 2001: 222). A further weakening of the terms of employment, already standing at a low level, might reduce the ability of workers to act collectively even further (Alemán 2008: 18). Nevertheless, unilaterally putting the emphasis on the union-unfriendly environment and cultural determinism (such as the communist and postcommunist legacy) is misplaced since union revitalisation campaigns like the one in Poland have been linked with new forms of union activism and work agency (Mrozowicki *et al.* 2010). As already mentioned, before the outbreak of the socio-economic crisis, there were some indications of growing grassroots activism among workers and strike activity in some CEE countries. Furthermore, it would be misguided to interpret the lack of significant DNW rates in Central and Eastern Europe as an indication of the absence of conflict at work or harmonious employment relations.

Strike regulations in many CEE countries are characterised by their statutory basis and restrictive character with regard to the legality of strikes (Welz and Kauppinen 2005: 93; cf. Warneck 2007). In several countries limitations are imposed on the right to strike with regard to public transport and other public utilities or outright bans are imposed on the armed forces, the judiciary and internal security services, although this strike legislation has not completely contained social conflict in those sectors. Furthermore, bargaining at the sectoral level is very weakly developed in most CEE countries, whereas decentralised wage bargaining is dominant so that 'in the private sector ... workplace-level industrial action predominates' (Welz and Kauppinen 2005: 95). Exceptions are Romania and Slovenia (cf. *infra*), both countries where wage bargaining is also present at the sectoral level. In Romania, sectoral and national collective agreements provide a framework for company negotiations and collective bargaining is compulsory each year for companies with more than 21 employees, which is particularly the case in industry (Trif 2007).

Whereas in the early 1990s the transition to a market economy was 'fertile ground for industrial action' (Welz and Kauppinen 2005: 94), this changed quickly. First of all, the development of national-level tripartite institutions and negotiations has been one answer to workers' grievances about deteriorating terms of employment and working conditions, even though those institutions have not matured into strong macro-corporatist structures (Hassel 2009). Secondly, although with cross-national differences, workers have rather opted for individual 'exit' from the formal labour market instead of raising their 'voice' collectively (Meardi 2007: 510–512). De-commodification through social benefits, working in the informal sector, migration or individual expressions of conflict at work might partly explain the absence of high DNW rates in the private sector in most CEE countries. The current socio-economic crisis, revealing the failure of neoliberal policies, might once again stimulate an 'exit' via outward migration, as illustrated by Lithuania, where 'the discourses of discontent assumed an initially explosive but thereafter an increasingly 'muted' character as the state sought to smother discontent and, where necessary, 'defuse' potential sources of opposition' (Woolfson 2010: 506). Finally, strike activity is located mainly in the public services sector and public utilities, yet wage increases in the public sector have been settled mainly by budgetary decisions (Carley 2010: 19–20, 2008: 22–23; Glassner 2010). Indeed, CEE governments have been tempted to exploit state resources to secure their own survival and rebuild the state (Bohle and Greskovits 2010: 361–362).

Centre-west

Except for Belgium at present, all other countries in central-west Europe are relatively 'strike-free'. In the other countries of central-west Europe works councils are more central at the workplace level, especially in Germany and Austria (Edwards and Hyman 1994: 271). The relatively high level of union strike benefits might produce an additional mitigating effect on German strike activity and on calls for more tactical use of short and limited strike action (Dribbusch 2007: 277–278). Likewise, Slovenian employment regulation at

the workplace shares similar representation structures to Germany, whereas wage bargaining is fairly centralised at the sectoral level. Despite union pluralism trade unions in Slovenia are ‘well organised and relatively influential organisations’ (Stanojević 2007: 350) at the workplace in large companies. Compared to their counterparts in other CEE countries Slovenian unions possess a high mobilisation and organisational capacity that is historically rooted in the favourable communist legacy of a decentralised Yugoslav economy wherein ‘the Yugoslav elite could not rule by coercion and crush strikes with brute force, but had to use softer forms of rule instead’ (Grdešić 2008: 138). Slovenian trade unions demonstrated their mobilisation and organisational capacity in 1992, with a successful general warning strike against a wage freeze proposal by the right-wing government, and in 2005 when they organised ‘the largest trade union public protest in Slovenian history’ (Stanojević 2007: 358) opposing a right-wing government proposal for a flat tax rate that heralded other reforms. In between, Slovenian trade unions have been largely incorporated into the policy-making process of pragmatic centre-left governments (Grdešić 2008: 14–146). Based on strike data from the largest trade union confederation the strike pattern was characterised by high frequency in the early 1990s, particularly in manufacturing, but declined afterwards (Stanojević and Vrhovec 2001).

Austria is traditionally characterised by coordinated decentralised bargaining that goes hand in hand with a high degree of centralised cooperation between the trade unions and employers’ organisations, adding to stability and extraordinarily low levels of strike activity. Only in 2003 was this consensus-oriented approach shaken up by a unilateral government decision to reform the pension system, but afterwards ‘industrial action once again became a rarity’ (Blaschke 2007: 254). In the other Alpine country, Switzerland, strike activity traditionally also stands at a very low level, which is almost inevitable given its ‘highly institutionalized regulatory system’ (Fluder and Hotz-Hart 1998: 279). In addition, the mobilisation capacity of the Swiss trade unions can be considered weak due to their fragmentation and, in particular, their weak access to the workplace (idem: 270–273). In recent times, however, strike activity has been increased in the public and private sector, but cooperative relations between the trade unions and employers’ organisations still predominate.

Furthermore, Luxembourg stands a little higher in the ‘strike league table’ but ‘traditions of social partnership remain strong’ (Tunsch 1998: 355). The National Conciliation Office plays an important mediating and obligatory role in the case of breakdowns in collective bargaining negotiations. Centralised wage bargaining together with increasing decentralisation and union absence from the workplace typify Dutch employment regulation. In addition, the peace obligation of collective agreements further explains the low DNW rates (Visser 1998: 306). In 2010, a more aggressive approach to union organising, including strike action, was adopted in the cleaning sector by *FNV Bondgenoten*, which is the main union in the private services sector (Heuts 2011). Although the cleaning sector strike was the longest strike since 1933 and the DNW rate increased in 2010 compared to the previous year, the rate was

still average (ter Steege and Kuijpers 2011). But it remains to be seen whether this approach will become widespread in other private services sectors and in the Dutch trade union movement as a whole (Vandaele and Leschke 2010: 24–27). Similar to the Netherlands, there is debate within the German union movement on whether a more active organising approach should be taken, whereas the long-term stability of the union landscape – with one dominant union confederation – was recently challenged by unions such as that of the locomotive drivers, who have strong workplace bargaining power (cf. Hoffman and Schmidt 2009).

4. Accounting for the contemporary decline

Given the cross-country similarity in terms of DNW decline, one might suspect that parallel explanatory factors are at work. For explaining persistent national patterns in strike activity single strike theories or models fall short (cf. Dribbusch and Vandaele 2007: 366). This section provides an overview, although not in strict order of causation, of various (macro-oriented) factors that are listed in the literature as influencing the decline in the DNW rates.¹¹ These explanatory factors are not mutually exclusive but often interrelated and might address different indicators of strike action. In the subsections below those explanations are grouped into three factors: deindustrialisation, deunionisation and globalisation.

Deindustrialisation

Strikes are rarely spread evenly through all economic sectors. For various reasons, such as geographical and social isolation or specific working conditions, workers in some sectors are more strike-prone than in others (Edwards and Hyman 1994: 251–252 and 269).¹² The demise of strike-prone economic sectors such as coal mining and the economic decay of certain mass production industries such as the metal industry have certainly negatively affected strike activity in Western Europe. Since the majority of strikes are organised by unionised workers or through trade unions, the location of unionism in the economy is thus crucial (Gall and Hebden 2008: 594). Hence, long-term shifts in the composition of the workforce and the economy have been considered key to explaining country differences in strike rates. The long-term process of deindustrialisation, involving major job losses in manufacturing industry, means that the bulk of employment is now in the service sector, where unionisation is generally lower.

DNW rates have been significantly higher in the more unionised industry sector compared to the less unionised service sector over time (Lesch 2009: 14–15). There are exceptions, however, at least in recent decades.¹³ Furthermore, strike rates are declining in both manufacturing industry and the service sector. Since the 1950s, some European countries, notably

11. This working paper deals predominantly with a macro-analysis of strike activity. Micro-oriented theories, which explain individual strikes based on microeconomic factors, are ignored in this working paper because their focus is mainly on the bargaining process. Those theories, putting forward abstract bargaining models, assume that conflict at work will disappear if the so-called ‘information asymmetries’ between the trade unions and firm management are solved (Fransozi 1995: 89–92). However, the theories take it for granted that workers agree with the current mode of production. Furthermore, they do not take into account the structural power asymmetries between workers and employers.

12. Strikes rates within a certain industry can show intra-variance, as well as differences with the same industry in another country, however.

13. Exceptions are Austria (averages 2000–2007), France (averages 2000–2007), Ireland (averages of 2000–2007) and Sweden (averages 1990–99 and 2000–2007).

Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK, have been confronted by a diminishing share of strike activity in manufacturing (Bordogna and Cella 2002: 601). Although the decline is most pronounced in manufacturing, given the higher starting point in this sector, it is not general. Nevertheless, for the period 2005–2009 industry and manufacturing, particularly metalworking, were the ones most affected by strike action in Europe, followed by the public sector and transport and communications (Carley 2010: 14).

Table 4 Share of DNW in manufacturing industry in total DNW, 1990–2009

Countries	1990–94	1995–99	2000–2004	2005–2009
Belgium ⁽¹⁾	82.5%	61.6%	38.2%	53.0%
Denmark	76.1%	64.8%	56.9%	26.6%
Finland	51.5%	30.4%	42.1%	62.6%
France	56.0%	47.2%	60.7%	27.9%
Germany	57.6%	68.2%	78.9%	29.4%
Hungary ⁽²⁾	42.1%	39.6%	21.3%	36.3%
Ireland ⁽³⁾	34.8%	16.2%	17.9%	23.4%
Italy ⁽⁴⁾	46.7%	54.1%	32.4%	57.5%
Netherlands	35.0%	32.1%	15.4%	36.2%
Poland ⁽⁴⁾	49.1%	53.9%	43.1%	26.4%
Portugal ⁽²⁾	50.2%	62.2%	42.4%	45.1%
Spain ⁽⁴⁾	27.6%	24.3%	26.9%	30.3%
Sweden	6.2%	4.0%	6.8%	4.1%
UK	26.5%	19.4%	7.3%	8.4%
Simple average	45.9%	41.3%	35.09%	33.4%
Standard deviation	19.87%	20.5%	21.0%	16.9%

Sources: 1990–99: Bordogna and Cella (2002: 601) except Belgium: Vandaele (2010b) and author's own updates; Finland, Hungary, Ireland, Poland, Portugal and Spain: laborstat; 2000–2008: laborstat except Germany 2008–2009: Bundesagentur für Arbeit; Finland 2009: Statistics Finland; Ireland 2009: Central Statistics Office; Netherlands 2009: Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek; Sweden 2009: Medlingsinstitutet; UK 2009: National Statistics.

Notes: ⁽¹⁾ 1990 is missing; ⁽²⁾ 2008–2009 are missing; ⁽³⁾ Manufacturing includes strikes in mining and energy in 2009; ⁽⁴⁾ 2009 is missing.

As the data in Table 4 demonstrate, the DNW share in manufacturing industry is not a linear trend across countries. There still exists considerable cross-country variation in the DNW share in manufacturing industry in terms of total days not worked due to strikes. In Hungary, Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the UK the share of manufacturing stands generally at a relatively low level. In the other countries manufacturing industry is responsible for half the volume of strikes in at least one of the five-year periods since 1990. Its share declined in the 1990s, except in four countries (Germany, Italy, Poland and Portugal). In the 2000s, the diminishing share of manufacturing industry continued only in two countries, Denmark and Poland. Other countries (Belgium, Hungary, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal and the UK) saw a further decline in the first half of the 2000s, but a rising share of manufacturing industry in the second half. The opposite has happened in France, Sweden (albeit at a relatively low level) and Germany where the share increased in the first half of the 2000s but declined afterwards. Finally, in Finland, Ireland and Spain the share of manufacturing industry has again been on the rise since the 2000s, although their shares stand at a relatively low level. Although the variation points to a certain cross-country divergence

until the mid-2000s, the development of simple averages points to a declining trend since the 1990s, which feeds into the view that '[t]he weapon of the strike may have a particular relevance to manual work at particular stages of industrialization' (Edwards and Hyman 1994: 277). However, concluding that deindustrialisation inevitably means the withering away of strikes is drawing conclusions too quickly (Gall 1999: 360) (cf. *infra*).

Deunionisation

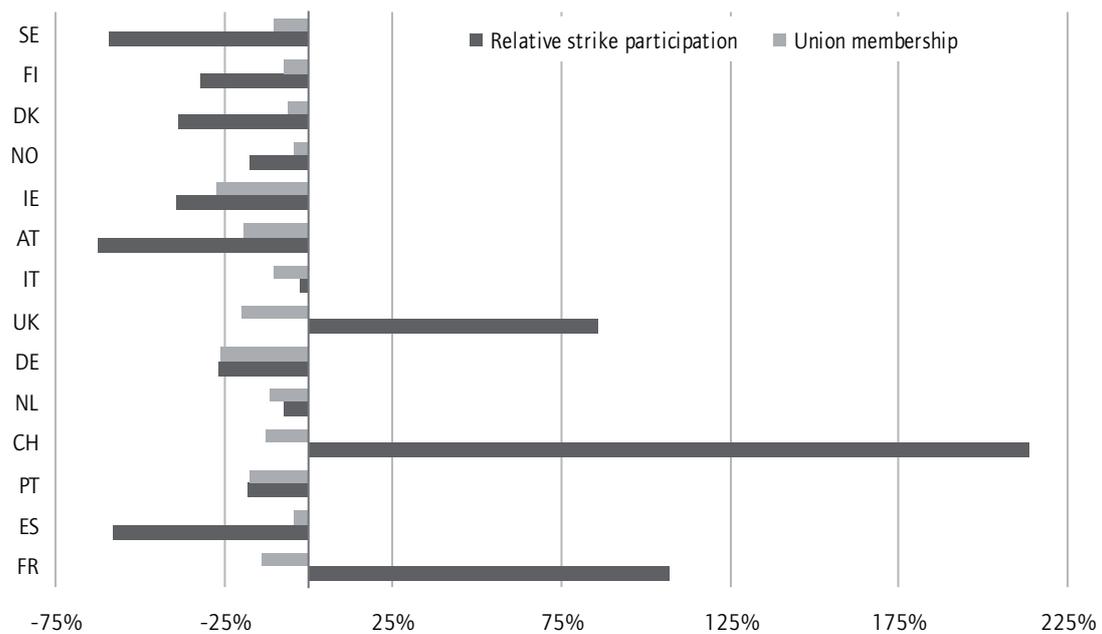
Deunionisation has also been put forward as responsible for the declining DNW rates (cf. Shalev 1992: 117–118; Scheuer 2006: 155). From a historical perspective, union membership and strikes, or better, *strike waves* have been positively interrelated: that is, strike waves have been associated with bursts in union density during certain historical periods (Franzosi 1995; Friedman 2008; Kelly 1997, 1998; Silver 2003). There is no simple, automatic link between the incidence of strikes, workers' militancy and trade union power as measured by union density, however (Vernon 2006: 192–193). Instead of a monotonic relationship between union density and the incidence of strikes, the relationship is considered curvilinear (Tsebelis and Lange 1995; cf. Martin and Dixon 2010: 115). The non-use of the strike weapon could be a sign of trade unions with either relatively weak or strong bargaining powers.

Unions with weak bargaining power might be more willing to conclude a collective agreement with management. If the union is compensating the loss of earnings by providing strike benefits, taking strike action could also exhaust the union strike fund. Conversely, trade unions in a strong bargaining position have less need to resort to strikes since management will be more willing to compromise with an eye to avoiding strike action (Hyman 1988: 75–85). In addition, the leaderships of strong unions tend to curb strike action, although strike movements were part and parcel of the foundation of trade unions. Indeed, once considered dangerous and subversive organisations, unions gained their legitimacy in the eyes of the authorities and employers through their disciplinary role vis-à-vis the *classe dangereuse*.¹⁴ As long as trade unions can retain their power, unions in high union density countries will rather opt for alternative and more efficient channels to look after their members' interests. For trade unions with strong bargaining power, the threat of a strike might be enough to obtain the workers' demands. Although there are no systematic data on strike threats, it is clear that in most countries such threats are part of the bargaining process in those sectors in which trade unions have strong marketplace bargaining power (Carley 2010: 15–19; 2008: 18–21). Threats are also applied at the national level to encourage the government to abandon or moderate proposals for reform in the field of employment relations (Kelly and Hamann 2010: 1).

14. This explains why trade unions are not only a medium for collective action by workers but why they could also be an object of workers' collective action.

Cross-national data on relative strike participation (that is, workers involved in strikes per 1,000 workers) shows that fewer workers are willing to undertake strike action today. Whereas on average 97 workers per 1,000 workers participated in strikes in the 1970s, this number fell to 67 in the 1980s and declined further to 29 in the 1990s in Western Europe (Scheuer 2006: 148–149).¹⁵ On average, the number of strikers was also lower in the 2000s than the three previous decades, although with continued large country variations. Strike participation in the European Union (EU) stands, on average, at 20 workers out of every 1,000 workers in the period 2000–2008 (European Commission 2011: 46). Insofar as strike participation hints at a 'greater willingness to defend the social custom of union membership' (Checchi and Visser 2005: 5 and 12), the future of trade unionism looks bleak since participation is falling.

Figure 4 Relative change in strike participation and union membership in the 2000s compared to the 1990s (average) in 14 countries



Source: Union membership and density: OECD.stat (2011); Relative strike participation: 1990–99: Scheuer (2006: 149) except France (Bouquin 2007: 265). 2000–2008: Eurostat and national sources – see Table 5 in Appendix 1.

Note: Countries sorted by average union density level in years 2000–2008.

Figure 4 makes the comparison between the relative change in union membership and strike participation by calculating the averages for the 1990s and 2000s in 14 West European countries.¹⁶ The countries are sorted by the average level of union density in the period 2000–2008. Union membership and strike participation declined in almost all West European countries;

¹⁵ The countries included in the calculation of the average are the same as in Table 1. The figure for France is based on Bouquin (2007: 265).

¹⁶ Belgium is left out due to the unreliability of the data on strike participation.

France, Switzerland and the UK are the only ones in which strike participation increased. With a record low of less than 8 per cent union density, the increasing strike participation rate in France indicates that non-union members, too, are taking part in strike action (cf. Sullivan 2010: 148). In the case of the UK augmented strike participation reflects the greater domination of national public sector disputes, whereas private sector stoppages have decreased (Dix *et al.* 2009: 182–183). Given the curvilinear model of union power, previous research shows an intermediary role of the level and change in union density between the neoliberal globalisation wave and strike rates, implying that strike rates will rise in countries with a high but declining union density (Piazzini 2005). For the 2000s there is little reason to believe that this is still the case since the decline in strike rates in Western Europe is even more widespread than before. Even in high union density countries strike rates have decreased.

Defensive struggles and globalisation

Part of the explanation for the falling participation might be that strikes, particularly in manufacturing industry, are mostly defensive struggles, whereby workers resist wage restraint, job losses, work intensification and so on. The current (and still prevailing) neoliberal globalisation wave and Europeanisation of markets are often cited as an explanatory factor for this self-disciplining of workers, thus causing a decline in strike activity. Since the threat of relocation of production is (perceived by workers as) more convincing than before, globalisation improves the bargaining position of employers and management and, consequently, leads to concessionary bargaining, undermining the regulation of competition between workers and heightening their reluctance to use the strike weapon. Employers' 'militancy' is also expressed in the legal field by resort to the courts, which often lean towards restrictive interpretations of the right to strike (Dribbush and Vandaele 2007: 378). Furthermore, dispute resolution bodies play an active role in intervention in cases of actual or potential strike action, thereby preventing strikes (Carley 2008: 23–24). Since the call for a strike is a rational way of achieving workers' demands, expressing workers' protests or resisting employers' demands, employers' militancy might have led to a 'novel calculus' among workers and union (or strike) leaders: namely that the perceived costs do not outweigh the perceived benefits (Scheuer 2006: 158–161). In other words, informal rules, embodied in practical experience of conflict, are thus also important, especially since strike defeats might have a 'demonstration effect' and initiate a self-reinforcing process of diminishing resort to strikes, even across sectors (Brandl and Traxler 2010: 13).

To a considerable extent there is also speculation in the literature about the negative impact on the propensity to strike of significant changes in working practices that very often have accompanied the shift in employment from industry to services. Non-standard forms of employment, such as temporary agency work, part-time work or (bogus) self-employment are all too often associated with relatively less employment protection (Venn 2009).

Relatively low or declining employment protection might make it more risky to go on strike. Unfortunately, there is little by way of disaggregated strike data that could confirm this, although it might be no coincidence that union density among non-standard workers is generally lower. The trend towards the reduction of company size is also associated with a lower propensity to strike since those companies lack a trade union presence and structures for collective bargaining (Edwards 1992: 382–383). At the same time, more flexible production chains and just-in-time production are more vulnerable to short work stoppages and selective strikes ‘involving relatively few employees who can unleash large-scale stoppages along the closely integrated chains of production’ (Brandl and Traxler 2010: 7; cf. Silver 2003: 66–73). Such production structures might thus tend to dampen strike incidence since they empower workers to strike in more economic and effective ways.

5. The inability of traditional strike data: tertiarisation and method displacement?

Given the declining trend in DNW rates and participation it is tempting to concur with linear interpretations of strike activity. But predictions or educated guesses are mostly out of place in the social sciences, let alone in strike studies where researchers are very cautious given the recurring character of strike behaviour in the past. Moreover, the extent of the strike decline has been questioned on the basis of strike data (un)reliability with regard to changes in collection methods, the systematic under-reporting of strikes and the deliberate exclusion of strikes in certain sectors, such as the public sector (see Appendix 1). However, although one accepts the historically low level of DNW rates, it does not indicate that conflict at work is no longer present. Furthermore, the changing DNW rates at the aggregate level only reflect broad tendencies; they mask sectoral differences within national borders (Akkerman 2008: 451). Moreover, unions' approaches and responses to similar adverse conditions are unlikely to be monolithic, given the variety of union identities and their rootedness in unique organisational histories (Martin and Dixon 2010: 99–103).

Alternatively, the low levels might point to a sectoral shift from strikes in the industry towards private services and, especially, public services, which goes hand in hand with a transformation of the logic of strike action. Previous research has cast some doubt on this 'tertiarisation' of the strike weapon, however. The relative increase of strikes in services could simply be an arithmetical result of the decline of strike activity in industry (Edwards and Hyman 1994: 264). Nevertheless, the traditional strike indicators and prevailing interpretations might be inadequate for analysing the 'disruptive' character of strike activity in services. Although this disruptiveness is unevenly spread, the effectiveness of strikes in the service sector stems from workers' 'workplace bargaining power' (Silver 2003: 13) due to their strategic location in the production system. In addition, those workers might have a history of strike experience during previous employment in industry since deindustrialisation is not only the result of the reduction of manufacturing but also of downsizing, that is, contracting out and outsourcing former services within the company (MacKenzie 2010).

Given the workers' workplace bargaining power it is assumed that strikes in services by their very nature do not require a large number of workers and do not have to last long to be effective. At the same time, this limits wage losses and the amount of strike benefits to be paid out (Bordogna and Cella 2002: 599–600). This more economic or tactical use of the strike weapon can

explain why DNW rates in services have not counterbalanced the decrease in DNW rates in industry. While the number of trade unions affiliated to union confederations has been decreasing, the rise of unions in certain categories might offer evidence of their members' strong workplace bargaining power (EC 2011: 20). It is assumed that strikers in services are less concerned with inflicting economic losses on the employer and more with the impact they can have on the users of public or private services. The tertiarisation of the strike weapon thus implies that the number of strikers and days not worked have become less central to analysing strike activity, whereas strike frequency has gained in importance. Given the inadequacy of traditional indicators for assessing strike activity in the service sector a more 'qualitative approach' or other interpretative models might be more appropriate in seeking to confirm the 'tertiarisation' of strike action.¹⁷

Since more women than men work in the service sector, the tertiarisation of the strike weapon might go together with its feminisation. It is difficult to examine the effects of tertiarisation on gender-related issues, however. For most countries, gender-disaggregated statistics are not available, one exception being Belgium. From the detailed Belgian strike data it does appear that tertiarisation of the strike weapon is accompanied by its feminisation, at least in quantitative terms. Figure 6 in Appendix 2 provides evidence that an increase in the share of DNW rates in the public and private service sector goes together with a rise in the share of the DNW rates of female white-collar workers and civil servants. This positive association becomes more pronounced when the (male-dominated) transport sector is left out of the service sector. More 'qualitative' research is needed, however, to examine the consequences of the feminisation of the strike weapon for trade unions and future trends in strike activity (for a research agenda, see Briskin 2007).

In addition, for further exploration of low strike rates reference should be made to the notion of 'method displacement' in some economic sectors (Gall and Hebdon 2008: 593–594). In certain sectors, strike action might be relatively less effective, restricted or simply forbidden, so that the likelihood of workers using other forms of action is increasing. This might be particularly the case in the public service sector, where a so-called 'minimum service' is sometimes required by law or other regulations. For instance, health care workers are particularly inclined to make use of demonstrations, as revealed by the Belgian and Dutch cases (Vandaele 2010a; van der Velden 2006a). Hence, there might be a trade-off between manifest forms of conflict at work, such as strike action, and more latent, individual and collective alternative expressions in certain economic sectors, particularly in those sectors where union representation is weak or absent. In such non-unionised workplaces workers might make more use of alternative dispute resolution, whether judicial or not, as a means of settling workplace disputes, although it is unknown to what extent this kind of resolution is used and if there is any upward trend (Purcell 2010).

17. An example is the analysis that Lyddon (2009) carried out of recent strike activity in the UK.

6. General strikes and the economic crisis

As already mentioned, from the generally declining development of national DNW rates, it is apparent that the ‘floor level’ in some countries is now and then punctuated by individual years of ‘anomalous’ high strike activity. In all cases these sudden rises could be attributed to ‘economic’ sectoral strikes, often in the public sector, or ‘political’ national mass strikes. ‘Political’ national mass strikes, being more ‘manifest and visible’ (Gall and Allsop 2007: 67) than ‘economic’ strikes, have been increasing over the past decades. With 38 mass strikes in 2000–2008 their number is significantly higher than in the previous decade when there were 29 mass strikes – in other words, 11 more than in the 1980s (Kelly and Hamann 2010: 1).¹⁸ Most mass strikes are political motivated, that is, they are multi-employer strikes directed against (planned) government action and legislation to alter employment law (Hamann and Kelly 2008: 143–145).

The majority of them are concentrated geographically in Southern Europe, where the right to strike tends to be written in the constitution, indicating that the costs of a general strike might be considered lower by trade union activists in France, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain (Kelly and Hamann 2010: 15).¹⁹ Nevertheless, before the socio-economic crisis, mass strikes have also been called in Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Norway. Prominent issues of general strikes are pension, labour market and welfare state reforms. Explanations for the increase in general strikes in Southern Europe relate to governments, irrespective of their party composition, that do not take into account the trade unions within the framework of (underdeveloped) corporatist structures, as well as the lack of trade union influence over labour market and welfare reforms, with leftist, often communist union militants time and again playing a mobilising role (idem: 18). In other countries, the abandonment of corporatist traditions by governments and government ‘interventions’ on issues salient to trade union members have been associated with the resurgence of general strikes.

In the past, mass strikes and strike waves were often a catalyst for trade union revitalisation (Franzosi 1995; Friedman 2008; Kelly 1997, 1998; Silver 2003). Today, there is some doubt whether strike action, especially purely ‘economic’ strikes, could be helpful for the purpose of trade union revitalisation. One

¹⁸. Although Greece contributes significantly to this pattern, leaving it out does not change the overall increase.

¹⁹. The right to strike is also included in the Swedish Constitution.

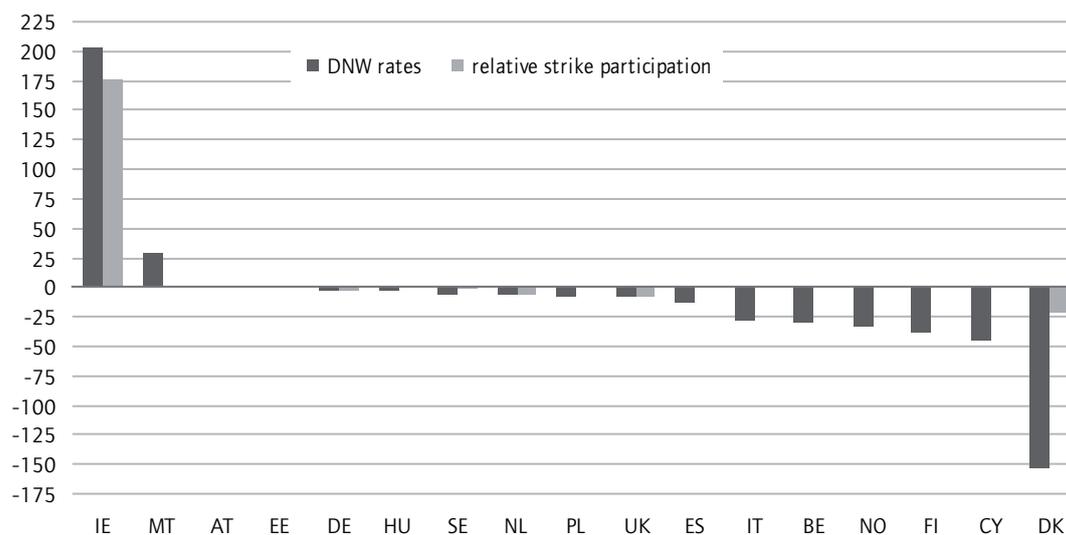
researcher, who in fact sparked the debate on union mobilisation, has little belief in the potential of the strike weapon, since the sharp decline in strike activity suggests – in his and a colleague's view – that 'little [is] to be gained from an empirical examination of the contribution of strike activity to union revitalization' (Frege and Kelly 2004: 33). Often advocating a bottom-up approach to union revitalisation, other researchers tend to take more notice of trade union history as a guide to the future. Predicting a new upsurge in union membership growth, one view advocates that unions should again act as social movements, as they did in the early days of unionism, in order to reignite the trade union movement and that they should seek alliances with other social movements (Clawson 2003). Emphasising the daily experience of workers at the workplace, another researcher sees the strike experience of workers as a necessary precondition of making them aware of the vulnerability and subversion of the hegemony of neoliberal ideas and values (Cohen 2006).

Assuming that strike action, *as a first step*, can be a necessary precondition for developing solidarity (cf. Fantasia 1988) and workers' awareness of the vulnerability of neoliberalism, it might be worth examining the extent to which strike action and other forms of collective action by workers have developed since the current socio-economic crisis when the financial crisis hit Europe at the end of 2008. Since the strike data end in 2009 for almost all countries, however, it is difficult to assess the impact of the socio-economic crisis on strike activity by referring to the official strike statistics. Nonetheless, for those countries where data is already available an assessment is made of whether a strike wave took place in 2009, the year that the crisis fully hit the European economies. Since the focus here is on the possible transformative character of strikes with regard to workers' awareness, the number of strikers has been selected as the principal strike indicator. A strike wave is therefore defined 'as years when the number of strikers is three times the average for the preceding five years' (Freeman 2008: 67). As the number of countries is limited to seven countries (Austria, Denmark, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK), the same calculation is also applied to the DNW rate.

Figure 5 provides an overview of the changes in the strike participation and DNW rates in 2009 compared to the period 2004–2008. It is clear that Ireland is the only country with a strike wave in 2009. However, although the Irish surge in strike activity might be a strike wave in the strict sense, it was fairly limited in terms of economic sectors and duration. The 2009 strike wave could be attributed to a 24-hour national public service strike held in protest at the government's pay cuts, whereby the public sector accounts for three-quarters of the days not worked through strikes in Ireland (Dobbins 2011). In 2010, the DNW level plummeted, to 6,602 days compared to 329,679 days the previous year. In all other countries from which strike data are available, the economic crisis did not lead to a significant rise in strike action in 2009; on the contrary, strike activity declined in 2009 compared to the average of the five preceding years. Part of the explanation for this might be the mounting unemployment. From economic studies it is known that the propensity to engage in strike activity declines in times of rising unemployment since workers perceive that the costs of strike action outweigh the benefits (for example, Ashenfelter and

Johnson 1969). It is also believed that today ‘under the dominance of orthodox economics rising unemployment restrains rather than stimulates industrial action’ (Brandl and Traxler 2010: 8).

Figure 5 Change in strike participation and DNW rate average, 2004–2008 to 2009



Source: See Appendix 1.

It would be too soon, however, to draw major conclusions since an unfavourable economic climate might often influence the dynamics of conflict at work but it does not determine it. Press and media provide evidence that the current socio-economic crisis has a noteworthy effect on the incidence of collective action by workers, predominantly in the public sector. Government's budgetary austerity policies are especially affecting the public sector today, particularly through wage freezes or wage cuts. Several consolidation policies were announced in 2010 as they are seen by international and European authorities and national governments to be necessary for solving the high government debt which has resulted from the measures taken to stabilise the financial sector and bail out failed banks. Very often those policies have been unilaterally decided by the government, without the involvement of trade unions, breaking with the tradition of free collective bargaining in the public sector in several countries (Glassner 2010: 14–16). Hence, it is no coincidence that the preceding year was marked by mass strikes and demonstrations in the public sector across Europe, often with prominent reference to the slogan '*Noi la crisi non la paghiamo!*'²⁰, which first cropped up in Italy in autumn 2008. Although no official strike data are yet available for the most recent years, press and media reports indicate that, unsurprisingly, general strikes – that is, covering all economic sectors – have been held in France, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain, triggered by government reform plans (idem: 28–31). In addition, public sector strikes in all those countries,

20. 'We are not paying for the crisis!'

particularly in Greece, but also in other countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Ireland, Netherlands, Romania, Slovenia and the UK), have also been held to pressurise governments.²¹ In Austria, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Sweden demonstrations have so far been the sole expression of workers' protest, giving the impression that those demonstrations are a functional equivalent of more costly general or public sector strikes.

Not all countries have announced or introduced austerity measures yet, while in other countries the measures have not come fully into force, so that their impact is not yet tangible for (public sector) workers in their day-to-day lives. This feeds speculation (and fears) about a 'battle ahead' (*The Economist*, 6 January 2011), in other words, an upsurge in mass mobilisation in autumn 2011 and in the coming years, especially since the public sector is the most unionised sector today (except in Belgium). Whereas in Western Europe the promotion of public employment was considered part of mitigating the unemployment problems caused by the socio-economic crisis of the 1970s – and there are considerable country differences in terms of public employment levels – employment regulation in the public sector is increasingly seen by governments as 'outmoded' and part of the socio-economic difficulties of today. Despite being challenged since 2009 by mass strikes and (union) demonstrations across Europe, in response to the (announced) austerity measures, the neoliberal agenda of pension, labour market and welfare reforms and the neoliberal framework are thus still fairly intact. Up until now (public sector) unions could only at best 'slow down or modify [the] neo-liberal reforms' (Kelly and Frege 2004: 192). An increase in public sector strikes, commonly defensive in nature, seeking to maintain existing employment regulation, will probably neither change the continued proliferation of neoliberal policies nor stimulate trade union revitalisation. To achieve that, tactical alliances with social movements and coalitions between public sector unions and trade unions in the private (services) sector will probably be needed and, above all, strikes have to be won again, pushing forward an 'offensive union agenda' and a 'new vision' (Hyman 2007) of (capitalist) society. A significant rise in inflation, adding to uncertainty about the contemporaneous and expected path of price changes, might trigger an increase in strike activity in the private sector, as was the case at the beginning of the 1920s, in the late 1940s and in the 1970s (Goerke and Madsen 2004: 397, 408 and 416).

21. Likewise, collective action by workers has also been expressed by demonstrations in all those countries.

7. Conclusions

Although mass strikes might punctuate the decline in DNW rates in certain years, the decrease in strike activity has continued in Western Europe and stands at a low level in CEE countries. Despite this trend, not unsurprisingly, strike action is still unpopular (cf. Hyman 1988: 166–173). It is self-evident that employers and their organisations dislike strike action, in essence, because of the production losses they entail (although the latter can be regained after the strike by overtime). For governments, production losses are also a ground for avoiding strikes, when they act as an employer, but they also have other reasons. In short, strikes are sometimes called to question the policies of national governments and, additionally, might be perceived as endangering the ‘general interest’ by stimulating capital flight and hindering an attractive investment climate.²² In general, ‘public opinion’, as constructed by press and broadcast media, is also not very fond of strike actions. Furthermore, historically, the majority of trade unions and their leaders have tried to discipline the workforce and to manage social conflict. Finally, workers also try to prevent strike action since it simply means a loss of income, even if unions provide strike benefits, and they have to overcome social risks.

Furthermore, strike action is also a relatively predictable form of collective action by workers since in most cases they relate to collective bargaining at the firm level or higher. Strikes are also fairly negligible compared to other reasons why workers legally do not work.²³ Despite all this, strikes still have a public impact; they can still count on considerable media coverage; and they are still a concern for authorities, employers and, self-evidently, trade unions. Various reasons might explain this. First of all, against the background of the still prevailing neoliberal ideological hegemony, strikes interrupt the banality of everyday life at the workplace and may call into question the assumed harmonious relations between workers and employers by strike leaders reframing those relations in terms of opposing interests. Secondly, the tendency to strengthen strike regulations tends to draw the attention of the

22. Similarly, European demonstrations or other forms of collective action can question the policy of the European Commission.

23. Data on Belgium show that the DNW rates only account for 0.7 per cent of total days not worked between 1991 and 2010: not being able to work due to an accident at work, sickness, pregnancy and so on are considerably more important (Vandaele 2010b: 19 and author’s own updates). Although measured in another way, similar results for the UK show also the relative ‘irrelevance’ of strikes in influencing economic output. From the estimated 41,100 million hours worked, 3.6 million hours were ‘lost’ through strikes in 2009 or approximately one in every 11,600 potential workings days (Hale 2010: 50).

authorities – to which the media contribute – to every strike that somehow questions with the existing regulations or long-term social conflicts that tend to resonate in the political arena. Finally, the ‘tertiarisation’ of the strike weapon not only means that strikes are shifting from manufacturing to the services sector; it also implies that ‘third parties’ – the users of services of general interest – irrespective of whether a given utility is publicly or privately owned, are affected by the strike. Many of these trends are common across Europe. However, since the rank order between European countries shows remarkable stability over a 20-year period – albeit with a tendency towards convergence – possible future dynamics of workers’ collective action and its meaning will almost certainly continue to vary across Europe, not at least because of ‘the attitudes of other sections of society and principally of the state towards labour itself’ (Geary 1981: 19).

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Glossary

CEE	Central and Eastern Europe
DNW	Days not worked
EC	European Commission
LRD	Labour Research Department
n.a.	not available
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
VoC	Varieties of Capitalism

List of country codes

AT	Austria
BE	Belgium
BG	Bulgaria
CH	Switzerland
CY	Cyprus
CZ	Czech Republic
DE	Germany
DK	Denmark
EE	Estonia
ES	Spain
FI	Finland
FR	France
GR	Greece
HU	Hungary
IE	Ireland
IT	Italy
LT	Lithuania
LU	Luxembourg
LT	Latvia
MT	Malta
NL	Netherlands
NO	Norway
PL	Poland
PT	Portugal
RO	Romania
SE	Sweden
SI	Slovenia
SK	Slovakia
UK	United Kingdom

Appendix 1

A short methodological note on strike data

Strikes, as a symptom of and one of the more visible expressions of conflict at work, occupy the bulk of popular attention and public policy debates. They are often considered an indicator of the health of 'social dialogue' between trade unions and employers' organisations. However, they are not the only expression of workers' discontent and grievances (Gall and Hebdon 2008: 589–590 and 595). Conflict at work can take various forms and can be expressed individually (labour turnover, absenteeism, poor time-keeping and discipline and negative attitudes) or (semi-)collectively via industrial action concerning the intensity of work (work-to-rules and go-slows) or extent of work (overtime bans) or via (Luddite-like) sabotage, 'conclave-like management keeping' and so on. Notwithstanding the various expressions of conflict at work, the main focus of researchers is strikes. This preoccupation is often explained by their visibility, their importance – since strikes actually stop work and are therefore a clear challenge to the managerial prerogative – and, more straightforwardly, the manner of registering and collecting strike information compared to other expressions of conflict at work, although this might be due to the 'lack of comprehensive frameworks of workplace conflict which take into account less visible expressions and their interrelationships' (Gall and Hebdon 2008: 597). Data on conflicts at work short of strike action are incomplete, non-standardised and not available on a long-term basis. In most cases such data are derived only from one-off episodic surveys in certain countries. Suffice to say that comparisons over time and between countries are not easy.

Despite the fact that strikes might be more worthy of measurement and more measurable, various data problems complicate consistent comparisons of the strike development of countries over time. First of all, there are difficulties of continuity since official strike data are simply not available for certain years or are no longer collected in some European countries. In recent times it looks as if governments have lost interest in gathering strike data (cf. Perry 2009). Although the UK has continued its strike series, the official collecting of strike data came under threat in 2001 (Lyddon 2009: 316). Very recently, for austerity reasons, the collection of strike data has been on the 'negative priority list' of Eurostat, the statistical office of the European Union, and at the time of writing it is uncertain whether strike data will be further updated or not at the European level. In some European countries data are no longer collected. Since 2002, no official government institution has been collecting strike information in Belgium (Vandaele 2010b: 19–22; 2007: 201). The number of days not worked through strikes, as the only indicator, can be retrieved from an administrative source within the framework of the social security system since 1991, however. But the underestimation of strike activity continues as a result of the new procedure. Greece stopped gathering strike information in 1999 (Chernyshev 2003: 7), without giving an official reason, although the 'sheer embarrassment' (Wallance and O'Sullivan 2006: 277) of the Greek authorities at the high strike statistics might be one. Recently, Italy has officially abandoned gathering strike information for austerity reasons.

For the period examined in this working paper there are no official strike data available for Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Slovakia (until 2008).

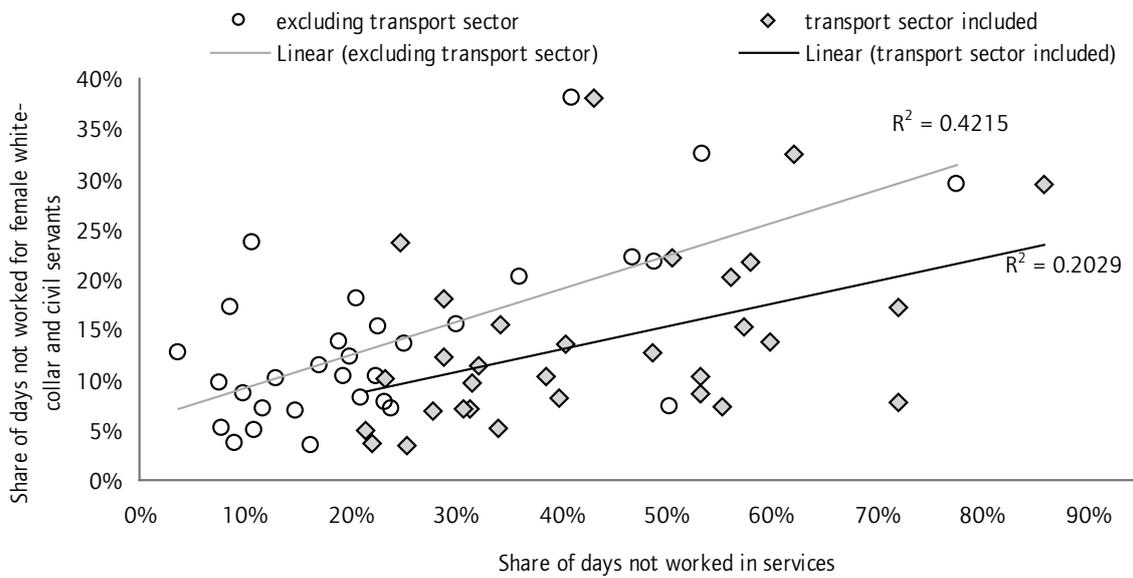
Table 5 Data sources utilised

Country	Period	Source
Austria	1990–2008	Laborstat (ILO). Number of workers: OECD.Stat
Belgium	1991–2009	Vandaele (2010b) and own updates
Bulgaria		No official data available.
Cyprus	1990–2009	Carley (2010); Laborstat (ILO)
Czech Republic		No official data available.
Denmark	1990–2009	Birke (2007); Carley (2010); Larostat
Estonia	1992–2001; 2003–2009	Carley (2007, 2010); Laborstat (ILO)
Finland	1990–2009	Eurostat; Laborstat (ILO)
France	1990–2008	Bouquin (2007); Eurostat; Laborstat (ILO)
Germany	1990–2008	Dribbusch (2007); Eurostat Bundesagentur für Arbeit- Statistik; Number of workers: Eurostat
Greece	1990–1998	Laborstat (ILO). Number of workers: OECD.Stat
Hungary	1991–2008	Laborstat (ILO); Carley (2010)
Ireland	1990–2009	Eurostat; Laborstat (ILO). Number of workers: Eurostat
Italy	1990–2009	Carley (2010); Eurostat; Laborstat (ILO). Number of workers: Eurostat
Latvia	1997–2008	Eurostat
Lithuania	2000–2008	Eurostat
Luxembourg	1990–2007	Carley (2008, 2010); Eurostat; Laborstat (ILO)
Malta	1990–2009	Baldacchino (2009); Carley (2010)
Netherlands	1990–2009	Centraal Bureau voor Statistiek. Number of workers: Eurostat
Norway	1990–2009	Eurostat; Laborstat (ILO); Carley (2010). Number of workers: OECD.Stat.
Poland	1990–2009	Carley (2010); Gardawski et. al (2010). Number of workers: OECD.stat
Portugal	1990–2007	Eurostat; Laborstat (ILO); Ministry of Labour and Social Solidarity. Number of workers: OECD.Stat
Romania	1995–2008	Eurostat
Slovakia	1991–2008	Carley (2008, 2010); Laborstat (ILO)
Slovenia		No official data available.
Spain	1990–2009	Carley (2010); Laborstat (ILO).
Sweden	1990–2009	Carley (2010); Eurostat; Laborstat (ILO). Number of workers: OECD.Stat
Switzerland	1994–2008	Eurostat; Laborstat (ILO)
UK	1990–2009	Carley (2009); Eurostat; Lyddon (2007b)

In countries where strike data are officially collected, data problems arise from the different methods used to register strike activity and the (changing) criteria for the inclusion of strikes (Aligisakis 1997: 76–77; Lyddon 2007a; Wallance and O’Sullivan 2006: 275–278). Structural underestimation applies especially to many small strikes since they go unnoticed by the statistical authorities or the parties involved feel no need to report them. Furthermore, some countries use different thresholds for including strikes, mostly depending on the number of workers involved or a minimum number of days not worked through strikes. Major changes to those thresholds can even lead to a certain discontinuity in strike data series. Other countries exclude certain economic regions, sectors or strikes deliberately (for details, see for example Chernyshev 2003). Finally, statistics suffer from data limitations since not all countries differentiate between strikes and lock-outs, although employer-initiated work stoppages clearly have a different logic from a power analytical perspective (Hyman 1988: 17–18; van der Velden 2006b). Since the Eurostat database does not have strike data for all years concerned, several databases have been combined or alternative sources have been used: Table 5 gives an overview of the various databases that have been used. For some countries, data are missing for recent since they have not yet reported them.

Appendix 2 Evidence of the feminisation of the strike weapon in Belgium

Figure 6 Relationship between days not worked in services and days not worked by female white-collar workers and civil servants, 2003–2010 (quartiles)



Source: Vandaele (2010: 38) and author's own updates.

Note: Last quartile of 2010 is missing.

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