

## **General Strikes in Western Europe, 1980-2008**

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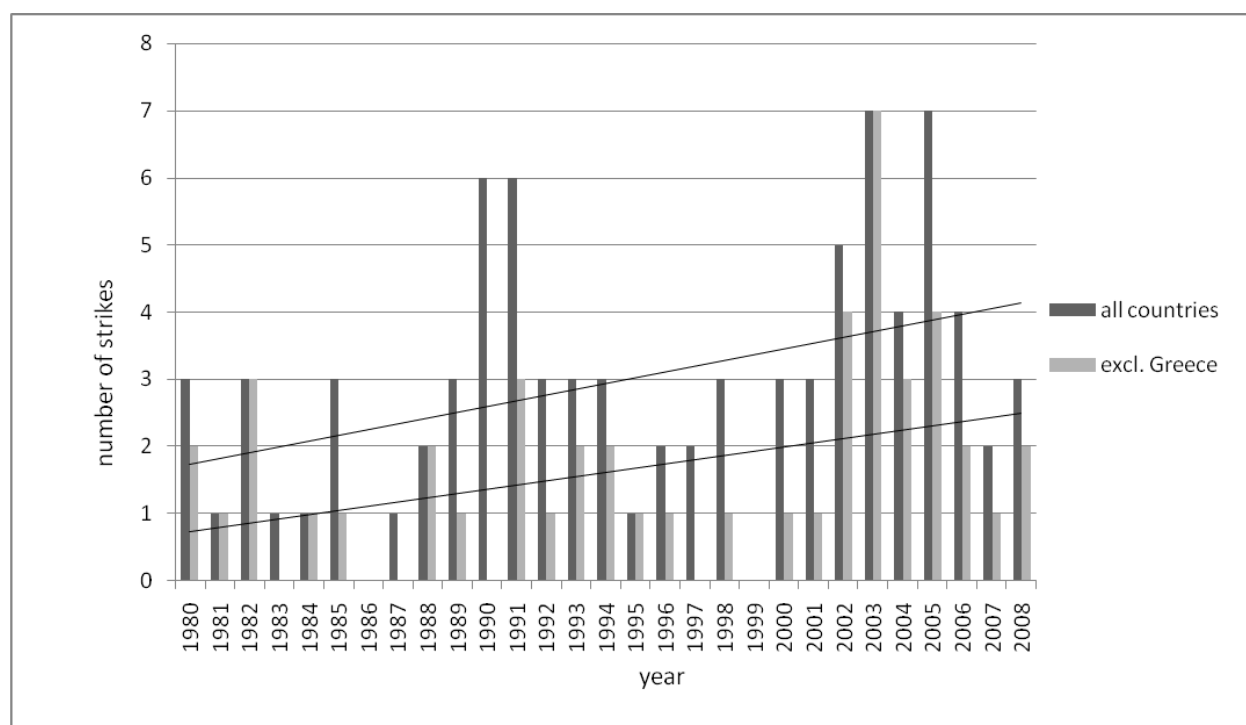
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## 1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, the incidence of strike activity against employers in Western Europe ('economic' strikes) has declined dramatically, whether measured by days lost, numbers of strikes, or workers involved. Between 1970 and 1979 an average of 419 working days per 1000 employees were lost to strike action each year in the major OECD countries, but by 2000-2004 days lost to strikes had decreased by almost 90 per cent to just 51 days per 1000 (Piazza 2005: 290; Scheuer 2006: 144, 149; van der Velden et al. 2007). Yet, intriguingly, at the same time the frequency of general strikes to protest against government policy has risen since 1980.<sup>1</sup> Figure 1 shows that between 1980 and 1989, unions staged 18 general strikes against governments in Western Europe, a number that increased by 50 per cent to 29 in the following decade; and between 2000 and 2008, the number of general strikes grew again to 38. In addition, unions issued a total of 11 credible general strike threats, once during the 1980s, eight times in the 1990s, and twice after 2000. While Greece certainly contributed significantly to the large number of general strikes, the overall pattern of general strikes persists even if we exclude Greece. Although several countries with a relatively high level of general strikes also tend to have relatively high levels of economic strike activity (e.g. Greece, Italy, and Spain), general strikes have also been called in countries with below-EU average levels of strike activity, such as Austria and the Netherlands.



**Figure 1: Number of general strikes in Western Europe 1980-2008 (rev)**

**Sources:** *EIRR, EIRO, Protest and Coercion Database.*

Given these patterns, we are interested in two related questions: How can we explain the overall high level of general strikes in Western Europe? And which factors can account for

the variation across countries in the incidence of general strikes? We explore these questions for 16 Western European countries (EU 15 plus Norway).

Theories developed to explain the existence, rise, or decline of economic strikes are poorly equipped to account for general strikes. For one, the empirical patterns displayed in Figure 1 demonstrate that patterns of general strikes diverge from those of economic strikes. In addition, general strikes differ fundamentally from economic strikes: General strikes are directed against governments and their (proposed) policies rather than employers; they are often organized around broad, rather than sectional or occupational, issues, of concern to large segments of the population beyond those employed in specific firms or sectors; the issues that motivate general strikes are not generally those that are subject to regular collective bargaining processes; and general strike mobilizations may well extend beyond the unions' membership and activist base to include many non-union employees. Thus, it makes little sense to expect that explanations developed to account for workplace, company, or even industry-wide strikes will also be able to illuminate the causes of general strikes.

Given the dearth of existing explanations for general strikes, we explore several factors to account for the relatively high level of such strikes across Western Europe. As general strikes are directed against governments and their (proposed) policies, we focus on the political context surrounding such events. In particular, we examine the degree of union inclusion or exclusion from policy formation and the 'opportunity structures' that are available to unions as channels of influence.

The next section defines general strikes and provides an overview of patterns of general strikes across Western Europe. Section 3 briefly lays out why theories of strike action are of limited value in explaining the patterns of general strikes. In section 4 we present our own framework of analysis. Section 5 briefly discusses questions concerning data and measurement. Section 6 offers a preliminary analysis of general strike patterns in Western Europe as a whole and also looks in more detail at strikes in the 'Mediterranean' economies and the 'coordinated' economies. The final section concludes.

## **2. The Patterns of General Strikes**

There is no generally agreed definition of the term 'general strike' or its various synonyms, such as 'political strike' or 'protest strike' (see for example Walsh 1983). We therefore propose to revise Hyman's (1989: 17) standard definition of a strike as follows:

'A general strike is a temporary, national stoppage of work by workers from many industries, directed against the executive or legislative arms of government, to enforce a demand or give voice to a grievance.'

A general strike involves the mobilization by one or more confederations of the whole of its membership, as well as non-union members, typically in protest against a proposed government policy reform, or following a breakdown in bi- or tripartite negotiations about policy reform. Given this definition the following actions would *not* count as general strikes: a stoppage by just one group of workers protesting government intervention; a stoppage involving many groups of workers in just one region of a country; and a stoppage by public sector employees protesting against the government in its capacity as employer. Although general strikes can also be called to protest regional government policy, we focus here on general strikes at the national level directed against the national government only. Typically a general strike will be a one-off action on a particular issue or set of issues. However, when a confederation has called a series of general strikes on the same issue over a short space of time, we count each strike as a separate mobilization. Working days lost and workers involved per 1000 employees are the most commonly used measures of strike activity in preference to simple frequency counts (see for example Monger 2005; van der Velden et al 2007). In the case of general strikes, as with all large, multi-workplace strikes, data on days lost and workers involved are extremely unreliable

(Lyddon 2007). However, as the number of general strikes can be measured very accurately, we use this measure here (details of the data sources are described in section 5 below).

The downturn in economic strikes is conventionally dated from approximately 1980 (e.g. Edwards and Hyman 1994; Shalev 1992). We have followed this practice, starting to trace general strikes in January 1980 that year and ending December 2008.<sup>2</sup> A total of 85 general strikes and an additional 11 threats to stage a general strike took place in 10 of the 16 countries (six countries experienced no general strikes: Denmark, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Sweden, and the UK).<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 displays a general upward trend with peaks in the early 1990s and early to mid-2000s. Because 38 of these 85 strikes occurred in just one country – Greece – the lower curve excludes the Greek case; yet, excluding Greece does not alter either the slopes of the curve or the presence and timing of the twin peaks – general strikes have a stable presence across nine countries in Western Europe in addition to Greece.

Table 1 reveals the national distribution of general strikes and documents their concentration in the Southern European economies of France, Greece, Italy, Spain, and to a lesser degree Portugal. These five countries alone account for 82% (70) of the 85 strikes in this period. The remaining strikes (15) were organized in countries that have for many years recorded some of the lowest levels of industrial conflict in Europe: Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Norway, whilst several countries that have recently ranked high on economic strikes stand out for their absence of general strikes e.g. Denmark and Ireland. Thus, the country rankings of general strikes and economic strikes 1980-2006 are not correlated (Spearman's rho =0.03) (Table 1).

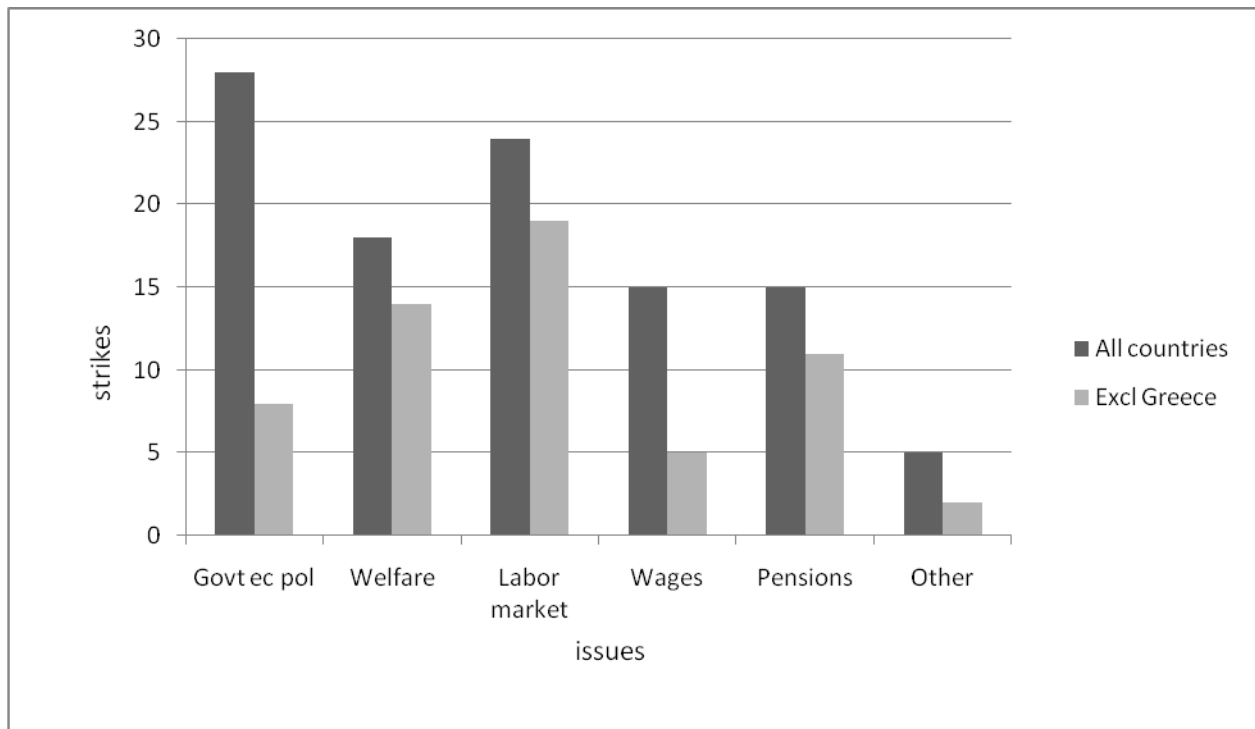
Country	General strikes 1980-2008	Strike ranking 1980-2006 (days lost/1000)
Greece	38	1
Italy	13	3
France	10	11
Belgium	7	12
Spain	6	2
Austria	3	13
Netherlands	3	15
Portugal	3	10
Luxembourg	1	16
Norway	1	8
Denmark	0	6
Finland	0	4
Germany	0	14
Ireland	0	5
Sweden	0	9
UK	0	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>85</b>	

**Table 1: General and Economic Strikes by Country**

**Sources:** As for Figure 1 plus Hale (2008), Monger (2005), Bird (1991).

Across all cases, general strikes have been precipitated by a wide range of different issues, announced as planned policy reforms by national governments. We classified these issues under the following six categories: wages, including basic rates, overtime and holiday pay; labour market reform, including bargaining structures, legal regulation of dismissals and redundancies, and non-wage issues such as work time; pensions; other welfare issues, including sickness and unemployment benefits; economic policy; and a miscellaneous category for issues that did not fit any of the other ones just listed. Many general strikes were organized around one major issue but a substantial minority featured a variety of issues. Figure 2 displays the distribution of the issues that motivated general strikes (excluding strike threats). If more than one issue led to a strike or a strike threat, each issue was counted separately; consequently, the total number of issues exceeds the strike total.

Figure 2 shows that government intervention to restrain the level of wage settlements has played only a modest part in the genesis of general strikes as wage issues constituted just 14% (N=15) of all issues. If Greece is excluded, only 8% (N=5) of all issues concerned wages, indicating that general strikes to protest wage restraint have been more heavily concentrated in Greece compared to other countries. Instead, welfare, pensions, and labour market reform have precipitated the majority of general strikes (54%, 57 of all issues), a tendency that is even more pronounced when Greece is excluded and these issues account for 75% (44 of all issues). Furthermore, although numerous general strikes were called to protest against government economic policy on issues such as taxation and public expenditure, Figure 2 illustrates that the overwhelming majority of these have occurred in Greece. During the 1980s, wages were the most prominent issue motivating strikes (7 out of 18 strikes), followed by economic policies (5 strikes). 'Economic policy' was the subject of no less than 16 of the 29 strikes in the 1990s, many of them in Greece. But in other countries welfare and pensions became the most frequent topics of strike action in the 1990s, accounting for 6 out of 11 strikes in that decade. Between 2000 and 2008 labour market and pension reforms emerged as the most frequent subjects of strike action across all countries, accounting for 15 and 9 strikes respectively (12 and 9 in the non-Greek countries) from a total of 38.



## Figure 2: Issues in General Strikes, 1980-2008

**Sources:** As for Table 1.

In sum, general strike frequency in Western Europe has steadily risen since 1980, peaking in the early 1990s and again in the early to mid-2000s at the same time as days lost through economic strikes against employers were in steady decline. For the most part general strikes were organized around non-wage issues involving government attempts to reform labour laws, welfare systems, and pensions. Finally, the highly uneven geographical spread of general strikes suggests that the dynamics and indeed the meaning of such actions may vary significantly across countries. A general strike in Greece (38 in 29 years) may have a different meaning and very different causes and consequences from a general strike in the Netherlands or Austria, where such actions are extremely rare. The next section explains why existing theories of strikes are not able to explain the occurrence of general strikes in Western Europe, nor are they equipped to account for cross-national variation in the frequency of general strikes.

### 3. Existing Theories of Strikes

Existing strike theories were developed to account for the variation in the occurrence of strikes launched against employers, i.e. “economic” strikes. Here, we briefly summarize the main approaches and insights gained in this literature. We then outline why these existing theories are not adequate to illuminate the existence of general strike before developing our own explanation in more detail.

Theories of economic strikes can be grouped into four categories: economic (business cycle, economic globalization), labour force composition, industrial relations institutions (union structure, bargaining coverage and coordination), and power resources (Brandl and Traxler 2010; Edwards and Hyman 1994; Piazza 2005; Scheuer 2006). These theories are not exclusive and address different facets of strike activity (frequency, workers involved, days lost); sometimes they are combined in models of strike activity (e.g. Franzosi 1995).

Business cycle theories identify unemployment, price inflation, real wage growth and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as key factors that impact on workers’ wage expectations and their willingness to strike (e.g. Ashenfelter and Johnson 1969; Cronin 1979). However, the underlying theoretical models of unions and the bargaining process often assume that strike demands centre on wages or monetary benefits without considering other issues as motivating strikes (Tsebelis and Lange 1995: 103-107). Globalization of the economy has also been considered a factor in depressing overall levels of strike activity in Western Europe. Piazza’s (2005) study of 15 OECD countries 1952-2001 asserts that two measures of globalization – increased international trade and reduced controls on capital mobility – are significantly associated with a decline in days lost to strikes, especially in countries with low (below-median) union density.

Changes in the composition of the unionized labour force – fewer industrial workers and more public sector workers – have resulted in a growing proportion of days lost to strikes taking place in the public sector (Bordogna and Cella 2002: 601), but do not easily explain the decline in economic strikes, nor cross-national differences in strike rates (Edwards and Hyman 1994: 264-169).

The number and size of strikes are also crucially influenced by industrial relations institutions, especially the structure of collective bargaining (centralization and coordination) and trade union density (e.g. Clegg 1976). Centralized bargaining structures that facilitated corporatist policymaking in the 1970s have been associated with fewer but larger strikes and the recent trend in some countries towards decentralization of bargaining is positively associated with a greater incidence of strikes (Brandl and Traxler 2010). In contrast there is no robust link

between union density and strike activity: the most strike-prone countries in Europe (2002-06) include high-density Finland, modest-density Italy and low-density Spain (Hale 2008).

The fourth approach focuses on the power resources of trade unions, conceptualizing them as a combination of high trade union density and political influence over social democratic governments (Kelly 1998: 37; Korpi and Shalev 1979; Scheuer 2006: 155). The underlying reasoning of this approach is that strong unions that are able to influence pro-labour governments will have less need to strike. Brand and Traxler (2010) show the predicted link between social democratic dominance of government and low levels of strike action although the mechanisms connecting the variable are somewhat unclear.

However, while these theories, alone or in combination, have been successfully employed to explain economic strike activity, they are less well suited to illuminate general strikes. A cursory empirical review suffices to illustrate the shortcomings of traditional strike theories for general strikes. For example, we examined business cycle factors in the five countries with the most substantial numbers of general strikes, Greece, Italy, France, Spain, and Belgium. Table 2 cross-tabulates changes in unemployment levels, consumer prices, GDP growth rates, and gross earnings against the timing of general strikes and strike threats in these countries. It reveals that there is no clear relationship between three of these variables – unemployment, inflation, and real wages – and the timing of general strikes. To take employment to illustrate the point, general strikes were more likely to be called during periods of *falling* unemployment in Greece and Italy but during times of *rising* unemployment in Spain and Belgium. Only GDP growth appears to be clearly associated with general strikes: far more general strikes were called during periods of economic slowdown (declining rate of GDP growth or actual contraction) than during boom periods in all five countries.

		Greece	Italy	France	Spain	Belgium	Total
Unemployment	Falling	25	13	4	1	1	44
	Rising	13	3	6	6	6	34
Price inflation	Falling	18	7	5	5	1	36
	Rising	20	9	5	2	6	42
GDP growth rate	Falling	23	10	8	4	5	50
	Rising	15	6	2	3	2	28
Gross nominal earnings	Falling	20	5	5	5	5	40
	Rising	18	11	5	2	2	38

**Table 2: Business Cycle Indicators and General Strikes (Including Strike Threats) in Five West European Countries, 1980-2008**

**Sources:** *OECD Economic Outlook*, June 2007, December 1999, December 1996.

Concerning the composition of the workforce, again the evidence does not match the observed outcomes. For instance, the total percentage of industrial workers in the five countries with the largest number of general strikes 1980-2008 (Greece, Italy, France, Belgium and Spain) was 25.5% in 2000. However, the total figure for the six countries without any general strikes in this period was almost identical, at 25.1% (European Commission 2006). Industrial relations institutions tend to change only slowly and their stability over time does not lend itself to explain the rise in general strikes since 1980. Moreover their similarities across countries are of little use in accounting for cross-national variation in strikes. For example, all but two countries have multiple union confederations (Ireland and the UK are the exceptions) and bargaining coverage is approximately 80% and stable in most countries (apart from the UK and Ireland) (Hamann and Kelly 2008). With respect to power resources, in particular union density, it is the case that general strikes have occurred frequently in low-density countries (France, Greece, and Spain, for example) and are almost unknown in the high union density Scandinavian countries (Hamann and Kelly 2008). In sum, existing strike theories offer limited insights into the pattern of recent general strikes in Western Europe, both across countries and over time.

From a theoretical standpoint, it is not surprising that existing theories of strikes carry little explanatory power for either the overall frequency or cross-national variation in general strikes: General strikes are fundamentally different from the type of strikes against employers that these theories have attempted to explain. In contrast to economic strikes, general strikes are not regularly or sometimes even routinely occurring components of regular bargaining processes. They attempt to mobilize the workforce at the national level rather than at the company or sectoral level. They target the government and planned policy changes rather than the employer and workplace-related issues. They tend not to be related to routine collective bargaining processes but rather are an occasional reaction to government policies or planned policies. Thus, general strikes demand an explanation that departs from that of employer-focused strikes.

#### **4. A Framework for Explaining General Strikes**

Under what conditions, then, are unions more likely to react to government policies with a general strike? Theories of general strikes are rare.<sup>4</sup> We develop a framework to explain general strikes that is based around four sets of variables: the nature of the issues in dispute; attributes of the key actors, governments, political parties and unions; the institutions that facilitate union influence over government (opportunity structures); and the costs of strike action. In addition we also comment briefly on the significance of different 'varieties of capitalism'.

##### *Government policies*

First, the policies of many governments in Western Europe since the early 1980s have involved downward pressure both on direct wage costs and on indirect costs such as social security and pension contributions by employers. Welfare and pension reforms have often involved some combination of cutbacks in benefit levels, restricted eligibility and increased employee contributions (Immergut et al 2007). In addition, many governments have also sought to increase labour market flexibility by amending employment protection and working time laws or adjusting collective bargaining structures (Hamann and Kelly 2007). These areas of state intervention in the economy correspond to the issues that have dominated general strike calls (see Figure 2), a reflection of that fact that many welfare reforms are likely to prove highly unpopular with segments of the electorate (Pierson 1994). Governments perhaps have become more sensitive to public opinion because of increased electoral volatility (see e.g. Dalton 2000; Dalton et al 2000), thus potentially making them more vulnerable to popular opposition



expressed through mobilizations. Hamann and Kelly (2007) propose that governments have resorted to social pacts as a way to limit negative electoral consequences from these potentially controversial reforms. Thus, the rise of social pacts from the early 1980s could be seen as a reflection of 'blame avoidance' (Pierson 1994) especially as social pact offers are more likely to emerge from minority governments (Hamann and Kelly 2009; Hassel 2006).

We thus expect that the frequency of general strikes will be higher where there is a large volume of government intervention in wages, labor market, and welfare reform. However, we also expect general strikes will be less frequent against governments that include unions in negotiations of policy reforms (and more frequent against governments that simply legislate and exclude the social partners) even though negotiations with the social partners may become deadlocked or rejected by unions.

### *Governments and parties*

Second, we contend that the type of government matters, in particular, the type of party/ies in government. General strikes overall should be more frequently directed against conservative governments than against leftist governments. Many unions are ideologically and organizationally closer to leftist parties and might be less likely to protest against leftist governments with a national work stoppage than against conservative governments. This hypothesis is also consistent with the corporatism literature, which asserts that leftist-led governments provide more room for unions to influence governmental policies through both party and governmental channels, making it less likely that unions will protest such governments (Molina and Rhodes 2002).

However, since the 1980s, in several West European countries social democratic parties have experienced three sets of changes that may be linked to the rise in general strike and to variation across countries. First, a number of these parties have re-evaluated their policies on issues such as welfare spending and labour market flexibility and have become more centrist, approximating the policies of their Christian Democrat and conservative competitors (see, for example, Callaghan 2000; Kitschelt 1994; Piazza 2001). Second, some social democratic parties have weakened their organizational links with trade unions as they have sought to broaden their electoral appeal well beyond the declining ranks of organized unions (Burgess 2004; Hindley 1997; Piazza 2001). Together, these processes suggest that insofar as the special relationship between unions and social democratic parties has atrophied, unions may become just as willing to strike against social democratic as against conservative governments. Third, it has been argued that where social democratic parties have lost vote or seat shares in the legislature they will be less useful as channels of influence for trade unions (Piazza 2001). Consequently union leaderships will have an incentive to develop other forms of influence, which might include general strikes.

### *Trade unions*

Turning to unions, mobilization theory (sometimes known as social movement theory) suggests that the incidence of trade union collective action against government policies is positively influenced by a number of individual and organizational variables (Kelly 1998; Tarrow 1994).<sup>5</sup> Individual variables include a sense of grievance or injustice and a belief that the government is to 'blame' for its planned policies because it could have acted differently. However, these variables require reliable individual attitudinal data, which is difficult to obtain. Thus, we concentrate here on organizational variables. Union collective action requires leaders who are unsympathetic to government welfare or labour market reforms and who are likely to 'frame' such policies as unjust. In addition collective action requires leaders who believe general strikes are a legitimate form of protest and who are therefore willing to mobilize members and

supporters for such actions. A priori we can hypothesize that union leaders who are 'leftist' by party affiliation, voting, or attitudes will be more likely to mobilize members for general strikes compared to union leaders who are not as leftist.

### *Opportunity structures*

The incidence of collective action is influenced by 'opportunity structures', the number and openness of decision-making bodies that permit discussion of union demands with government (Kriesi 2004).<sup>6</sup> However, the direction of any relationship is unclear from the literature: some have argued that relatively 'open' structures encourage the presentation of demands by trade unions and their backing by collective action (Tarrow 1994). Others have suggested that closed structures that discourage or prevent demand presentation lead to frustration amongst trade unions, which, in turn, leads to collective action (Tilly 1978). Formal opportunity structures for union influence on government can take three forms: institutionalized channels of influence, such as tripartite councils; the structures of social democratic parties present in national legislatures; and the willingness of the government to include unions (and employers) in tripartite negotiations, or social pacts. We would expect that the more extensive the opportunity structures, the less incentive unions have to organize general strikes.

### *The costs of strikes*

The probability of occurrence of collective action is also influenced by the costs and benefits of such action, both for the individual participants and for their unions. Costs of action can be imposed by governments, employers, or both. One influence over their capacity to impose costs is the legal status of general strikes. The more restrictive the legislation on general (or what are sometimes called 'political') strikes is, the less likely we are to see general strikes as a form of union protest against government.

### *Varieties of Capitalism and state intervention*

The literature on 'Varieties of Capitalism' suggests that institutional differences between the Coordinated Market Economies (CMEs) of central Europe, the Liberal Market Economies (UK, Ireland), and the Mediterranean Economies may be associated with differing patterns of behaviour by firms, governments, and unions (Hall and Soskice 2001). Governments in the CMEs may be more willing to negotiate with the encompassing union and employer organizations of those countries compared to governments in the LMEs since these economies are built on a higher level of trust and cooperation (Hall and Soskice 2001), thus potentially reducing unions' incentives to stage general strikes. The Mediterranean economies have been relatively understudied within the VoC framework although Schmidt (2002: 113), for example, distinguishes the 'state capitalism' of France and Italy from the two more conventional types of capitalism, the liberal and coordinated (or managed) varieties (see also Amable 2003 on 'Mediterranean capitalism'). She argues that the hallmark of the Mediterranean economy is the degree of state intervention, evidenced, for example, in the regulation of labour markets, through employment protection legislation, and in wage bargaining. One implication is a possibly greater volume of government reform activity in labour markets and wage determination within these more 'statist' economies and consequently a greater degree of union-government conflict. In addition, Molina and Rhodes (2007) contend that whilst governments in these countries are likely to attempt tripartite reforms, they lack the institutional foundations, such as strong employer organizations and effective bargaining coordination, required for such reforms to be agreed and implemented. The low level of bargaining coordination in the Mediterranean economies is also associated with other industrial relations

institutions that distinguish them from many LMEs and CMEs: a relatively low level of union density, a politically divided union movement, a high level of unemployment and income inequality, and a high level of employment protection legislation (Hamann and Kelly 2008). Although neither the VoC nor the welfare state regimes literature (e.g. Esping-Anderson 1990; Huber and Stephens 2001) offer any predictions about levels of industrial conflict in LMEs, CMEs, Mediterranean, or the Scandinavian economies, it could be hypothesized that general strike frequency will be positively associated with a higher degree of state intervention in the economy.

In the following sections, we conduct some preliminary tests to assess the explanatory power of our framework. First, however, several issues related to the data demand attention.

## 5. Data

Data on general strikes are difficult to collect because some countries exclude what they call 'political strikes' from their national statistics, e.g. Belgium, France, or the UK, whilst other countries include them but do not distinguish them from economic strikes directed against employers, e.g. Denmark or Italy (Walsh 1983: 50-51). Eastern European strike statistics are not available for the 1980s and post-1990 data are sometimes based on narrow definitions of strike action or supplied by trade union sources whose reliability is unknown (EIRO 2005). We therefore confined our sample to the EU15, i.e. Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, and the UK, in addition to Norway. Several useful sources can be used to construct a time series from 1980, namely the monthly *European Industrial Relations Review (EIRR)* and the Protest and Coercion Database at the University of Kansas, which contains daily logs of numerous forms of protest in many West European countries from 1980 to 1995 (<http://web.ku.edu/ronfran/data/>). We have supplemented these with data from the online *European Industrial Relations Observatory (EIRO)*, [www.eiro.eurofound.ie](http://www.eiro.eurofound.ie), available since 1997. There are discrepancies between these different sources because the Kansas dataset employs a very broad definition of general strikes, including regional and purely public sector stoppages. We recorded only those strikes that conformed to the definition given above; if in doubt about a particular action, we erred on the side of caution and excluded it. Given that a general strike is both a rare and dramatic event we are confident that our sources provide comprehensive and complete data.

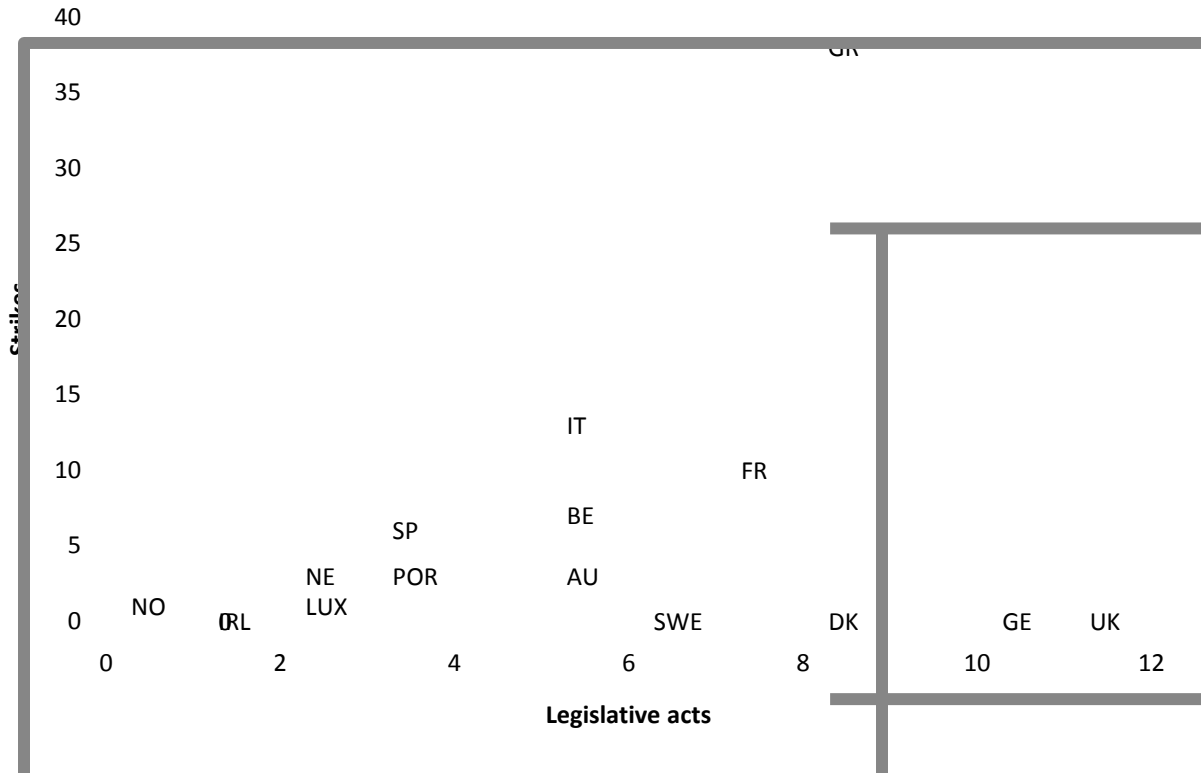
Data on social pact offers and legislation by governments on wages, welfare, pensions, and labour markets are taken from the dataset used in Hamann and Kelly (2009). To gauge the effect of type of party in government, we coded the party family of the main governing party in power (defined as the party of the Prime Minister) at the time of each general strike. The categories for party family are based on the conventional labels of Social Democrat, Centre, Christian Democrat, Conservative, Liberal and Far Right (Gallagher, Laver and Mair 2006: 231). Data on Social Democratic party policies was based on the left-right scale used by the Manifesto Research Group (Budge et al 2001; Klingemann et al 2006). We coded each party manifesto for every election between 1980 and 2008 using the composite Left-Right scale. To measure change over time we then divided the elections into two equal-sized groups (where possible), labelled periods 1 and 2 respectively. We then averaged the Left-Right score for each of the two periods in each country and subtracted the period 2 mean from the period 1 mean to obtain a measure of policy change over the whole period. Data on union structures are taken from Ebbinghaus and Visser (2000). We measured opportunity structures by using Siaroff's (1999) data that captures both corporatist structures of decision-making as well as collective bargaining structures and legal support for trade unionism. Data on parties' legislative seat shares are taken from the Hamann and Kelly (2009) dataset and are based on national electoral authorities of the 16 countries in the study. For legal data, we assumed that the strongest legal protection for the right to strike is arguably a clause in a country's constitution, as distinct from a

right embodied in statute or case law and we also noted those cases – Germany and the UK – where general strikes against government policy do not enjoy any legal protection or are even outlawed (Jacobs 2007: 634-35).<sup>7</sup> Among the numerous measures of state intervention in the economy, we concentrated on measures that best capture state intervention in employment relations as the focus of the paper is on labor. We used OECD measures of employment protection legislation (EPL), public sector employment as a percentage of the total labor force, and social protection expenditure as a percentage of GDP. Because of dramatic changes in the size of the public sector owing to privatization we decided to measure public sector employment in the later part of our time frame, around the early 2000s, and to ensure consistency we measured EPL and social protection at approximately the same time.

## **6. Explaining the Patterns of General Strikes**

### *Government Policies*

We first examine the link between general strikes and the number of government interventions, that is, the total number of social pact offers and legislative initiatives in lieu of social pacts on wages, labor market, and welfare reform but found no relationship. We then proceeded to examine the form of government intervention. A visual inspection of the data in the scatterplot in Figure 3 reveals that the more often the government pursues legislative acts to address reforms in the areas of welfare, pensions, and labor markets (and to a lesser extent wages), the higher the propensity of unions to stage general strikes across our cases. The data are in accordance with our hypothesis that union exclusion from passing crucial policy reforms that have an impact not just on the union membership, but on a significant portion of the electorate, affects the likelihood of general strikes in protest at these measures. Additional analysis (not shown here) elaborated on this analysis and confirmed the main finding: while union inclusion through pact offers is not in and of itself linked to general strikes, a small number of pact offers that are overshadowed by a relatively high volume of legislative activity (the ratio of pact offers to legislative acts) is associated with a higher level of general strike activity. The pact offers/legislation ratio, calculated for each country across all governments within that country, measures the relative import of governmental attempts to include unions. These findings provide some initial explanation both for trends over time and variations across countries.

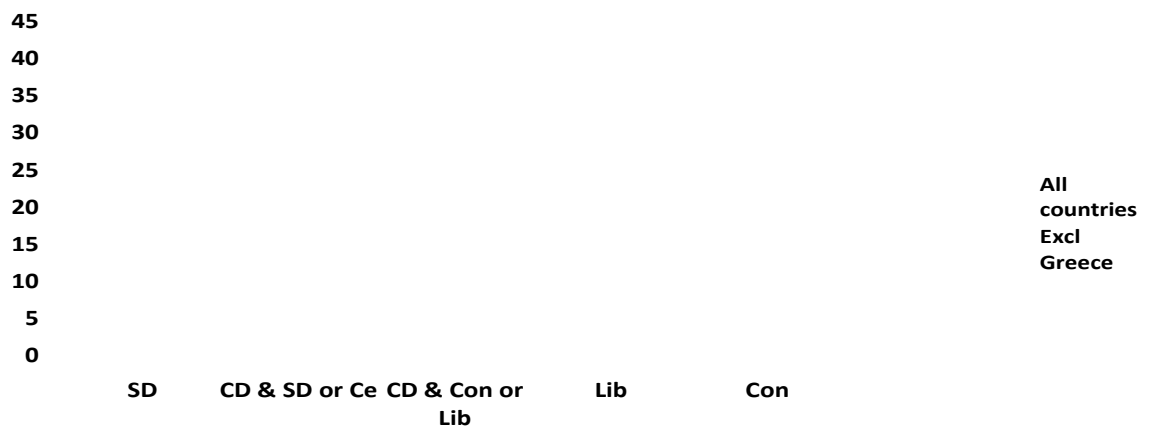


**Figure 3: Legislative Acts and General Strikes, 1980-2008**

**Source:** Hamann-Kelly dataset

*Parties and Governments*

Looking at the main party (the party of the Prime Minister when coalitions rule) of governments that have faced general strikes reveals that the majority of general strikes has been launched against conservative governments, 51% (43 out of 85), a proportion that is similar if Greece is excluded (22 out of 47, or 47%, see Figure 4). Yet if this finding was expected, a significant minority of strikes were also called to protest the policies of social democratic governments, 23 out of 85 (27%), all of which were in France, Greece, and Spain. We also suggested that party policy shifts towards the right might be associated with more general strikes; however the evidence suggests a more complex relationship. Modest rightward shifts are indeed associated with higher levels of general strikes, in Belgium, Greece, and Italy for example. However, the social democratic parties that have shifted most dramatically to the right, in Denmark, Sweden and the UK for example, have done so without evoking the kinds of protests seen elsewhere. Again, this evidence helps account both for temporal trends and cross-national differences. Why modest shifts, rather than more radical shifts, should be associated with general strikes is unclear and it is possible that results are an artefact of the Manifesto data.<sup>8</sup>



SD: Social Democrat, Ce: Center, CD: Christian Democrat, Lib: Liberal, Con: Conservative.

**Figure 4: Party Composition of Governments Experiencing General Strikes 1980-2008**

**Sources:** As for Figure 1 and Hamann and Kelly elections dataset.

### *Trade Unions*

Four of the six countries with the highest levels of general strikes have trade union confederations divided on ideological lines between 'communist' and 'socialist'. Although general strikes have often been called by all the union confederations in a particular country, some general strikes were staged only by the communist confederation: CGT (France), CGIL (Italy), CGTP (Portugal), and CC.OO (Spain). Since general strikes have occurred in six other countries then we know that the presence of such a confederation is not necessary for general strike action to occur. However it is strongly associated with variations in their occurrence between countries, in line with social movement theory.

### *Opportunity Structures*

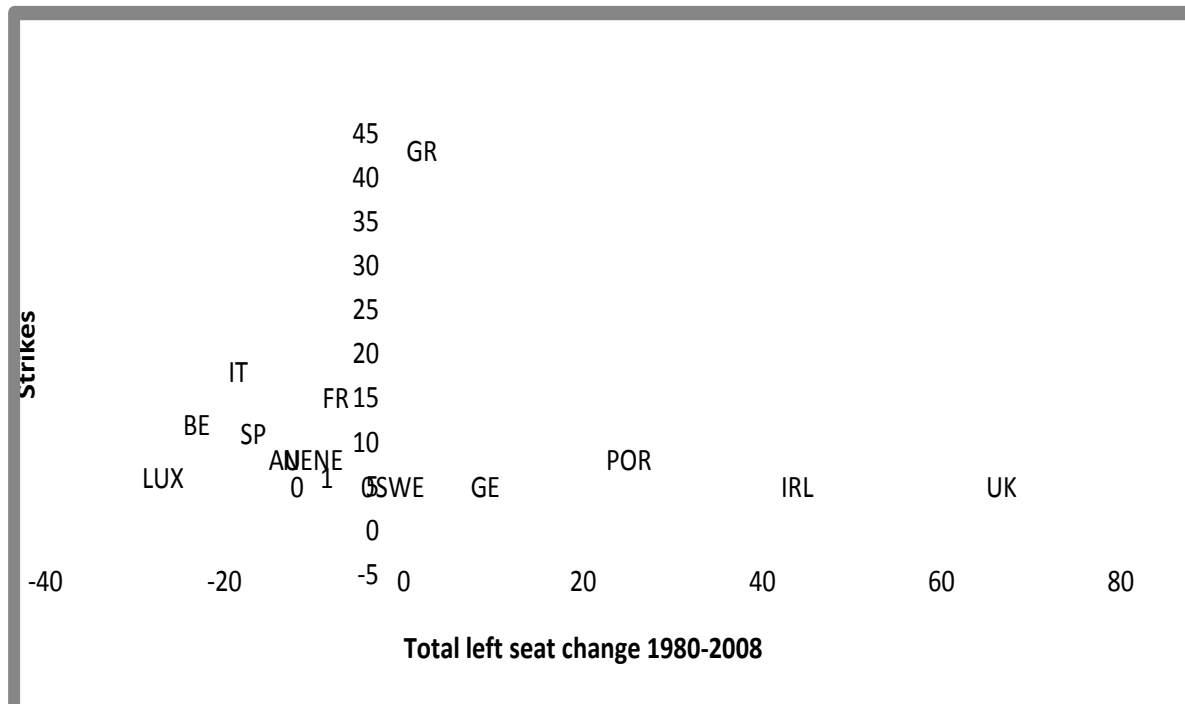
Our findings above indicate that the incidence of general strikes is higher where governments legislate reforms rather than seek to include the unions in tripartite negotiations to agree a social pact. In other words, union exclusion is associated with a higher incidence of general strikes. The importance of 'opportunity structures' is underlined by the data on corporatist structures in Table 3. Based on Siaroff's (1999) composite index of bargaining and tripartite institutions through which unions can pursue their demands, the data shows that the more highly developed the opportunity structures, the lower the level of general strike action. Five of the seven countries with below-average corporatist ratings have the highest general strike totals, Ireland and the UK being the exceptions. One other potentially important channel for union influence is through social democratic party presence in the legislature. However, we found no relationship between general strikes and either average social democratic seat share for the whole period or

change in seat share between the 1980s and the 2000s. For example, taking the countries with the highest levels of general strikes, the Greek and Italian non-communist left improved their electoral performance over the 1980-2008 period; the Spanish Socialists lost seats through the 1980s and 1990s but recovered in the 2000s; and the seat shares of the Belgian and French socialist parties tended to decline over time. On the other hand if we look at the total left representation in the legislature, combining social democratic, communist, and independent left parties, it does appear that the level of general strikes is somewhat lower where the left gains seats and somewhat higher where they lose, as theory would predict (Figure 5).

Country	Late 1980s-mid 1990s scores
Austria	4.6
Norway	4.6
Sweden	4.6
Finland	4.3
Denmark	4.1
Germany	4.1
Luxembourg	4.1
Netherlands	4.0
Belgium	3.7
Italy	2.9
Ireland	2.5
Portugal	2.4
France	2.3
Spain	1.9
UK	1.9
Greece	1.8
Mean	3.4

**Table 3: Corporatism scores for West European democracies**

**Source:** Calculated from Siaroff (1999), Tables 4c and 4d.



Source: Hamann-Kelly dataset and national election authorities

Figure 5: Total Left (SD+Far Left) Seat Change and General Strikes, 1980-2008

### Costs of Strikes

If we look at one measure of the costs of strike action – legal protection for the right to strike - it appears there is a strong relationship between constitutional protection for the right to strike and the level of general strike activity. Five of the six countries with such a legal measure – France, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain - comprise countries with unusually high levels of general strike activity, with Sweden being the exception.

Before discussing these findings and reflecting on their implications, we first consider briefly the ways in which some of the components of our analytical framework play out in different parts of Western Europe. In line with our earlier discussion about varieties of capitalism, we look in turn at the economies of Southern Europe and then the coordinated economies of the Benelux countries and Austria.

### State intervention

Scores for our three measures of state intervention are shown in Table 4, which lists the countries in descending order of general strike frequency. Simple bivariate correlation tests confirmed what the table suggests: no straightforward relationship between any of these measures of ‘statism’ and general strike frequency exists. Perhaps other measures would show different results but a priori the measures we chose made theoretical sense and if the general



degree of state intervention was a factor in the genesis of strikes it is surprising that none of these measures appears to be significant. Before concluding, we look more closely at the correlates of general strikes in each of the different varieties of capitalism within Europe.

Country	Employment Protection Legislation Late 1990s-2003	Public sector employment as % total employment Early 2000s	Social protection expenditure as % of GDP 2001
Greece	2.4	22	24.3
Italy	1.8	16	24.4
France	2.4	20	28.5
Belgium	1.7	25	27.2
Spain	2.6	17	19.6
Austria	2.7	11	26.0
Netherlands	3.1	12	21.8
Portugal	4.3	15	21.1
Norway	2.3	38	n/a
Denmark	1.5	30	29.2
Finland	2.3	26	24.8
Germany	2.7	12	27.4
Ireland	1.6	18	13.8
Sweden	2.9	37	28.9
UK	1.0	20	21.8
Mean	2.4	21	24.0

**Sources:** Hamann and Kelly (2008); ILO/LaborSta; OECD

#### **Table 4: State intervention**

##### *Varieties of Capitalism*

##### General strikes in Southern Europe

Governments anxious to reform labour markets, welfare systems, and sometimes wages, vary significantly in their reliance on social pacts as against unilateral legislative action and fluctuations in union inclusion seem to be strongly associated with shifts in the level and timing of general strikes. Of the 32 general strikes in France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, only 12 (38%) occurred in conjunction with tripartite negotiations; the vast majority (20/30) were a response to union exclusion. In Greece, where very few social pacts were offered by governments, virtually all of the country's 38 general strikes were launched by a union confederation that was very rarely involved in government policy formation.

Although general strikes have been called against a variety of governments, conservative governments have borne the brunt of strike action in Southern Europe, an association that is reinforced when we adjust strike figures to take into account the proportion of time conservative governments have held office. In Italy, Berlusconi's three conservative governments (1994, 2001-06 and 2008 onwards) ruled for just 22% of the 1980-2008 period but faced 11 of the country's 13 general strikes. In France the conservative parties were in power for 48% of the 1980-2008 period but faced 9 of the country's 10 general strikes, whereas in Greece the Conservative New Democracy party was in power just 36% of our time period but

was the target of 57% of general strikes. In sharp contrast, 5 of the 6 general strikes in Spain were organized against the Socialist governments of Felipe González (1982-1996).<sup>9</sup>

In sum, the pattern of general strikes in Southern Europe reflects a combination of factors. In particular, general strikes appear to be associated with reforming governments, conservative in France, Greece, and Italy, leftist in Spain in the 1980s and 1990s, that are willing to bypass underdeveloped corporatist structures and exclude unions from influence over contentious welfare and labour market reforms. They are also associated with the presence of communist union confederations (except in Greece) willing to launch general strikes in countries where such action enjoys a significant degree of legal protection.

### General strikes in the Coordinated Market Economies and the Scandinavian Economies

Yet, if conservative governments, communist union confederations, and underdeveloped corporatist structures are helpful in accounting for general strike patterns in Southern Europe, they cannot tell us much about general strikes in the coordinated economies of Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands (Gallagher et al 2006: 232; Jacobs 2007). Governments in these countries have been dominated by Christian Democrats; there are no communist affiliated union confederations; and most of these countries have well developed systems of coordinated collective bargaining and highly institutionalized systems of tripartite policymaking (Ferner and Hyman 1998; Kelly and Hamann 2008). General strikes emerged, often for the first time in decades, either when governments attempted to move away from traditional tripartite processes and resort to legislation or when tripartite negotiations broke down and governments then switched to the legislative route.

In Austria it was a majority Christian Democrat-right coalition, newly elected in 1999 and re-elected in 2002, that provoked a series of general strikes. In 2000 and 2001 the government simply tried to bypass the traditional tripartite structures and processes and legislate pension and welfare reforms. Unions responded with general strikes in June 2000 and again in October 2001. Subsequent reform proposals were discussed with unions but when negotiations broke down and the government opted for legislation, unions called two further general strikes in spring 2003 to protest their exclusion from policymaking. In Belgium two attempts to legislate wage restraint, bypassing the unions entirely, led to general strikes in 1982 and 1984 against the Christian Democrat-Liberal coalition. In the 1990s the failure to reach agreement on wage restraint led two successive Christian Democrat-Social Democrat governments to opt for legislation and led unions to call general strikes protesting at the termination of wage discussions (in 1993 and 1996). In the Netherlands the breakdown of tripartite talks provoked general strikes in 1982, 1991, and 2004 against governments led by Christian Democrats. In Luxembourg general strikes were threatened by unions on four occasions when Christian Democrat-led coalition governments proposed contentious reforms to pensions and health insurance without first consulting unions (in 1982, 1990, 1992 and 2001).

Looking now at unions through the prism of mobilization theory, considerable heterogeneity within this group of countries stands out. Four of the seven Belgian general strikes (as well as one in Luxembourg) centred on government intervention in wage determination but wages did not figure in any of the other strikes or strike threats in the other countries in this group (Austria, Netherlands, Finland and Norway). The strongest correlates of general strikes were twofold: radical government intervention on an issue salient to union members; and union exclusion from policymaking in countries with strong corporatist traditions. In contrast with Southern Europe there are no communist union confederations although unionism is still divided: along the Socialist/Christian Democrat cleavage in the coordinated market economies (apart from Austria) and along occupational and sectoral cleavages in Scandinavia. In the Scandinavian countries, Korpi and Shalev's (1979) power resources theory argued unions have often been able to secure their objectives by using their political ties to

ruling social democratic parties. The 1998 general strike in Norway and two of the three strike threats in Finland were triggered by the rare electoral success of Christian Democrat and Centre-led coalitions respectively, all of which indicated their willingness to dispense with tripartism if agreement could not be reached with the unions. The Bondevik government in Norway and the Aho governments in Finland both provoked union unrest because of their radical departure from the longstanding tripartite conventions prevalent in both countries.

## **7. Discussion and Conclusion**

The decline in economic strikes throughout most of Western Europe since 1980 has often been traced to a shift in the balance of power between increasingly mobile and powerful corporations and their unionized but vulnerable employees. Whilst the capacity and willingness of unions to strike against corporations has declined, this does not appear to be the case for general strikes against governments. The rise in the number of general strikes since the early 1980s and the admittedly patchy evidence on their effectiveness suggests some reforming governments facing volatile electorates may be vulnerable to this sort of tactic. Whether the use of the general strike can play a role in revitalizing union movements, stimulating membership growth, and increasing union influence, is still unclear.

Concerning theory, the conventional strike literature, centred on union-employer relations, is not especially helpful in explaining the patterns of general strikes against governments. In contrast, assessing political variables including governments' policy reform issues and governments' strategies of adopting these reforms – either through union inclusion through pacts or through legislation – coupled with mobilization (social movement) theory has proved potentially more promising although much work remains to be done. Rather than corresponding to the level of state intervention directly, the volume and timing of general strikes in Southern Europe appear to be associated with governments, though not always conservative, that are willing to bypass underdeveloped corporatist structures and exclude unions from influence over contentious welfare and labour market reforms. These governments have clashed with union confederations influenced by leftist (often communist) militants willing to launch general strikes in countries where such action enjoys a significant degree of legal protection. In the coordinated market economies and Northern Europe, just two common factors appear to be associated with general strikes: radical government intervention on issues salient to union members; and union exclusion from policymaking in countries with strong corporatist traditions. To put it another way, many general strikes in Southern Europe have been provoked by conservative governments that behaved as leftist union leaders would have expected. In contrast, general strikes in the coordinated economies and against socialist governments in Greece and Spain have been provoked because governments behaved contrary to expectations of union inclusion in policy formation.

Our main findings thus indicate that institutional factors (especially the legal protection of strikes) as well as political factors (especially the inclusion or exclusion of unions in policy reform processes) provide considerable purchase to account for cross-national variation. Regarding developments over time, the resilience and in fact slight increase in the number of general strikes over the past three decades coincides with governments' attempts to limit the welfare state, reduce wage bills, and increase the flexibility of the labor market. Unions' reaction to these policy reforms in the form of general strikes is thus perhaps not surprising. Traditional bargaining processes, centered around working conditions at the firm, do not regularly incorporate these issues, though this is more so for welfare, pension and labour market reforms than it is for wages and working conditions. As unions' power vis-a-vis employers is in many cases eroded, and their organizational strength is declining in many countries in Western Europe, they have retained a voice in politics – not just through inclusion in policy-making

processes through tripartite negotiations and relationships with leftist parties - but also through mobilizing union members, supporters and potential voters in general strikes.

Union exclusion from policymaking is the one factor common to many of the general strikes in Western Europe since the early 1980s. Yet even if union exclusion is a necessary condition for such action it is far from sufficient. Unions were deliberately excluded from policymaking by conservative governments in Denmark and the UK in the 1980s but neither country experienced general strikes, although union confederations in both countries did organize anti-government demonstrations on several occasions. Future research should therefore look at the factors additional to union exclusion that combine to bring about general strikes. It would also be useful to look more closely at particular cases in order to understand the decision-making processes that either led union confederations down the road to strike action or led them to consider but reject such action. In addition, it might be interesting to assess the outcomes of union threats to stage a general strike in more detail. Whilst the 11 strike threats in the time period analyzed here is too small for statistical analysis, it is noteworthy that about half of them led to government concessions or abandonment of their initial reforms, especially in Finland and Luxembourg in the early 1990s, indicating that strike threats might have a function not very different from actual strikes. Finally it would be interesting to explore the extent to which other forms of collective action, such as demonstrations without work stoppages might be considered functionally equivalent to the general strike, both in countries with strong union movements (such as Denmark and Sweden) and in those with weaker movements (the UK and Ireland).

The presence of general strikes throughout Western Europe in a period of union membership decline may also have important implications for our understanding of union decline and union revitalization (Frege and Kelly 2004). These general strikes have produced a range of outcomes for unions and raise interesting questions about the role of political action in union revitalization (Hamann and Kelly 2004). For example, the Spanish general strike of 2002 (with the threat of more to follow) forced the conservative (Popular Party) government to abandon almost all of its proposals for the reform of unemployment benefits. The Italian general strikes of 1994 against pension reforms led to the conservative government's resignation and its defeat at the next general election. On the other hand Austrian trade unions staged general strikes in 2000 and again in 2003 in protest at the unilateral implementation of pension reforms by the conservative-far right coalition government but extracted very few concessions. Ongoing research will explore the issue of strike outcomes more thoroughly.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The precise definition of a 'general strike against government' is an issue discussed in section 3 of the paper. Reliable data, consistent with our definition, are hard to obtain for Italy in the 1970s and are perhaps less meaningful for Greece, Portugal and Spain whilst they were under authoritarian rule. Nonetheless it appears there were 18 general strikes in the 1970s: Italy 10, Belgium, Greece, UK (2 each), Netherlands and Spain (1 each) (Barkin 1975; Crouch and Pizzorno 1978; Franzosi 1995; van der Velden 2007; von Beyme 1980).

<sup>2</sup> Data on general strikes pre-1980 are not easily available without consulting national sources for each country.

<sup>3</sup> Sometimes the mere threat of strike action can induce a response from government. Therefore, we also looked at general strike threats even where the strike did not actually take place. To count as a 'threat' a trade union or union confederation leadership had to declare its intention to call a general strike on a particular issue(s) and on a given date. Three threats occurred in Finland, where no actual strike was held, and four in Luxembourg, where only one actual general strike was staged. The number of threats (12) is too small to analyze separately; we generally exclude them from our analysis (we distinguish them explicitly in our analysis when they are included). The full dataset is available on request from the authors.

<sup>4</sup> One exception is Lindvall (2009), who contends that strikes occur when pressure groups (such as unions) are moderately strong and concerned at the impact of reforms on their power.

<sup>5</sup> 'Social movement theory' embraces a number of different approaches to collective action and the list of independent variables identified in this literature is enormous. For overviews, see Crossley (2002), Opp (2009), and Snow et al (2004).

<sup>6</sup> The concept of 'opportunity structure' has been the subject of considerable debate with a wide measure of disagreement on precisely how to define and measure it (Kriesi 2004).

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<sup>7</sup> Assessing the impact of constitutional rights is far from straightforward because we would also need to take into account statute law that gave effect to such rights; case law from constitutional and labour courts; the willingness of government or employers to resort to the courts; and the scale of penalties for breaches of law.

<sup>8</sup> For example, the Manifesto data display the widely reported rightward shift of the British Labour Party between the 1980s and the 1990s but surprisingly they show a leftward shift in the overall policies of the Spanish Socialists after 1986.

<sup>9</sup> Portugal has experienced just three general strikes against Centre, Centre-Conservative, and Socialist governments respectively.