

Labour, Labour Movements, Trade Unions and Strikes (Austria-Hungary)

By [Jakub Beneš](#)

Summary

The First World War was a period of repression and severe privation in Austria-Hungary. The organized labor movement was heavily constrained and its leaders resorted to a strategy of compliance with the imperial regime through much of the conflict, hoping to protect significant pre-war gains. But some of the ethnic-national factions within the multinational labor movement in both halves of the Dual Monarchy began to reorient their policies toward national independence. Faced with worsening food shortages, ordinary workers sought more radical solutions to their often desperate situations. Strikes and other forms of working-class protest convulsed the Empire in the final two years of the conflict.

Table of contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 Labor](#)
 - [2.1 Industrial Labor in Austria-Hungary](#)
 - [2.2 Legal Position of Labor in Wartime](#)
 - [2.3 Labor Conditions](#)
 - [2.4 Changes in the Labor Force](#)
- [3 The Workers' Movement: Socialist Politics and Trade Unions](#)
 - [3.1 Activism and Its Discontents](#)
 - [3.2 Growing National Differences](#)
 - [3.3 Leadership Versus Rank and File](#)
- [4 Strikes and Workers' Protest](#)
 - [4.1 Strikes 1917-18](#)
 - [4.2 Other Forms of Protest](#)
- [5 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

This article provides an overview of [Austria-Hungary's](#) labor history during the First World War. The first section outlines the social and legal position of the working classes in the final

decades of Austria-Hungary, with special attention to wartime changes. The second section discusses the political labor movement and the various fractures that appeared in it between 1914 and 1918. The final section addresses workers' wartime mobilizations aimed at improving living and working conditions. This article inevitably reflects the state of the literature on these issues. In spite of some innovative recent works from social-cultural history that highlight patterns of experience and perception, much of the scholarship on the labor movement has been conducted through the lens of high politics. Secondly, the historiography on labor and labor movements is much more developed for the Austrian half of the monarchy – particularly for its German- and Czech-speaking regions – than for the Hungarian half. This article attempts to present a balanced picture, but asymmetries remain.

Labor

The lot of laboring men and women in Austria-Hungary was generally worse than in the major combatant states to the west. First, workers faced harsher treatment under repressive statutes and a state security apparatus that had little trust in its own citizens, especially among non-German and non-Magyar [ethnic nationalities](#). Second, they suffered from the inefficiency of the Habsburg state's provisioning efforts, which left the laboring population with insufficient nourishment and fuel. The war altered the demography of the working classes, bringing many more [women](#) and [youth](#) into previously male-dominated professions. Pre-war hierarchies based on profession and gender broke down, replaced by simpler categories of perception distinguishing, for instance, those who had access to food from those who did not.

Industrial Labor in Austria-Hungary

Industrialization came later to Austria-Hungary than to the major combatant states of western Europe. Until its collapse in 1918, it remained a predominantly agrarian country. Yet by 1914, the level of industrialization in certain regions matched, or even surpassed, western European averages. These included Vienna and its surroundings in Lower Austria, parts of upper Styria centered on Graz, Brno and other parts of Moravia and Silesia, and Bohemia – especially Prague and northern Bohemia – where most of Austrian industry was concentrated by 1914. From the late 1860s, industry expanded rapidly in these regions alongside railway construction. The Austrian half of the monarchy was considerably more industrialized than the Hungarian half and, in terms of ethnic-national distribution, Germans and Czechs were far and away the most likely to be employed in industry. In 1910 around 42 percent of both Germans and Czechs were employed in industry, while the next closest percentages were 24 percent for Italians and 22 percent for Slovenes.¹

	Lower Austria	Upper Austria	Styria	Littoral	Tyrol	Bohemia	Moravia	Galicia	Bukovina
Industry	37.54	20.30	17.50	22.19	16.51	36.73	30.13	6.77	7.52
Agriculture	20.59	52.63	57.03	42.83	56.17	36.64	45.80	78.71	77.23

Table 1: Percentage of the Population Employed in Industry and Agriculture in 1910 in the Nine Most Populous Austrian Crown Lands (at least 800,000 inhabitants in 1910)²

Hungary experienced industrialization on a more limited scale as well. Between 1870 and 1914 the railroad network there expanded fourfold and production of iron and coal increased rapidly. The percentage of the workforce employed in industry grew from 8.6 percent in 1870 to 16.2 percent in 1910 – a considerable increase, if still modest compared to parts of Austria.³ The working class was also multiethnic in Hungary, though two-thirds of it was Magyar and heavily concentrated in large enterprises in and around Budapest.

In the early 20th century, workers in Austrian (not Hungarian) industry were the beneficiaries of relatively advanced social legislation, second only to [Germany](#). Since the regime of Minister-President Count [Eduard Taaffe \(1833-1895\)](#) between 1879 and 1893, Austrian law required industry inspectors (*Gewerbeinspektoren*) to monitor labor conditions, mandated Sunday as a day off, insured workers in case of sickness or injury, and prohibited child labor in mining (restrictions on child labor in factories were put in place in 1859). Socialist observers complained that much of this progressive legislation existed on paper only and was unenforced. At the 1889 congress of the Second Socialist International, the Austrian labor leader [Victor Adler \(1852-1918\)](#) remarked that the Habsburg state operated in a “permanent state of illegality.”⁴

Legal Position of Labor in Wartime

In 1912, despite fierce resistance from Social Democrats and other anti-[militarists](#), the regime passed the War Requirement Acts ([Kriegsleistungsgesetze](#)), which gave the state far-reaching control over private industry in the event of war. In summer 1914, this went into effect. Among other things, the law stipulated that male workers (and from 1917, female workers too) could not leave firms under state direction. Moreover, a 25 July 1914 supplementary ordinance outlawed all activities that could be deemed a hindrance to production in firms under “state protection.” All legal bases for trade union organization were thus eliminated. Workers in Austria-Hungary were left with fewer rights than in other belligerent states. Their situation improved somewhat in March 1917, not coincidentally after

the [Russian February Revolution](#), with the establishment of Wage and Complaint Commissions (*Lohn- und Beschwerdekommisionen*) that allowed workers in militarized firms to address unfavorable labor conditions, institutionalizing some cooperation between workers and state officials (other industrialized combatant states, not including [Italy](#) and [Russia](#), had generally implemented such schemes earlier).

Labor Conditions

Wartime brought longer hours and wages that stagnated or dropped – sometimes by as much as two-thirds in real terms – while prices for basic [foodstuffs](#) and fuel rose astronomically. In the Lower Austrian metal industry, nine- or ten-hour days and a fifty-three-hour week had become the contractual norm before 1914. By mid-1917, workers commonly endured fourteen-hour shifts and work weeks of sixty to seventy hours.⁵

With some of the [Empire's](#) most fertile agricultural lands turned into warzones (especially Galicia), agricultural production plummeted and rationing on basic goods was introduced earlier in Vienna (spring 1915) than in all other large European capitals. Rationing was introduced in Austrian provincial capitals around the same time. The state's attempt to keep food prices under control by instituting a Food Office (*Ernährungsamt*) in 1916 to regulate supply, distribution, and prices failed. Instead, people were reliant on a haphazard system of cartels run by private interests and a flourishing black market.⁶ Additionally, miners could not keep up with demand for coal, iron, and steel and from 1916 production figures fell drastically, leading to industrial stoppages. Coal and food shortages hit the [urban working classes](#) the hardest and in 1917-18 starvation and lack of fuel threatened the Empire's major cities. The situation was marginally better in Hungary, where agricultural exports were withheld from Austria in order to improve domestic provisioning, with deleterious effects on Austrian workers' nourishment and internal Austro-Hungarian relations.

Changes in the Labor Force

The pre-war industrial working class in Austria-Hungary was overwhelmingly male, its interests represented by skilled male workers in trade unions and political organizations. This pictured changed rapidly from summer 1914 when millions of adult men departed for the front. Entering the labor force in increasing numbers were women and unskilled youth.

In the first months of the conflict, the Dual Monarchy's economy experienced a sharp contraction that produced soaring unemployment. One reason for this was the army's requisitioning of all trains for troop [transport](#), which paralyzed the delivery of [raw materials](#) for industrial production. The military exacerbated the situation by confiscating private

means of transport such as carriages and cars. The money market also shrunk drastically, with bank assets frozen and an interest rate hike. Finally, firms fearing a drop in productivity due to the departure of their workers often closed their doors temporarily.

Laboring women were particularly affected by the wartime restructuring of the economy. The import-dependent Austrian textile industry, which had relied heavily on female workers, virtually collapsed. From early 1915, when the effects of the initial crisis began to wear off, the munitions- and armaments-focused metal industry boomed, with many women entering this sector. The munitions factories of Wiener Neustadt experienced a wartime influx of about 100,000 workers, half of whom were women. Even in the highly skilled sector of [armaments production](#), women found employment; in the arms factory (*Österreichische Waffenfabriks-Gesellschaft*) in Steyr and the Škoda Works in Pilsen, around 10 percent of workers were women – virtually unthinkable before the war.⁷ By 1916, 40 percent of the Austrian war industries' workforce was female and the number of women employed in Hungarian manufacturing increased by 65 percent.⁸ Yet as raw material shortages set in by 1917 across all sectors of Austro-Hungarian industry, women were often the first to be made redundant. The return of male workers from the front in 1918 largely completed the exit of women from heavy industry.

Changes in the labor force culture were at least as profound as the change in its makeup, which was mostly reversed at the end of the war. To male workers accustomed to the stridently [masculine](#) and socialist ethos of pre-1914 labor, the war years were deeply disorienting. Women workers dominated some industries and became established in ones that had previously been the exclusive domain of men. Proletarian children and youth from fatherless homes had to work or forage for food, raising widespread concerns about social collapse. Laboring men who stayed in the hinterland felt emasculated both by the discourse of front heroism and by the fact that women were entering their professions in droves. On the other hand, those who returned home from the front were often wounded physically and/or psychologically and showed little of the exuberant masculinity of August 1914.⁹

The Workers' Movement: Socialist Politics and Trade Unions

General mobilization decimated the workers' movement. In Austria-Hungary, the "workers' movement" above all meant Social Democracy with its dense web of political organizations and closely affiliated trade unions. The Social Democratic Party and Social Democratic unions appealed most to workers in large factories and in state concerns, particularly railways, and less so to those in smaller-scale artisan and family-centered firms.

Social Democratic leaders, like their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, greeted the war with varying degrees of resignation and enthusiasm. They accommodated repressive state policies by dissolving many local organizations and encouraging a policy of “hibernation” (*überwintern*) among their cadres.¹⁰ This decision was partially born of necessity, as early on hundreds of thousands of unionists and party members departed for the front. For much of the war, the cautious stance of Social Democratic leaders characterized the organized labor movement. In 1917-18, ordinary workers often participated in spontaneous and radical protest movements, looking less to party leaders than to revolutionary Russia.

Activism and Its Discontents

In July 1914, most socialist leaders across Europe adopted the position that war was inevitable and opposing it was an untenable strategy. In Austria-Hungary, this more or less grudging compliance, or “activism” as it was called, characterized the policies of leaders such as Victor Adler, [Bohumír Šmeral \(1880-1941\)](#), and Hungarian Social Democrats [Ervin Szábo \(1877-1918\)](#) and [Gyula Alpári \(1882-1944\)](#). Some, like the pro-German editor of the *Arbeiter-Zeitung* [Friedrich Austerlitz \(1862-1931\)](#) and the anti-Russian Polish socialist [Ignacy Daszyński \(1866-1936\)](#), greeted the war for openly [nationalistic](#) reasons.

Social Democrats in the Dual Monarchy adopted activist policies for a number of reasons. In the first instance, there was a sincere desire not to be on the losing side against Tsarist Russia. Capitulating to the bastion of European reaction seemed to many a far worse fate than facing Russia and her allies in battle, even if despised ruling circles (“bourgeois-aristocratic-clerical”) sounded the battle cry. Among German-speaking socialists, this argument often assumed nationalist, anti-Slavic hues, exposing some of the movement’s latent tendencies. On 5 August 1914, the Viennese *Arbeiter-Zeitung* greeted the war and the [Social Democratic Party of Germany’s](#) vote for war credits in the Reichstag with the headline “Day of the German Nation.” Some socialist leaders – notably [Karl Renner \(1870-1950\)](#) in the Austrian Social Democratic Party – hoped that cooperation in the war effort would produce, through state interventionism, a form of organized capitalism amicable to workers’ demands and socialist development.

Activism also reflected resignation and narrowing options. The autonomist Czech Social Democratic Party – after the Austrian Germans the largest socialist movement in the Empire, which had in 1911 seceded from the multinational “all-Austrian” party – saw no other option than to fight for the maintenance of Austria-Hungary, which appeared as a bulwark against both Russian reaction and German expansionism. Likewise, the much smaller Slovak Social Democratic movement saw itself compelled to “see it through,” as their leading organ *Robotnícke noviny* (Workers’ News) declared on 28 July 1914.¹¹

From the beginning, minority factions opposed activist policy. The most vocal of these coalesced in the Austrian Social Democratic Party around [Friedrich Adler \(1879-1960\)](#), son of Victor Adler. The Leftist opposition demanded that the party mobilize for peace, using strikes where necessary, and expressed solidarity with likeminded groups in other warring states, hoping to revive the defunct Socialist International. In 1915, the Leftist opposition hailed the [Zimmerwald Manifesto](#), a defiant expression of proletarian internationalism authored by a group of resolutely antiwar socialists meeting in [Switzerland](#). Consistently marginalized in party decision-making and despairing of the war in general, the younger Adler alone planned and on 21 October 1916 carried out the sensational murder of Minister-President Count [Karl Stürgkh \(1859-1916\)](#) in a Viennese restaurant. In his trial the following spring, he used his defense to mount an eloquent attack on the war and the supine policies of the Social Democratic mainstream, winning admiration from the ranks of ordinary workers. Meanwhile in Hungary, some leaders, including Szábo and Alpári, abandoned activism and became outspoken [pacifists](#).

Growing National Differences

The [ethnic-national tensions](#) that had begun to disintegrate the pre-war multinational Austro-Hungarian workers' movement were muted in the first two years of the war. But by 1916 opposing nationalist aspirations reemerged. In early 1916, Polish Social Democrats joined their former enemies in the noble-dominated parliamentary alliance known as the Polish Club to lobby for independent Polish statehood – a move seemingly vindicated by the November 1916 declaration of intent by Habsburg and Hohenzollern monarchs to establish an independent Polish client state. Hoping to win a similar promise of autonomy, Czech Social Democrats emerged in late November 1916 alongside members of the Czech Agrarian Party as leaders of a reconstituted Czech Union, or alliance, of (nearly) all Czech political parties, with the agenda of Czech autonomy, if not yet independent statehood. While activist Austrian German and Magyar Social Democrats still hoped that Austria-Hungary would victoriously survive the war, and so provide the opportunity to carry out major democratic reforms throughout the sprawling Empire, socialists of other nationalities now envisioned altogether different post-war political settlements.

When the [Austrian parliament](#) reopened on 30 May 1917, a majority of Czech Social Democratic leaders had already abandoned activism and supported some form of Czech national independence. This reopened an old rift with Austrian Germans and led to bitter exchanges that summer during the abortive international socialist [peace conference in Stockholm](#). The following year, Czech Social Democrats under the nationalist leadership of men like [Gustav Habrman \(1864-1932\)](#) and [Rudolf Bechyně \(1881-1948\)](#) celebrated May Day in Prague together alongside the stridently nationalist and anti-German National Social Party

(renamed the “Czech Socialist Party” shortly before) and began making unconditional demands for Czech independent statehood. From 1917, Austrian German leader and theorist [Otto Bauer \(1881-1938\)](#) encouraged his cohorts to consider their post-war future outside of the Habsburg Monarchy, but his thinking had little purchase until the state was in collapse. The Magyar-dominated Hungarian Social Democratic Party was even slower to countenance the demise of historic Hungary.

Leadership Versus Rank and File

Throughout the war, the Social Democratic rank and file was often closer in spirit to the party’s Leftist opposition than to the activist leadership. This cleavage cut across ethnic-national divides. As wartime privations became intolerable in the winter of 1916-17 and the Russian Revolution radicalized segments of the working class, the rift between movement leaders and ordinary workers widened. While socialist leaders found encouragement in [Charles I, Emperor of Austria’s \(1887-1922\)](#) reopening of parliament in early 1917, the Bolshevik example of Russian worker councils (Soviets) and calls for national self-determination and immediate peace energized the rank and file.

Actual Bolshevik agitation remained limited, even among the hundreds of thousands of 1918 returnees from [Russian internment](#) who had experienced the October Revolution firsthand. Yet workers were sanguine, if often poorly informed, about Russian developments and enthused about the Russian “example” or the “wind from the east.”¹² Party leaders remained committed to pursuing their aims through legal parliamentary channels. They sympathized with the October Revolution – particularly its demands for peace without annexations or indemnities and national self-determination – but dismissed the Bolshevik approach as unsuitable for Austria-Hungary. The density of the Social Democratic organizations in Austria and their ability to discipline their cadres help explain the absence there of a Bolshevik insurrection of the sort that occurred in Hungary, culminating in March-August 1919 with [Béla Kun’s \(1886\)](#) short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic.

Strikes and Workers’ Protest

During the war Social Democratic leaders oscillated between cautiously approving strikes and actively discouraging them. The wisdom of their approach remains debatable. While strikes corresponded to the model of workers’ protest established in the decades before 1914, other forms of workers’ protest such as hunger demonstrations became widespread. In hunger demonstrations in particular, the large numbers of women challenged established conceptions (both among workers’ movement leaders and state authorities) about the character and acceptability of social protest.

Strikes 1917-18

Strikes occurred infrequently in the first two and a half years of the war. The winter of 1916-17, when privations became intolerable, produced a surge in strike activity (see table 2). Also, unlike the strikes of 1914-16 that were almost exclusively “economic” in their aims – demanding better wages and shorter hours for instance, the strikes of 1917-18 often featured “political” demands such as immediate peace, amnesty for political prisoners, or national independence. Strike waves thus coincided with major domestic and international political developments – the Russian February Revolution, the May 1917 reopening of parliament in Austria, the Russian October Revolution, and the [Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations](#). Strikes that started in response to economic grievances could swiftly develop broader political meaning that in the first instance reflected workers’ perceptions of the war and only secondarily the aims of union or party leaders.

These tendencies were evident in the largest wartime industrial action in Austria-Hungary: the 1918 January Strike (*Jännerstreik*). Following stoppages on 13 January 1918 in Budapest and Vienna, an immense strike movement erupted on 14 January 1918 in the *Österreichische Daimler Motoren Gesellschaft* of Wiener Neustadt – the largest and most politically radical concentration of industrial workers in the Monarchy. A reduction in the daily flour ration was the immediate impetus for a strike that, within several days, extended to around 250,000 workers in Lower Austria and Vienna. But workers’ chief demand was the conclusion of unconditional peace as negotiations between the Central Powers and Bolsheviks in Brest-Litovsk appeared to stall. Hundreds of thousands more workers around the Empire joined the strike and Social Democratic leaders had virtually no influence for the first week. Characteristically, the party leadership regained its footing as a mediator between state authorities and strikers, who were persuaded to scale back their demands, and on 21 January 1918 began returning to work. In Bohemia and Moravia, spontaneous strikes spread in the days after 14 January 1918, but a more coordinated action did not emerge until 22 January 1918, this time under the leadership of Czech Social Democracy. Czech socialists wanted to underscore their autonomy from Austrian Germans by not walking out at the same time and simultaneously called for Czech independent statehood.

Year	Number of Strikes	Number of Striking Firms	Number of Strikers
1914	144	375	20,170
1915	25	37	6,213
1916	28	46	7,900

1917	104	555	186,291
1918	184	996	378,082

Table 2: Strike Activity in the Bohemian Lands 1914-1918 (1914 numbers include pre-war months)¹³

Other Forms of Protest

Beyond strikes, laboring men and women expressed their discontent in the form of hunger demonstrations or riots that often ended in the looting of supply trains and warehouses. The lack of programmatic demands in such manifestations, their usually vandalistic or violent character, and the noticeable participation of women and minors, who in many instances formed the majority of participants, led authorities to dismiss them as the actions of hysterical mobs. Socialist leaders, while expressing sympathy for the plight of hunger demonstrators, tended to distance themselves from such events that did not fit their (heavily masculine) program for socialist advancement through organized and legal channels. This more spontaneous form of protest also drew on worldviews that socialist leaders regarded as backward: paternalistic understandings of authority and [anti-Semitism](#). [War profiteers](#), regularly identified with Jews, heartless employers, and state authorities were the targets of demonstrators who aimed to restore a “moral economy” to local relations.¹⁴

Conclusion

At the time of Austria-Hungary's collapse in autumn 1918, its labor movement was even more fragmented than at the beginning of the war. In addition to irreconcilable national differences among leading Social Democrats, a wide gulf emerged between those leaders and the radicalized and brutalized ordinary workers, among whom were now a large proportion of women and youth. Pulled apart by various forces during wartime and immediately after, the central European labor movement would never again achieve the relative unity of purpose it possessed during the pre-1914 years.

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Notes

1. Kulemann, Peter: Am Beispiel des Austromarxismus. Sozialdemokratische Arbeiterbewegung in Österreich von Hainfeld bis zur Dollfuß-Diktatur, Hamburg 1979,

pp. 40f. [↑](#)

2. Bolognese-Leuchtenmüller, Birgit: Bevölkerungsentwicklung und Berufsstruktur, Gesundheits- und Fürsorgewesen in Österreich 1750-1918, Munich 1978, p. 57, table 3. The remaining percentage comprised employees in trade and transportation, civil service, free professions and the unemployed. [↑](#)
3. Hitchins, Keith: Hungary, in: van der Linden, Marcel/Rojahn, Jürgen (eds.): The Formation of Labour Movements 1870-1914. An International Perspective, volume 1, Leiden 1990, pp. 348f. [↑](#)
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5. Augeneder, Sigrid: Arbeiterinnen im Ersten Weltkrieg. Lebens- und Arbeitsbedingungen proletarischer Frauen in Österreich, Vienna 1987, pp. 85f. [↑](#)
6. Healy, Maureen: Vienna and the Fall of the Habsburg Empire. Total War and Everyday Life in World War I, Cambridge 2004, chapter 1. [↑](#)
7. Augeneder, Arbeiterinnen 1987, p. 1. [↑](#)
8. Watson, Alexander: Ring of Steel. Germany and Austria-Hungary at War, 1914-1918, London 2014, p. 335. [↑](#)
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13. Heumos, Peter: "Kartoffeln her oder es gibt eine Revolution." Hungerkrawalle, Streiks und Massenproteste in den böhmischen Ländern, 1914-1918, in: Mommsen, Hans et al. (eds.): Der Erste Weltkrieg und die Beziehungen zwischen Tschechen, Slowaken und Deutschen, Essen 2001, p. 271, table 1. [↑](#)
14. Kučera, Rudolf: Život na příděl. Válečná každodennost a politiky dělnické třídy v českých zemích 1914-1918 [Rationed Life: Science, Everyday Life, and Working-Class Politics in the Bohemian Lands, 1914-1918], Prague 2013, chapter 4. [↑](#)

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- [Announcement Explaining War Requirement Acts \(November 1914\), Viennese Digital Library \(Wienbibliothek Digital\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
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Regional Section(s)

[Central Europe](#) > [Austria-Hungary](#) > [Austria](#)

[Central Europe](#) > [Austria-Hungary](#) > [Czechoslovakia](#)

[Central Europe](#) > [Austria-Hungary](#) > [Hungary](#)

Thematic Section(s)

[Home Front](#)

Subjects

[Economy](#) > [Labour](#) > [Trade unions](#)

[Economy](#) > [Labour](#) > [Women's labour](#)

[Economy](#) > [War economy](#) > [Agriculture](#)

[Economy](#) > [War economy](#) > [Food and nutrition](#)

[Economy](#) > [War economy](#) > [Industry, other](#)

[Economy](#) > [War economy](#) > [Mobilisation, economic](#)

[Economy](#) > [War economy](#) > [Raw materials](#)

[Economy](#) > [War economy](#) > [War industry](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [Political and social movements](#) > [Labour movements](#)

[Politics, law](#) > [Political ideologies](#) > [Communism, socialism](#)

[Society](#) > [Everyday life, civilian war experience](#) > [Rationing and shortages](#)

[Society](#) > [Social conflict](#) > [Strikes, society](#)

[Society](#) > [Social groups](#) > [Minorities](#)

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[World War, 1914-1918--Austria ; Labor](#)

Rameau Subject Headings

[Mouvement ouvrier ; Autriche ; 1900-1945](#)

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