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Labour Movements, Trade Unions and Strikes

By [James Thompson](#)

This article compares the history of labour movements during the war across a range of European countries. It charts the impact of the economic realities of the war upon labour and analyses the complex, and variable, relationship between labour parties, trade unions, and the state across different nations. The article traces and seeks to explain the chronology and character of strikes and protests in a number of national contexts. In doing so, it explores the ways in which the war period created a new model of revolutionary action and strengthened a reformist vision amongst labour activists.

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Introduction

The First World War witnessed dramatic developments in the history of [labour](#) movements across and beyond Europe. Unprecedented close involvement with the state, radical strikes in the later years of the war and after, the growth of trade union membership, strains and splits in labour

movements have all attracted a considerable body of scholarship. Yet, as Antoine Prost has noted, the last two decades have seen a relative neglect of labour history in [writing about the war](#).^[1] Much of the key literature comes from two waves of interest: the drive in the 1960s and 1970s to understand the relationships between the state, labour and capital in the period of [total war](#); and a rich flurry of work in the 1980s and early 1990s that was often comparative, and concerned with the place of the war years in the longer trajectory of labour history. The second wave of writing opened up perspectives – notably comparisons between cities in different nations and the rhetorical construction of social groups in wartime – that merit further investigation. In offering a comparative account of labour movements, this article is firmly based on the current literature, but it also identifies areas where new work and approaches are needed. In order better to combine meaningful comparison with sustained scrutiny of national differences, it focuses chiefly upon Europe.

"Burgfrieden," Choices and Mobilisation

The support of labour movements and parties for war in August 1914 has been much discussed. Rather than emphasising the betrayal of internationalism, historians have focused increasingly on the qualified nature of labour support for war, upon the constraints on labour's choice, and upon the expectations of reform that underpinned it. In [Germany](#), [Burgfrieden](#) meant different things to different people, with the right seeing it as complete in August 1914, and the left as a promise of post-war reform.^[2] While historians have demonstrated that [war was greeted](#) more with stoic resignation than wild enthusiasm, its prevention was not realistically within the power of the European labour movement. In [Belgium](#), [France](#) and [Great Britain](#), the view that Germany had engaged in an unprovoked war of aggression was widespread, including within the labour movement, and grew in strength in the first months of the war. Labour movements were often divided over the decision to go to war, with a majority supporting it, while in Great Britain anti-war sentiment extended to some liberals. Only in [Italy](#) and [Serbia](#) was there a clear majority rejection by labour representatives of active participation in the war. It is important to recognise the co-existence, and indeed the compatibility, for many in 1914 (and after) of labour and national loyalties. For many members of European labour movements, a form of labour patriotism saw support for the war effort as crucial to maintaining, and advancing, labour's place within the polity, while conversely viewing political recognition of labour's due as essential to the successful waging of war. Labour attitudes were complex, sensitive to change over the course of the war, and varied between and within nations. The initial phase of the war already revealed some of these differences.

While writing about the First World War has often operated within the framework of the nation state, historians have long recognised that explaining its course and outcome requires a comparative perspective. The scale of the mobilisation of resources, and the obvious importance of industry for producing armaments, has led historians to compare the ways in which labour was incorporated into the [war economy](#) in different combatant states. The study of Germany, and the work of German historians, has been central to this process. This reflects a long tradition of comparative history in

Germany, but also the urgency of questions about the First World War, the founding of the Weimar Republic, and the subsequent trajectory of German history. These kind of motivations were evident in the influential work of [Jürgen Kocka](#), while Gerald Feldman's path-breaking account of the German military-industrial complex led to an intense interest in the comparative history of inflation in the post-war world.^[3] More broadly, the German case has often served as a starting point for comparative thinking about the war.

The spectacle of the party-truce (*Burgfrieden*) in Germany, where [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) rhetorically incorporated the [Social Democratic Party of Germany \(SPD\)](#) into the national community, has been seen as an object example of the power of [nationalism](#) in the summer of 1914. Europe's strongest and most influential socialist party, theoretically committed to [revolution](#) and internationalism, joined in the suspension of party conflict as part of the war effort. But while the 1912 *Reichstag* elections represented a new high for the SPD vote, the party remained fundamentally excluded from the governing structures of the German Empire. The institutional and legal constraints upon German trade unions were notable, and the view that the war was essentially a response to Russian aggression propagated by the [government](#) resonated widely. The greater access to policy-making achieved by trade unions in Britain reflected their more secure position within the pre-war polity. While some of the institutional architecture of the German war economy was widely imitated, the German state faced a distinctive gap between high, partly self-generated, expectations, and its actual performance, notably through its early embrace of rationing in the name of equity, and the reality of unfairness and a growing black market. Whilst countries faced common challenges in [waging industrialised war](#), each did so on the basis of its own pre-war history. As [John Horne](#) has argued, this was evident in the particular aspirations and assumptions underpinning the decision in 1914 of the majority of most labour movements to back the war.^[4] In Britain, for instance, where hostility to militarism was a central value for many in the [labour movement](#), the war was often seen as a struggle for democracy and against German militarism, particularly as the German [occupation of Belgium](#) proceeded in August 1914. Where existing political arrangements enjoyed greater popular legitimacy before the war, opposition tended to be weaker.

The choices of 1914 were made on the assumption of a short war. While some senior military figures in Britain and Germany recognised the potential for military stalemate, this exacerbated the tendency to plan for a short war. Labour movements, often with [pacifist](#) sympathies, may have been especially prone to the view that a long war was impossible, though the notion that everyone expected the conflict would be over by Christmas is exaggerated. The scale of the mobilisation for war, and the rapid and common experience of [shell shortages](#), swiftly created substantial manpower challenges, and thrust labour questions to the fore. Hopes that the war would soon be over proved persistent, but as its magnitude and industrialised character became clear, labour movements faced new opportunities and new challenges as the economy became integral to the struggle. As well as much-discussed issues of the relationship of labour parties and trade unions to the state, total war raised more existential questions about the meaning and identity of labour in the context of large changes in the occupational structure – with the growth of arms manufacture and associated industries – and

significant alterations in the composition of the workforce, especially in terms of gender and age. Again, however, national and regional differences were visible in responses to common challenges, as was apparent in the early experiences of mobilisation.

The disruption of war led to unemployment, swiftly apparent in Berlin, London and Paris. Within the first fortnight, the unemployment rate in Berlin more than tripled. In Britain, where voluntary enlistment made for a smaller initial mobilisation, the loss of work was less, and the administrative spare capacity to respond to it greater.^[5] In Paris, London and Berlin benefit payments were made to the unemployed through established institutions on a minimalist, non-contributory model. Due to the nearness of the [front](#), the movement of the [government](#) to Bordeaux, and the occupation of Northern French industrial areas, the recovery in Paris was less effective than in Berlin and London, which were both experiencing labour shortages by spring 1915. The inadequacy of preparations was made plain by the combatants running out of shells by the end of 1914; embarrassed generals became obsessed with the need for staggering quantities of high-explosive shells. Even before the end of 1914, the French and German armies were sending skilled metal workers back from the front. The demands of the trenches and the factories needed balancing. As Antoine Prost has noted, in countries with conscription, workers were mobilised, but with exceptions made for those needed in the factories; such exceptions could be very large in number.^[6] The pressure of competing demands and lobbying groups posed a challenge for allocating resources with which conscription struggled, but voluntarism proved incompatible with the demands of the war, arguably in respect both to generating sufficient soldiers, and to co-ordinating the workforce. Local military tribunals in Britain, however, importantly limited the degree to which the central state determined who fought and who worked. This likely produced distortions in the relative contributions of different areas to the armed forces, but may also have eased the transition to conscription in a state where voluntarism was deeply rooted.

Labour in Wartime

The economic demands of the war strengthened labour's bargaining position. In Britain and France, widespread commitment to the war meant that this advantage was not fully exploited. This commitment owed something to the treatment of the labour movement in Britain and France, where left-wing politicians entered the cabinet. The basic pattern for industrial mobilisation was some form of state capitalism in which businessmen played a key role. This was most evident in the Russian economic mobilisation initiated by the private sector. The German model of the War Materials Section of the War Ministry run by [Walther Rathenau \(1867-1922\)](#) and [Wichard von Moellendorff \(1881-1937\)](#) proved influential, including in the United States.^[7] It was the relationship between labour, business, the [military and the government](#) that shaped the basis for economic mobilisation. It was arguably polities in which the labour movement was most established, and in which state neutrality was most favoured, that were best able to preserve stability by seeking equity of sacrifice, whereby those most able to bear the costs of war did so – through the protection of the living

standards of the weakest and the limiting of the gains of the strongest, notably by restraining profits.

As economists like [Franz Eulenburg \(1867-1943\)](#) and [A. L. Bowley \(1869-1957\)](#) noted at the time, the war wrenched economies into new shapes. The growth of the armed forces was colossal. As Wrigley observes, in Britain, 5,670,000 men enlisted across the war, amounting to about 38 percent of the male labour force. Yet Britain – bolstered by the soldiers of [empire](#) and seeking at first to fight a liberal economic war, drawing on naval and financial power – never reached the levels of recruitment attained elsewhere. The proportion of the population mobilised in Germany, and especially in France, was significantly higher. These workers were replaced from a variety of sources, with the mix varying in different countries. The pre-war unemployed, who had often been designated unfit to work, were called upon, along with older men, [women](#), foreign workers and [children](#). In France, the share of men working reached its twentieth-century peak in 1921, reflecting the entrance of older men into the workforce.^[8] Historians have debated the extent to which the war pulled women into the labour force, rather than leading women who already worked to change jobs. While the extent to which women were newly active in the job market has sometimes been overstated, the balance of the evidence suggests some increase in wartime. Middle-class contemporaries, as in France, often underestimated the degree to which women worked before the war, hence their exaggeration of the genuine expansion in wartime. An important comparative study found that the female labour force grew by 25 percent in London during war; 30 percent in Paris; and 38 percent in Berlin.^[9] In France, the role of foreign workers was notable, as half a million entered the country during the war, with substantial numbers from [Spain](#), [China](#) and the French colonies. Across all German factories, there was a rise of about 10 percent in the number of 14-to-16-year-olds at work, while the presence of schoolchildren at harvest time grew in Britain.

Amongst women and men, the occupational structure of the workforce altered markedly in response to the demands of war. Unsurprisingly, armaments and associates witnessed particular growth. In London and Berlin, metal-working and mechanical engineering boomed. While there was a widespread growth in government factories, private industry serving [government](#) priorities played a crucial role in arms-making. As Strachan observes, typically specialist firms – Krupp in Germany, Schneider-Creusot in France, Skoda in [Austria-Hungary](#), Vickers in Britain – dominated the manufacture of high-end [artillery](#), while the simpler technologies required by trench warfare, such as mortars and [grenades](#), were made by non-specialist companies: the Russian firm of [Peter Carl Fabergé \(1846-1920\)](#) turned, for instance, from bejewelled eggs to grenades.^[10] Coal was central to the war effort, placing miners in an especially strong bargaining position. The difficulties of supplying the war – especially of moving coal to the front – gave [transport](#) workers leverage, though proved less important than the inability of the Central Powers, particularly [Russia](#), though also Germany, to keep supplies moving in the last part of the war. Contraction occurred in construction – a sector highly responsive to macro-economic changes – paper-making, and leisure sectors driven by mass, as opposed to elite, demand. Key divergences between combatant nations in the prosecution of the war emerge in contrasting occupational patterns. The privileging of military and industrial demands in Germany is evident in the shrunken ranks of workers in food and transport in Berlin as compared

with Paris. These pronounced shifts in the occupational structure resulted in significant mobility within the labour force, which often involved the relocation of workers. In the less industrialised and less urbanised nations of Southern and Eastern Europe, the war drew workers from the countryside into factory towns, as happened in Turin, creating enduring concentrations of industrial labour.

States sought to shape the labour market, encouraging mobility into essential sectors, and often seeking to limit mobility where it was thought to disrupt production. In Britain, the Munitions of War Act of July 1915 was designed to expedite movement into war production, and, through the institution of leaving certificates, to restrict movement out of key sectors. Restrictions on occupational mobility ran counter to deeply rooted voluntarist traditions within the British labour movement, and also checked wage rises, favouring employers. It was, however, linked in the British instance to limits on profits through the Munitions of War Act, building on measures implemented in March 1915. Nonetheless, leaving certificates were often unpopular with workers, as well as with individual employers who saw an opportunity to increase their own share of a profitable market. The system was weakened later in 1915, and abolished in October 1917 in response to arguments from the Amalgamated Society of Engineers that it actually impaired necessary adjustments and reduced productivity. Similar measures to control labour mobility were introduced in France and Germany, though the provisions of the German Auxiliary Service Law of December 1916 specified higher wages as a justification for changing jobs, augmenting inflationary pressures in a system ill-designed to contain them. Austria-Hungary faced the pressures of war early, and passed emergency legislation, in the face of opposition from the left, in 1912 that severely curtailed labour mobility, which was only relaxed in March 1917. This more restrictive approach was paralleled in Italy, where, as also in Russia, workers integral to war production were subject to military discipline.

In all countries, the war had complex distributive effects that were much discussed at the time, and have been ever since. As the British economist A. L. Bowley sagely observed in 1930, wartime wage statistics present “a host of problems”.^[11] In Germany, statistics themselves became a site of struggle, as contending groups fought their corner against an unfamiliar background of pronounced inflation.^[12] Constant enjoinders to be worthy of the sacrifice of the soldiers raised the moral stakes on distributional conflict.^[13] The extent of the black market in Germany, and especially Austria-Hungary, further complicates attempts at comparison. More fundamentally, real wages are an imperfect guide to the question of how well the capacities and functions of civilian life were preserved, and need relating to expectations. The broad cross-country picture was one of a decline in real incomes for workers, as nominal increases failed to keep pace with price rises, with those in the war industries faring least badly. Some other groups, such as the *Mittelstand* in Germany, saw greater losses in real wages, but usually from a higher level, while some groups – notably industrialists but also, as in Britain in 1917, farmers – did better out of the war. There were, however, significant variations across countries and regions, between groups of workers, between men and women, and over time. The reduction in unemployment relative to peacetime benefited some, as did the lessening of seasonal work and the regularisation of casualised labour, visible in the London dockyards.^[14] In Germany, skilled workers in war industries could receive high nominal wages, but

often endured higher prices and rents than workers in other areas. In countries where civilian needs received least priority, nominal wages in sectors distant from the immediate needs of the war effort were vulnerable. In Eastern Europe especially, the war exacerbated tensions between [rural](#) and [urban](#) workers. Differences in experience over time were important: whereas in Britain real wages stabilised after sharp falls in 1915 and rose significantly in 1918, in Germany real wages stabilised at a much lower level and barely rose in 1918.^[15]

Where workers' nominal wages rose, this was often a result of working longer hours. In many countries, piece work became more prevalent during the war, notionally in order to stimulate greater efficiency, and increases in hours worked were commonplace. In Turin, hours at Fiat could exceed seventy per week, while in Austria-Hungary hours for some metal workers increased by 20 percent. Across Europe, a sixty-hour week became the norm in many arms factories; in the middle of the war, seventy-seven-hour weeks were standard in detonator factories in Britain.^[16] As such long hours imply, night work was widely adopted. In Germany, restrictions on night working were abandoned at the beginning of the war; by 1917, the requirement for permission for women to work at night was regularly ignored. The economic impact of the war was not limited to those directly involved; night working became more common in [Switzerland](#) as well. Conditions of work worsened in other respects too, as holidays were restricted, while accidents became more common. Working conditions were often worst where labour was militarised.

There has been extensive discussion of the impact of the war upon wage differentials amongst workers. This debate is often linked to the question of Taylorism: of how far, and with what consequences, the war fostered the adoption of mass-production, assembly-line techniques. Deskilling was not, though, the only possible route towards reductions in wage differentials: relative pay levels according to skill might have altered independently of changes to the level of skill required in the labour force. As Steven Rowe notes, categories of skill were politically and culturally constructed, and varied across industries and countries. In most countries, there was a compression of wage differentials between different skill levels as well as between male and female workers. Despite high wages for key skilled workers like tool makers, wage differentials declined in Germany.^[17] In Britain, well-organised skilled workers were more successful in defending wage differentials, while dilution, as in shipbuilding, could free up skilled workers to concentrate on more demanding tasks.

The common increase in female participation in the work force, along with more significant shifts in which jobs women performed, was a striking development, albeit one that was largely reversed after the war. Women in the war industries were commonly paid less than men in similar roles, though the move from, say, domestic service in peacetime to industrial employment in wartime often meant increased earnings. Alongside long hours in industry, women continued to be the principal bearers of the burden of labour within the household. The sheer amount of time needed to queue for food acted in Germany and Austria-Hungary as a brake on women's involvement in the workforce.^[18] At the level of the household, the effects of the myriad changes in labour's position in wartime were highly

complex, rendering cross-country comparison exceedingly difficult. In some working-class households with more than one wage earner, nominal gains could be significant, though these were hard put to match price rises.

Labour Movements and the State

The decision of the majority of most labour movements to support the war inaugurated an era in which labour parties worked more closely than ever before with governments. The extent and nature of this process varied between nations. As with the initial divisions, the experience of war, and the example of the [Russian revolution](#), led to widespread and enduring divisions on the left, of which the German variant is perhaps the best known. Such splits, as has been stressed in the German case, often had pre-war antecedents, but the war played a crucial role in their emergence. The legacy of 1914-18 for labour movements was Janus-faced: reformist currents were strengthened through the enhanced status and lessons learnt from engaging with governments, yet more confrontational groups were better placed to articulate growing discontent after 1917 precisely because of reformists' entanglements with the state. As the war persisted, disenchantment led to widespread radicalisation, while in countries where labour organizations continued to work for victory, their criticism of official policies and war aims grew sharper.

Massive economic mobilisation necessitated labour co-operation. In more open political systems, political logic pointed towards a role for labour politicians in the running of the war economy. In France, the socialist [Albert Thomas \(1878-1932\)](#) was central to munitions policy from October 1914. In Britain, [Arthur Henderson \(1863-1935\)](#) had played a role in industrial mobilisation even before he entered the government, later joining the war cabinet at the end of 1916. While the Labour party in Britain divided over the war with [Ramsay MacDonald \(1866-1937\)](#) and others opposing it, the split in the Liberal party was to prove more acrimonious and more enduring, contributing to post-war party realignment. The SPD in Germany operated in a harsher environment. Reflecting its vision of the *Burgfrieden*, the SDP sought to win rights for its members, including the right to be an officer. No SPD politicians entered the war cabinet. In Italy, the decision to neither undermine nor collaborate with the war effort prescribed involvement in government. In more repressive regimes, notably Russia, such choices were unavailable.

The emergence of war economies made the attitudes of the trade unions especially salient. The war witnessed significant developments in a number of nations in the role of trade unions. In Britain and France, trade unionists were incorporated into the governing of the economy, imparting political influence while associating unions with the doings of the state. It has been argued that war led the German military to discover the hard-headed virtues of German trade union leaders.^[19] Certainly, legal persecution of trade unionists ceased, while the Auxiliary Service Law conferred novel rights upon unions. It officially recognised claims to speak for labour, instituted elected works committees in all companies that employed more than fifty people, allowing unions to penetrate hostile heavy industry, and gave unions a voice in decisions on plant rationalisation and labour mobility. Paragraph

9, permitting workers to change jobs if doing so secured “a suitable improvement in his working conditions,” was expressly fought for by the unions.^[20] In Britain, trade unions contributed to governing the home front through a variety of fora. Enhanced political access in Westminster and Whitehall was accompanied by participation in Joint Industrial Councils, affecting wages and conditions. In France, socialist politicians were more inclined to join the administration of the war, with Jules Guesde (1845-1922) and Marcel Sembat (1862-1922) becoming ministers before Thomas, than the *Confédération générale du travail* (CGT), which was less closely integrated into the machinery of government than the Trades Union Congress in Britain. Nevertheless, trade unionists sat in committees with government and business. Regimes that took a harsher line on workers’ rights in general were not keen to involve unions in decisions. Only in March 1917 did unions in Austria-Hungary gain access to institutions in militarised industry determining working conditions. In the early phases of the war especially, Italian trade unions had no voice in the determination of working conditions. Trade unions in Russia faced the most overt exclusion and oppression, and were unable to operate legally.

The relationship between labour movements and the state changed over the course of the war. As the conflict went on, and the [toll of the dead](#) and the maimed mounted, so war weariness grew. Living standards suffered as food supplies dwindled, and inflation accelerated. The “turnip winter” of 1916/17 marked an important point in this process, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. The Russian revolution of February 1917 provided a radicalising example, notably in Austria-Hungary, though in most European labour movements Wilsonism rather than Leninism was the favoured doctrine of 1918.^[21] Socialists from neutral countries, principally the [Netherlands](#) and Scandinavia, had been instrumental in organising peace conferences in Switzerland: Zimmerwald in September 1915 and Kienthal in April 1916. The desire for peace, more than yearning for revolution, swelled after 1917. While revolutionary socialists developed new accounts of the opportunities offered by state crises, many on the left continued in Germany, France and Britain to see the war as one of national self-defence, and struggled to see how it could be ended on acceptable terms. The relationship between material deprivation, expectations and legitimacy differed between nations. In much of Central and Eastern Europe, there was an absolute lack of food, and sharp tensions between urban and rural areas over its production and distribution. These tensions also existed in Britain and France, not least over farm profits, but in less severe forms. Whereas death rates on the home front rose from 1916 in Germany, they remained roughly constant in France, and probably went down amongst the worst off in Britain. Rationing was widely seen as fair given inequities in access to food, but if accompanied by failures of supply, it deeply undermined faith in the state. In Italy, the sheer lack of food underlay the protests of 1917, while Russians experienced both the most extreme food shortages, the biggest protests and the gravest loss of state legitimacy. Pressures on housing were very common, as were declines in the quality and quantity of available and affordable consumer goods, such as clothing. In all combatant countries, and in [non-combatants](#) such as Switzerland, wartime suffering tested state legitimacy and raised profound and divisive questions for movements that claimed to represent the people.

1917 saw deep concerns with [civilian morale](#) amongst combatant governments. This led to co-operation with trade unions during strikes in Britain, France and Germany. The importance of shop stewards grew in several countries, in part as a response to the loss of experienced workers to the front, and the challenges of integrating new workers. In particular cases, historians differ over the role and significance of the shop stewards movement. In the British instance, there was no chasm between the local leadership and the broader membership, not least because working with the state had brought tangible gains. Across Europe, though, there were tensions amongst trade unionists in 1917, and bottom-up industrial action was frequent, and usually inspired by concerns over food prices. Nonetheless, with important exceptions such as Russia and Italy, the trade unions generally acted as stabilising forces in 1917-18, though on their own terms as much as those of the state.

The revival of "[socialist pacifism](#)" amidst the travails of 1917 involved a complex range of positions, as was evident in the split within German social democracy in April 1917. The Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD) incorporated the full gamut of social democratic thought, united by the demand for peace. The majority SPD persevered in its support for a defensive war, but attacked annexation, increasingly focusing upon post-war reconstruction, both national and international. In the final year of the war, hopes of democratising and pacifying international relations and establishing democracy and social justice domestically suffused European labour movements. As John Horne has shown, this vision was an understandable response to the privations of war, and a valuable source of solidarity and consolation for its adherents.^[22] One legacy of the war was a persistent cleavage in many European labour movements between reformers and revolutionaries. Understandings of the potential and the hazards of state power were fundamentally altered by the experience of total war.

Strikes, Protests and Revolution

In many countries, trade unions grew in numerical strength through the war. In Britain, there was an increase of more than two million in TUC membership across the war. Membership rose throughout the war, but the bulk of the growth came at its end. In France, union membership doubled to more than a million, with CGT moving from 355,000 in 1914 to 600,000 by 1918. The trajectory was, however, different, with a significant fall in membership until 1916, followed by an even sharper rise at the war's close. Likewise, in Germany, union membership fell in the first part of the war and rose later. In both France and Germany, the sheer scale of mass conscription had an impact on union membership. In the French case, the upturn in the second half of the war in trade union participation needs to be contrasted to the steep drop in socialist party membership across the four years of conflict. In Germany, the ASL had unintended consequences in its contribution to a boom in trade union membership. Growth in membership during the war was also evident in Australia. Rising membership was not confined to industrial occupations; in Britain, for example, white collar unions grew significantly in wartime. In several countries, including Britain and Germany, though not France, there were significant increases in trade union membership immediately after the war. This was spectacularly apparent in Germany, where membership of socialist trade unions rose from

1,665,000 in 1918 to 5,479,000 in 1919.^[23] Belgium witnessed sharp growth in trade union membership in the immediate post-war period. Switzerland adhered to the common pattern of early decline followed by sustained growth, peaking in the post-war period. In much of Europe, it makes sense to think of 1917-20 as a single phase in trade union history, characterised by high levels of participation and activity and reflecting the economic strains created by the making of war and peace.

Official restrictions on strike activity were widespread, but so was the enhanced bargaining power resulting from the centrality of labour to the war effort. As the mining industry well exemplifies, this strengthened bargaining position enabled concessions to be won through strike action. In often tight labour markets, industrial action was not limited to the war industries; French and Italian textile unions were highly strike-prone. Where unemployment was rife, as in Belgium, strikes were less common, and concentrated in the classic sectors for wartime industrial action, notably mining. In evaluating the level of strike activity, much depends on contextualisation. Comparisons between, for instance, British and German strike levels need to acknowledge the more precarious legal and political context in Germany, while recognising that British strike levels were lower than during the great industrial unrest prior to 1914. Labour historians have sought both to locate wartime strikes in a longer-term perspective, embracing continent-wide waves of unrest in 1905-7 and 1911-14, and to integrate industrial action into the broader economic, social, political and cultural history of the war. While both perspectives are needed, it is perhaps the latter that has shed most light.

There were significant commonalities in the chronology of strike action, with many countries experiencing increasing industrial unrest from 1917. In some countries affected by the war, such as Switzerland, there were very low strike levels in the first half of the war. The common labour patriotism of the start of the war led to reduced unrest, and there is evidence – certainly for Britain and France – of a propensity to avoid strikes when the news from the front was bad. The widespread intensification of industrial unrest in 1917 reflected the material hardships of winter 1916/17, the impact of inflation and long hours, growing disenchantment with a war whose end was hard to see, and an increasing willingness to hold government to account, given the rise of state intervention. Some countries witnessed a steep change in levels of industrial action in 1917: in Switzerland, the number of workers undertaking strikes more than quadrupled from 1916 to 1917; in the Bohemian lands, there was a more than twenty-fold rise in strike participation. The general strike in Petrograd in early 1917 – which grew, as much industrial action did, out of a food protest led by women – was the most spectacular of the strikes of that year. In the Russian case, 1915 and 1916 had already witnessed substantial rises in strike activity, led by the metalworkers of Petrograd, against a background of broader popular discontent driven by deep economic dislocation and a fundamental absence of state legitimacy. In a more moderate key, Britain and France experienced significant industrial unrest in 1917. While the state response in France under Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929) made greater use of oppression, in both polities there were important elements of accommodation, as governments preferred to deal with trade unions rather than risk greater upheavals and endanger the war effort.

As well as affording economic leverage over employers and the state, strikes were part of a repertoire of protest forms which were not strictly demarcated. Historians still have much to do in recovering the discursive context in which strikes occurred, and also in relating strikes to other modes of political practice. Not only did many strikes originate in protests over food shortages, strikers often incorporated “consumer” questions into their demands. In Coventry in 1917, workers downed tools over food shortages. Participants in strikes and food protests overlapped, and might also inhabit the same house. As John Horne has observed, it is misleading to separate out food protests and strikes in Germany, Italy and Austria-Hungary in 1917. Housing pressures were acute in many industrial areas, and the rent strike – deployed in Budapest, Glasgow and Vienna – entered the lexicon of political practice in these years. The renewed focus upon the cost and standard of living, as well as upon wages, has often been characterised as a revival of “moral economy,” notably in the work of Waites on Britain and Procacci on Italy. Older political languages certainly could be employed, as in the Jacobin tone of attacks on grain hoarders in France identified by Horne.^[24] In debates over the rising cost of living in Britain and Germany just before the war, labour movements deployed the language of political economy to attack tariffs and trusts.^[25] The turn towards more direct political engagement of the British co-operative movement in 1917 typifies a broader recognition on the reformist left of the significance of the state for consumers that built upon pre-war precedents.

Historians have sought to label strikes as “economic” or “political” in motivation and aims. This distinction is problematic, given the degree to which governments assumed effective responsibility for economic life in wartime, and the politicization of the economic as the call for equity of sacrifice intensified distributional conflict. In practice, historians have not treated the two categories as mutually exclusive, but have highlighted the spread of demands for democratization and peace in the last years of the war. [Strikes](#) in France in 1918, such as that in the Loire in May, were more avowedly “political” in their call for peace and revolution, reflecting in part material gains extracted from employers with support from the state, but with limited resonance in the population as a whole.^[26] Radical political strikes were both more common and more likely to succeed in Eastern than Western Europe. State failure to provide materially for populations cannot be understood without reference to the framing context of expectations, equity and commitment to the war and political legitimacy. The character, meaning and reception of industrial action remains under-researched due to the relative neglect of labour history in the era of the cultural turn, but is crucial to evaluating the meaning of raw strike statistics. The diaries of the better off reveal sometimes sharp tensions and resentments around strike action in Britain, yet established political institutions retained considerable, cross-class legitimacy – reinforced for many by support for the war as a struggle for democracy – but shared by those opponents of the war who looked to democratise existing domestic institutions so as to benefit workers and avoid future conflict.^[27]

The role of relatively prosperous metal workers in strikes across Europe suggests some of the complexities of explaining the pattern of industrial action. In occupied Belgium, there were “patriotic [strikes](#)” intended to weaken the enemy. The pressure to increase the intensity of work, alongside

lengthening hours of work, focused attention, and sometimes strike action, on safety at work. In many workplaces where unions had previously been denied recognition, this was often achieved during the war, whether in Britain, Germany or even Italy. Many industrial disputes in France concerned bargaining rights. In Britain and Germany, state action facilitated union efforts to gain recognition, potentially leading to wage rises and increased union membership. In the British case, there has been considerable attention to resistance to dilution. British trade unions were better able than most to contest developments in the war economy, but despite the presence of radical shop stewards in parts of the engineering industry, this owed more overall to effective union leadership, established techniques of production that depended on skilled workers, and the unwillingness of government to support the more authoritarian employers. French trade unions similarly aimed at defending the prerogatives of the skilled worker, defending apprenticeship and pay differentials and opposing Taylorism. As in Britain, male trade unionists in France were often hostile to women's work, seeing themselves as champions of the working-class family, fighting for enhanced separation and maternity allowances, and arguing that the employment of women would damage male wages. Pro-natalist policies were more prevalent in France than Britain, as manifested in British official opposition to crèches, contrasting with the French law of August 1917 on space for breast-feeding. Interestingly, and contrary to the suspicions of male trade unionists, pro-natalist imperatives in France could lead, as with health and safety under Thomas, to measures that benefited both male and female workers.^[28]

Historians have paid much attention to who participated in strikes. Traditionally, this involved identifying sectors, industries and occupations that were especially prone to industrial action. The metal working industry provides the best known of these, especially in the Russian instance, but more generally a small number of industries could account for a high proportion of strikes; more than half of days lost in Britain were in engineering or mining. Commonly, the "bottom-up" and often unofficial character of the industrial disputes of 1917-18 has been stressed, though this model is more applicable to some countries and regions than others. Certainly, in much of Europe, the decision of trade unions to work more closely with governments inspired both hopes of reform and fears of managerialism, and a loss of local workplace autonomy. In some countries, workers' councils emerged during the war seeking to embody radical and local industrial democracy. The welcome and increasing attention to gender in recent historiography has disclosed a complex picture, involving female activism, male trade unionist defence of male rights, yet also collaboration between working men and women in defence of the working-class household and family. Generational differences could be significant, as in Austria-Hungary and Italy, where radical young workers rejected established labour cultures of politics and sociability. The growth of unskilled work could, as in Germany, foster spontaneous strikes, and challenge a cautious craft union leadership that often moved to support industrial action it notionally opposed. Strikes were very often an urban phenomenon, and the activism of 1918-20 often struggled to appeal to peasants, who could, as in Austria-Hungary, be distinctly hostile to metropolitan radicalism. This division would have fateful consequences across Europe in the post-war period.

Much writing about labour movements has addressed their role in the revolutionary, or quasi-revolutionary events, of 1917-20 across Europe. Unsurprisingly, it is in the Russian case that the labour movement in its Petrograd stronghold plays the most clearly revolutionary role. Elsewhere, labour movements were frequently divided, and trade unionists often committed to preserving order. The enduring split between the social-democratic and communist left in much of Europe was chiefly a product of the war, and the convulsions of the immediate post-war period.^[29] The *biennio rosso* saw the Italian labour movement divided; the formal split within the SPD in Germany embodied the ideological fissures wrought by total war. In Austria-Hungary, divisions between leaders and rank and file were overlaid with national differences that were exacerbated by the stresses of war. In Germany, the trade union movement was chiefly concerned in early 1918 with extending and building upon the gains of wartime, particularly the eight-hour day and collective bargaining. The failings of the majority SPD and of trade unionism in Germany have been much canvassed, particularly the willingness to strike a deal with industry in 1918, which has been criticised as a concession to capital that fatally weakened the fledgling republic.^[30] Historians come to differing conclusions in the German, and other cases, about the scope for alternative outcomes, usually due to contrasting readings of the coherence of the revolutionary forces and the power of the political right.

Conclusion

Relative neglect of the history of labour movements in the war in recent years leaves the subject ripe for revival. There are signs of important, more culturally informed, work emerging that focuses upon the discursive context within which labour movements crafted their political practices. Comparative and transnational perspectives have long been present in writing about labour movements, but there is welcome evidence of a renewed interest in the networks of support, such as donations to strikers abroad, that characterised the pre-war international labour movement, and recurred in efforts to bring the war to an end, as well as to imagine and create a newly democratic international order in its aftermath.

The legacy of the war years for labour movements was profound and contradictory. Whereas reformists took inspiration from the regulated capitalism of the war, more radical currents felt bolstered in their critique of the capitalist state and their faith in revolution. Many labour movements were divided by the war, aiding the reassertion and remaking of the established order in the immediate post-war years. While this fraught legacy is well established in the literature, here too our understanding remains impoverished, not least about the cultural history of work, and of how workers imagined and understood the political and its possibilities. Comparative work on capital cities has shown the potential for reinvigorating the subject, but much remains to be done.

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Notes

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