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# Labour Movements, Trade Unions and Strikes (Portugal)

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**This article focuses on the interaction between the development of industrial social relations and the political opportunity structure of state democratization in shaping the Portuguese labour movement. It argues that the First World War accelerated the emergence of an autonomous political identity among workers. Industrial acceleration, subsistence crises and foodstuffs supply policies enabled the construction of alliances between organized artisans and skilled workers on the one hand and an unqualified industrial proletariat on the other. Trade unions benefited from these new bonds, turning into mass organizations at the end of the conflict.**

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## Labour movement empowerment: a relational process

This article aims to analyse long-term trends that shaped the Portuguese labour movement before the First World War and the evolution of the movement during the conflict itself. It will consider the structural conditions which affected unions' empowerment and the labour movement's ability to take

advantage of this exceptional political juncture. Portuguese historical studies on the evolution of the workers' movement have been shaped by an intense debate discussing various issues such as: the ability to overcome working-class stratification; the composition and identity of working-class associations; integration and segregation based on gender, ethnicity, qualification, among others factors; and the relationship between workers' associative practices and political intervention – or, broadly speaking, the relationship between the workers' movement and the general political process.

Among the most frequently applied interpretive frameworks the cultural approach stands out, whereby the political practices of the working-class are directly linked to everyday experiences. At the opposite end of the pole, some authors point to state action and how the political environment structures collective action.<sup>[1]</sup> Recently, relational approaches have produced very significant results, highlighting the interaction between social structures and collective action, on the one hand, and between the workers' movement and the political process, on the other.

Keith Mann's important analytical framework relating to Industrial Social Relations encompasses relations between workers and the production process, between workers and employers and between employees themselves and the important role they play in shaping collective action. His framework also deals with the contemporary political opportunity structure; the relative openness of the political system, the stability or instability of alliances among elites, the state's capacity and propensity for repression, political programs, and, finally, the available historical traditions and myths.<sup>[2]</sup>

With this in mind, it will be argued that the social unrest that preceded and followed the war is only understandable in the light of a long-term process, in which structural changes observed in the Portuguese economy, society, and the working-class political experience, induced the development of labour organizational resources and collective action. The increasing uncertainty inherent in wage labour encouraged different strategies among workers: mutualistic – by association; economic – fighting for better wages; or statist – requiring state intervention on labour relations regulations.<sup>[3]</sup>

It will be further illustrated that these organizational resources were appropriated by revolutionary syndicalists who used the war to their advantage. State democratization before the war, the war itself and the ensuing [European revolutionary crisis](#) made collective action possible and efficacious. These analyses lead us to conclude that, in Portugal, during the war, the interaction between the evolution of industrial social relations (due to increases in manufacturing and the development of mechanization) and the political opportunity structure (state intervention in supplies and labour regulations) enabled the construction of broader alliances between skilled workers and the industrial proletariat, including women.

## **Industrial social relations shaping the labour movement**

Before the war, the Portuguese labour movement was marked by a struggle for control of the productive process, between artisans, skilled workers and employers. During the conflict, however,

a mutation of the working class's composition posed new challenges to trade unions. Due to the industrial development caused by the war effort, new workers arrived in the factories, mostly women and minors.

Furthermore, the introduction of new mechanisms and organizational methods, like Taylorism,<sup>[4]</sup> diluted the key role of technical skills.<sup>[5]</sup> Even in southern Europe, the war induced the development of some industries. In Portugal, new markets for canning, for example, justified the increasing number of production units as in the introduction of new mechanisms, like welding machines could be managed by unskilled or semi-skilled workers. Technical skills became increasingly threatened. In this sense, during the second industrial revolution and especially in the war years, the effort to coordinate skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers interests' was predominant.<sup>[6]</sup>

As Eric Hobsbawm showed, a significant development of European working class organizational resources was discernible from the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The transformation and growth of unionism in countries that, unlike Portugal, already had a strong union tradition, such as England, gave rise to the concept of new unionism. Multiple solutions were found to reform labour organizations seeking to respond to the problems raised by industrial development. Different options were taken according to each national economic development. Diverse organizational models and doctrines were adopted, but the key objectives were the same – to create broader associations, adaptable to unskilled and semi-skilled workers, structuring the movement by industrial sector, locally, regionally and nationally.<sup>[7]</sup>

Concerning southern Europe, recent studies have highlighted the role of territorially based associations engaging different working-class strata. It is possible to discern, at a local level, the articulation of different forms of working class organizations performing different strategies, such as informal networks of mutual support or formal associations. In countries where industrial development was late and incipient and where, consequently, the working-class was strongly stratified, the local community played a key role in overcoming the distance between artisans, skilled and semi-skilled modern workers and the mass of unskilled workers who floated between various seasonal and occasional tasks<sup>[8]</sup>

In this region, working-class organization was based on two types of ancestral solidarities – crafts and communities. The progressive federation and confederation of professional groups allowed for the formation of extended spatial networks among skilled workers. However, the intersection of professional with local networks was essential in the extension of craft bonds inherited from the old regime. The territorially based associations allowed for a relative and gradual integration of unskilled and semi-skilled workers in the labour movement.

The Portuguese labour movement followed these trends. Despite Portugal's low level of industrial development, around the two main cities and in some small enclaves in the country, informal and formal social networks were being created at a grassroots level and progressively integrating into a

broader part of the factory-based proletariat.

Indeed, before the war, mobilization outside Lisbon, through local association networks, was especially effective in these manufacturing neighbourhoods. Through intertwining assistance and welfare, with union and cooperative functions in the same place or in a tight network of territorial institutions, it became possible to mitigate the distance and the diversity of interests that characterized the contemporary working classes. Associative practices enabled the engagement of broad social layers in collective action, creating resources and experience – social capital – that would be critical to the development of the workers' movement.<sup>[9]</sup> These formal bonds, linking working-class local communities, rested upon informal kin and friendship ties created during the successive cycles of [migration](#) and integration that marked this period.

In Lisbon, however, and to a lesser extent in Oporto, new organizational structures sprouted reflecting more global trends. Despite the low rate of formal unionization outside the traditional crafts, the evolution of the Portuguese labour movement, from the last decade of 19<sup>th</sup> century, has parallels with the developments observed in the rest of Europe. Gradually, unions from the most important economical sectors started to gather into National Federations.

Public services employees, such as railway or postal workers, created mass organizations, as well as national trade unions' federations. Organizational structures that sought to mobilize working classes not only over labour issues – as the Tenant League – started to act. Finally, the anti-war associations and the participation in global protests, like the one against [Kotoku Denjiró's \(1871-1911\)](#)<sup>[10]</sup> execution, help to increase the politicization and internationalization of the rising labour movement. Yet these structures were still embryos of what they would become after the war.

Progressively, the impetus to join a labour movement came not only from trade unions but also from cooperative societies or cultural associations, indicating an increasing involvement of all sorts of popular associations in collective action and an important extension of working-class organizational resources. In the years preceding the war, workers' increasing and conscious determination to defend trade union movements became noticeable, as witnessed by the eloquence of solidarity strikes for the freedom of association.

## **Collective action based on class**

Since the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a cycle of low intensity contention enabled a new repertoire of collective action consolidation, replicated and emulated on different socio-spaces.<sup>[11]</sup> More than the revolutionary syndicalist propaganda, which defended direct action against employers and the State, the examples set by previous successful strikes were essential in shaping the form of social unrest that in the two strike waves preceding and following the war.

The analysis of Portuguese strike movements, from 1910, reveals an increasingly effective organisation and a correspondingly relevant support by skilled workers of the factory proletariat. This

support and articulation, using the organizational resources described above, made it possible to mobilize unskilled workers on a larger scale in movements that spread across sectors and localities.

From 1910 onwards, the participation of women and children – both groups constituted a very significant proportion of unskilled Portuguese workers – gave an unprecedented mass character to the workers' movement. Cork, textile or canning strikes reflected these trends. We find women also reinforcing their organizational resources: founding associations of their own (of seamstresses or midwives) or taking responsibilities in pre-existing mixed unions. There were also trade unions which had their origin in women's struggles, such as the Post and Telegraphs Union, which was created following a general strike of telephone operators. Other social strata outside the traditional crafts were responsible for dramatic struggles during these strikes, for example, commercial employees fighting for the weekly rest or rural workers claiming salary increases.

The radical nature of contentions resulted from the revolutionary syndicalists' leadership. However, they relied on pre-existing organizational resources, largely founded by Republicans, socialists and other social reformers, for efficient mobilization instruments.<sup>[12]</sup> They also influenced the everyday sociability of the rural and industrial proletariat to mobilize large numbers of unskilled workers. On a local scale, the analysis of these strike waves further demonstrates that community associations and informal networks, formed in the previous period, sustained the strikers morally and materially. Taking into account official statistics, the scope of these struggles reflects a significant strength and extension of solidarity ties.

The strike wave of 1917-1920, however, surpassed its predecessor in the number of strikes, strikers, and in geographic and social scope; all suggesting that the war played a pivotal role. It was, in fact, during the war that, in different national contexts, the proletariat reached new forms of political unity and an enormous mobilization potential, transferred to the post-war struggle.

Repression against trade unions deprived the working class, especially the older skilled workers, of their traditional resources, causing great disorientation. New industrial workers staged movements typical of the first phase of industrialization, like outbursts of anger, rather than organized labour conflicts. These outbursts were particularly violent in the working class neighbourhoods, where population density increased dramatically and the crisis of livelihoods was felt with particular intensity. The main protagonists of food riots were women. Although they were deprived of formal organizational resources, they managed family and neighborhood networks and had always led consumption struggles.

The arrival of [women](#) on the factory floor, however, was a novelty that would have important consequences. It made it easier for unions to influence and politicise these new workers and their struggles. As referred to above, even before the war male skilled workers tried to integrate women into their strikes, formulating general demands like wage increases or the reduction of working hours. Portuguese unions, which were composed mainly by men, also supported autonomous women's struggles for better wages in order to fight labour feminization, a strategy undertaken by the industry

to reduce labour costs. In this sense, in social - paces where strong grassroots unions influenced local networks, revolutionary syndicalists managed to politicize the revolts against the rising cost of living, linking them to anti-war and class grievances.

They also succeeded in scale - jumping, expanding their ascendancy to areas hitherto untouched by social emancipation ideas such as medium-size cities and rural areas where large holdings dominated. The composition of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT), the national trade union's organization founded in 1919, reflects clearly the long-term trends described above. It engaged a total of 170 unions, organized in strong professional Federations and Local Unions.

During these years the number of unions and fellows multiplied. New locations and professional classes, namely civil servants, were mobilized. The CGT now played a broad role, approaching that of a political party. Alongside with the wage strikes, unions lead all struggles that involved the working classes; against the war and against the cost of living, among others.<sup>[13]</sup>

Unions were able to articulate these protests using the industrial workers movement, to bridge working-class interests through informal and formal networks. Struggles over production tended to assume a broader character by focusing on common demands like salary increases, which in turn could be related to the cost of living increase.

## **Labour and politics**

The democratization of Portuguese society that preceded the war had crucial consequences: a progressive integration of the popular classes in the political process; an increasing tension and division among elites and authorities; a growing alliance between small industrialists, merchants and the working classes; and, finally, an ostensible weakening of State power.

The political environment created by antimonarchical agitation and propaganda – carried out by republicans, socialists, anarchists and syndicalists – stimulated the strengthening of workers' and popular associations, such as mutual societies, cooperatives, and unions. The struggle for political hegemony among these actors was crucial to the development of grassroots associations.<sup>[14]</sup> Moreover, the prospect of social reform created by republicanism determined a growing ability to mobilize lower social strata.

Social unrest was enhanced in the period following the republican revolution of 5 October 1910, when the new regime sought to consolidate itself. As the new rulers attempted to maintain popular support, strikes were legalized and the unions' political role was recognized. Indeed, the strike wave that preceded the war – from 1910 to 1913 – and the structuring of the national trade union movement were profoundly related to the political process. Unions and strikes in general, despite the defence of direct action, redirected their claims to the State, requiring the legal regulation of working hours and other labour and social rights.

During the war, the increasing incapacity of the Portuguese authorities to minimize the conflict's

economic and social effects and, to curb infighting among the political groups, enhanced social unrest. More than the coups and revolutions, the increasing tension between central, regional and local authorities, concerning livelihoods, was perceived as an opportunity for struggles over consumption. The purpose of popular protests was to mitigate the crises of subsistence with the support of the state. In fact most of the agitation sought to force authorities to control prices and prevent hoarding. Unions and popular strata in general pressed for legal regulation in the essentials of trade.

The workers' struggle around the issue of consumption was not waged through unorganized explosions of hunger. At a local level, unions organized meetings and rallies, and even participated on official committees organized by municipalities to implement regulations on supplies. On the national level, the increasing cost of foodstuffs became a Workers National Union's priority from May 1917. The most significant mobilization campaign attempted during the war was the one that preceded the "general strike of all consumers" of 18 November 1918, staged a week after the Armistice. Consumers' struggles had a clear political character, differing thus from the economic struggles of artisans and skilled workers before the war.

Revolutionary syndicalists and anarcho-syndicalists gained the leadership of the Central Workers Union, at the Conferences of April and May 1917 and also succeeded in connecting the economic and social effects of the war to the capitalist system, contributing to the politicization and polarization of Portuguese society.

The radicalization of the movement, led by the socialist since its foundation, owed much to the war positions taken by each current within the workers' movement. Inspired by the Italian anarchist [Errico Malatesta \(1853-1932\)](#), the anarcho-syndicalists were the only ones who advocated peace and the non-participation of Portugal in the conflict from the beginning of the war. This position and the anti-war propaganda earned them the support of workers, severely affected by inflation and the shortage of foodstuffs.

Meanwhile, the [Russian Revolution](#) inspired an unprecedented internationalization and politicization of the labour movement. The Bolshevik victory, during the most dramatic period of the livelihood crisis, was immediately applauded by all strands of the labour movement, even anarchists, as an alternative to the current social system. During the global cycle of social unrest started in 1917, the Soviets were lauded in demonstrations and rallies all over Europe.

Alarmed by the revolutionary crisis, Portuguese post-war governments tried to implement relevant reforms. Among the social policies, the eight hour day stands out; one of labour's major aspirations, which became the issue of the first convention of International Labour Organization founded at 1919.

On a global framework, state intervention was the source of a new political tendency emerging among elites in support of profound social reforms. Portugal followed this trend. The Portuguese Socialist Party joined the early post-war governments led by the republican left, promulgating a package of important social laws, including the eight hour day. Defending these gains, workers

mobilised in order to force employers to comply with the law. In this process, the National Workers Union and later the General Confederation of Labour, although illegal,<sup>[15]</sup> were taken into account in the political arena, consolidating and making their identity official.<sup>[16]</sup>

## Conclusion

Conditions in wartime reinforced the interaction between the long-term process of development within industrial social relations and the structural political opportunities opened up by State democratization. This was applicable to both increases in manufacturing and the reinforcement of State intervention. This relational process gave added strength to the organizational resources of Portuguese workers and brought about the most important cycle of social unrest ever experienced in Europe.

The First World War, in the countries where industrialization was late and incipient, constituted a boundary between the traditional labour movement, typical of an artisanal world and sustained by the resilience of skilled workers, and modern trade-unionism, based on broader class alliances and desirous of intervention in the political arena. The dynamics of contention during the war and post-war years, in particular, gave rise to labour movement's autonomous political identity.

In recent decades, the theoretical debate regarding social and political identities has emphasized the multiplicity of identities criss-crossing the labour world. Several authors have rejected the idea that class overlaps gender or race, defending that this identity is merely a cultural and linguistic phenomenon.<sup>[17]</sup> Rejecting the structuralist determinism criticized by these tendencies, however, some recent approaches to social and political identity do not neglect the relevance of class as a powerful analytical concept. It should be used in a relational framework, in which social existence interacts with collective action shaping social and political identity. According to these authors, workers' identity as members of a class differs from gender or race identities, when, in a given situation, it becomes the basis for political action.

As was shown above, Portuguese workers' disposition to class-based collective action was unequivocal during the war years. Before the war, working-class social intervention and identity were part of a broader political movement, whose main aim was the overthrow of the centuries-old monarchy. A curtailment of militarism, schools militarization, together with the cost of foodstuffs and rents, was one of the mottoes at workers rallies from the end of 1911; the increasing repression of labour movement during the years before the war imposed grievances between the old allies – republicans and trade-unions.

The increasing autonomous political role assumed by trade unions favoured collective action during this period. In the process of Portuguese workers mobilization, organizational resources were reinforced, ideas of social emancipation diffused, and working-class strata linked by common interests and solidarity.

## Notes

1. ↑ McAdam, Adam/Tarrow, Sidney/Tilly, Charles: Dynamics of Contention, Cambridge 2001.
2. ↑ Mann, Keith: Forging political identity. Silk and metal workers in Lyon France 1900-1939, New York 2010, pp. 6-11.
3. ↑ Savage, Michael: The dynamics of working class politics, Cambridge 1987, p. 20.
4. ↑ Labour management inspired by [Frederick Winslow Taylor \(1856-1915\)](#) regarding theories on and practices of mass production methods and the division of tasks.
5. ↑ Procacci, Giovanna: «Dalla rassegnazione alla rivolta: osservazione sul comportamento popolare nella prima guerra mondiale» [From resignation to revolt: observation on the popular behavior in World War I], in: Ricerche Storiche, Ano XIX, 1 (1989), p. 46-111.
6. ↑ Hanagan, Michael: The logic of solidarity. Artisans and industrial workers in three French towns 1871-1914, Urbana 1980.
7. ↑ Hobsbawm, Eric J.: Worlds of Labour. Further Studies in the History of Labour, London 1984.
8. ↑ Tomassini, Luigi: L'associazionismo operaio. Il mutualismo nell'Italia liberale [The workers' associations. Mutualism in Liberal Italy] in: Annali della Fondazione Feltrinelli XXXIII (1999), pp. 8-17.
9. ↑ Rotberg, Robert: Patterns of social capital. Stability and change in historical perspective, Cambridge 2000.
10. ↑ Kotoku Denjiró was born in 1871, in Nakamura, Participated in the creation of the first Social Democratic Party in Japan (Shakai Minshuto), which was soon suppressed by the authorities. As an émigré in the USA in 1905–06, he was exposed to the influence of the anarcho-syndicalist figures of the Industrial Workers of the World. In June 1910, Kotoku and twenty-five of his associates were arrested on the false charge of conspiring against the emperor. Kotoku was executed in 1911 after a secret judicial process.
11. ↑ Tilly, Charles: La France conteste. De 1600 à nos jours, Fayard 1986.
12. ↑ McAdam/Adam/Tarrow/Tilly, Dynamics of Contention, Cambridge 2001.
13. ↑ Portuguese National Archives. Ministry of Interior: General Direction of Civilian and Political Administration. Received correspondence.
14. ↑ Catroga, Fernando: Republicanismo em Portugal. Da formação ao 5 de Outubro de 1910 [The republicanism in Portugal. From formation to 5 October 1910], Coimbra 1991.
15. ↑ According to the 9 May 1891 Law concerning trade unions, these structures were not allowed to create federations.
16. ↑ McAdam/Tarrow/Tilly, Dynamics of Contention.
17. ↑ Jones, Gareth Stedman: Languages of Class Studies in English Working Class History 1832–1982, Cambridge 1983.

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