STRIKES AROUND THE WORLD, 1968-2005

Case-studies of 15 countries

Sjaak van der Velden, Heiner Dribbusch, Dave Lyddon, Kurt Vandaele (eds.)

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Strikes in France

Strong social eruptions and a weak tradition of collective bargaining

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In both international literature and in popular belief, France retains the image of a country in which a high level of social conflict[1] has always existed. Can France be said to be the country of strikes and social conflict, or even class struggle *par excellence*? Many might be temped to answer in the affirmative. At the outset we need to underline that this representation is fed by a history of large-scale mobilizations of the population onto the streets to demonstrate against government measures in 'social explosions' which are all the more remarkable given the historically low level of unionization. This representation is at times nourished even in trade union circles, which bemoan the existence of a 'culture of conflict and opposition' and envy other European, in particular Scandinavian, countries for their 'culture of social dialogue'. This vision strikes us, however, as a departure from reality. We will therefore begin by reminding our readers of certain aspects that are often neglected in the standard representations. This will enable us to better analyse the particularities of the French situation in terms both of trade union activity and of strikes. We will then look more closely at the evolution of strike activity and, beyond this, of social conflict. Finally we will conclude by examining the present situation and possible future trends.

The particularity of the French situation

Seen from beyond its frontiers, France's situation remains for many analysts an enigma. How can a country with such a low level of unionization produce 'so much' collective protest action? To this is added a second question: how can one transpose to France a system of well-founded social dialogue that can avoid both a large number of 'unnecessary' strikes (those which do not even reach a compromise) and improve purchasing power and working conditions? These questions stem in part from an incomplete representation of the facts: (1) strike activity in

France is not that high and is indeed considerably lower than in many other European countries; (2) those countries in which purchasing power has more or less kept pace with global productivity (the gap between the average wage and GDP per head) are precisely those that are highly unionized and have centralized and coordinated systems of employer–employee relations (Plasman and Ryckx 2001), a situation that can also at times go hand in hand with higher levels of strike activity. These facts demonstrate the importance of placing any analysis of strike action and social conflicts into the context of, *inter alia*, capital–labour relations in the broad sense of the term, trade unionism and the relationship between the state and civil society. We present here the specific features of France in this area.

First characteristic: historically, the strike as a social phenomenon preceded trade unionism as a social formation. Recognition of the freedom of assembly in 1865 de facto annulled the Le Chapelier Act (1791) and made strikes possible. After being prohibited during the Vichy regime (1940–44), the right to strike was confirmed after the Second World War by being written into the preamble of the 1946 constitution, where it is stated that *'Any person may defend his rights and interests by trade union action and belong to the trade union of his choice'*. This means that workers are allowed to strike, even without or against a trade union. Linked to the democratic republican tradition, the right to strike, just like that of the freedom of choice of trade union affiliation, is first of all an objective, individual, right. Every employee is therefore entitled to exercise this right without prior notice. This is equally true for employees in the private and the public sector, and it is only very recently that discussion has been opened by the new Fillon–Sarkozy government (2007–) on maintaining minimum service levels in the public sector and submitting strike activity to procedures whereby each individual is required to announce his/her commitment to take strike action.

Second, it should be stressed that trade unionism has always been a minority phenomenon in the French working class. This minority character is linked both to its unequally distributed existence (with trade union strongholds and trade union deserts) and to a specific tradition of French unionism whereby only workers wanting to become activists were recruited into the unions. During the twentieth century, union membership peaked at around 35–40% on three occasions: after the 1936 general strike, after the Second World War (1944–1952) and following the general strike of May–June 1968. Outside these periods, the unionization rate has fluctuated around 15%, falling to under 10% for the past fifteen or so years (Andolfato and Labbé 2007). As French trade unionism largely retained its activist nature, these historical fluctuations in union density reflect first of all the extent of militant commitment to the union. At the same time, elections of employee representatives (*délégués du personnel*) at the workplace and of worker representatives in industrial tribunals (*les conseils de prud'hommes*) have always been supported by a majority of employees, with turnouts ranging from 50% up to 60% and even 75% in large private firms or in the public sector. Through these elections, employees mandate their representatives, via the ballot box, and are

otherwise involved in trade union life only through social movements and on demonstrations. It is at these moments that trade unionism regains its 'mass' character, by organizing workers' protest and conducting negotiations. This applies as much to industrial action at national level as it does at company level.

Third, it is important to point to the pervasive presence of the political sphere in capital–labour relations. Unlike in Scandinavia, collective labour relations tend to be part of the public arena. Public authority intervenes in social relations as one of the main prescribers of laws and standards. This is proved by the hierarchy of social legislation: the Labour Code, a product of the legislative activity of the National Assembly, takes legal precedence over national agreements, which in turn take precedence over sectoral agreements, and these over enterprise or establishment agreements. It becomes difficult to distinguish a real collective bargaining system, as such bargaining takes place in the public arena, with a major role taken both by the legislature and the executive (in particular as regards the minimum wage). Within the European typology, France is on the side of the 'dual system' which gives the right of expression within an enterprise to trade union representatives (*délégués syndicaux*) or employee representatives, as well as to elected representatives in the *comité d'enterprise* and the Health, Safety and Working Conditions Committee (CHS-ST), both of which function as employee representative bodies. These institutions are the heritage either of the immediate post-war period (1945–46), in the case of *comités d'enterprise*, or of the May–June 1968 strikes (trade union representatives and company trade union branches), or of the victory of François Mitterand and the left in 1981 (health and safety committees).[2] The signing of agreements does not require any majority consent, either from the trade union delegations or within the works council.[3]

The division of the trade union field is a *fourth structural characteristic*. There are no laws or regulations regarding the creation of trade unions inside enterprises. Trade union branches, whether or not affiliated to national confederations, are therefore easily set up. We should also add that this is the way that splits have occurred, in particular at local level.

The *fifth structural characteristic* remains important, even if tending to weaken today. At enterprise level, a large portion of trade union branches have been set up at the instigation of employers. This reflects employers' long-standing hostility to trade unionism (Weber 1986), a hostility that over time has become selective and limited only to those unions proclaiming a revolutionary direction. This attitude subsequently shifted towards a desire to help trade unions become more representative, on the assumption that the more widespread they became, the moderate their outlook would become (1984–94). During the latest period (1997–2007), known as that of 'social recasting' (*refondation sociale*), employers have sought to obtain an overturning of the legal hierarchy (with the Labour Code losing its legal precedence vis-à-vis collective agreements). The centre of gravity of employer–employee relations is already well on the side of business, and with agreements requiring the signature of a single trade union, whether or

not it has a majority in workplace representative elections, employers have often stimulated the establishment of local trade union branches that are ready and willing to sign agreements. This has enabled employers to produce contracts that have in no way impaired their businesses. In such a situation, the supremacy of the Labour Code, through the recourses it permits, still makes it possible to avoid a total breakdown of social structures.

The division of the trade union movement along ideological lines is a *sixth characteristic* which derives largely from the two previous ones: the freedom to choose one's trade union affiliation (or not) combined with the employer tradition of creating privileged talking partners *ex nihilo*. To the divisions based on the opposition between employers and trade unions are added those produced by ideological differences. The division of the CGTU into two confederations, the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) and the *Force Ouvrière* (FO), is patently the product of the Cold War (Mouriaux 1996; Lacroix-Ruiz 1996). In 1963 the majority of the Christian confederation, the *Confédération Française des Travailleurs Chrétiens* (CFTC), broke off to create the *Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail* (CFDT) (Cours-Salies, 1988). In the public services, such splits were for a long time avoided by the internal tolerance of organized minorities (tendencies). But since the late 1980s, a dynamic of fragmentation or organizational differentiation has continued. Certain splits originate in collective exclusions (in particular the CFDT's postal and telecommunication workers' branch), others in grouped departures or a combination of the two. This movement of decomposition–recomposition has since given rise to a new confederation, *Union Syndicale Solidaires* (which affiliates the SUD unions). Not affiliated to the confederations are the FSU (*Fédération Syndicale Unitaire*) and UNSA (*Union Nationale des Syndicats Autonomes*), which organize civil servants (education, customs, tax, police) (Jefferys 2003). For more detail on union confederations, see Appendix 1.

To explain the cleavage within the trade union movement simply in terms of the opposition between 'revolutionary' and 'reformist' unionism is no longer appropriate. However, this traditional cleavage continues to weigh heavily even today. Through much of the second half of the twentieth century, the 'revolutionary' uncompromising union current (organized in the CGT) strengthened its position in opposition to a 'reforming' or neo-corporatist type of trade unionism. Yet its institutional position was fostered by its presence in *comités d'enterprise* (works committees), composed of employee representatives and the owner of the company. Since 1947, these committees have administered substantial funds (usually between 0.5 and 1.5% of the total salary bill) for social activities (leisure, holiday centres, culture). This can put considerable amounts of money into the hands of the union which holds the majority on the committee. While these financial resources are confined to non-protest activities, this does not prevent the development of a consensual and bureaucratic culture in union circles.

Finally, it is important to underline that the French form of highly divided unionism, based on activists, goes together with to a traditional employer opposi-

tion to collective bargaining. This gave rise to a configuration of industrial relations that continues to affect the current situation. What we have here is a sort of 'path dependency', which we also find in other national systems and which places a heavy brake on the European integration of national industrial relations systems. In the French case, this has produced a game between social players with distinct roles. Where it enjoyed a majority the CGT combined a policy of refusing to sign agreements on wages or working time, in the name of doctrinal purity, with the management of the socio-cultural activities of the *comités d'enterprise*. In the private sector, FO has long been the privileged dialogue partner with employers, at both sector and enterprise level, despite its particular minority character (winning only 7–15% of votes in the private sector). This role was sometimes taken by house trade unions (CSL-CFT), led in part by militants of the far right, as at carmakers Peugeot and Citroën until the late 1980s. More recently, the move of the CFDT towards the political centre-ground has led it to also play this role of privileged negotiating partner, in particular in the area of pension reform (1995 and 2003). By acting in this way, it has allowed the combative minority in FO to push this confederation towards protest action, forming a single front with the CGT. The new unions affiliated to *Solidaires* have strong affinities to forms of protest and unionism favoured in the tradition of the radical left – direct democracy, respect for employee mandates, radical reforms, self-management and workers' control.

The combination of these features – an individual, unregulated, right to strike, a trade unionism of active minorities, a divided trade union landscape, and the signing of minority agreements – has meant that in France strikes tend very often to be very minority affairs, mobilizing in general one-third of affected employees, exceptionally more than a half of the labour force, and sometimes continuing around the question of payment for strike days. At times strikes are essential for getting employers to the negotiating table, at times they represent a unilateral call by a trade union organization looking to 'kill two birds with one stone': to get the employer to act and to embarrass the other unions. In some cases, the strike is initiated by a single sector of the company workforce, which then tours the shop floor asking workers to down tools.

In the private sector, these six characteristics have sapped the effectiveness of employer–employee relations and the hierarchy of legal instruments. The fact is that very few agreements are reached at national level, owing to an absence of consensus between employer and trade union organizations. Such agreements that are reached in this way concern general labour market or unemployment issues. At national level, one may indeed speak of a culture of dialogue in parity employer–employee structures on sickness and unemployment insurance (financed in a Bismarckian manner through levies on wages). Sectoral agreements are also a poor relation: again, representative organizations are signatories to them, but not all, given the fragmentation of the trade union scene and the existence of purely local structures. Unlike in countries such as Germany, sector-wide strikes

at the time of renegotiation of sectoral agreements are very rare. This is in part attributable to the fact that the minimum wage is determined by government decision while salary increases (based on classification tables and pay scales) derive from the obligation (since the Auroux Acts of the early 1980s) for two-yearly pay negotiations at enterprise or establishment level.

Generally speaking, we can say that France has a weak tradition of collective bargaining, despite this obligation for two-yearly salary negotiations in each enterprise. Salaries are based therefore either on government decision (rise in minimum wage) or enterprise negotiation. Pay rates have always had a highly individualized character, whether by classification of jobs on pay scales or via assessment of the competence of the individual worker. The weak tradition of collective bargaining is probably a strong point in the eyes of 'revolutionary' trade union currents, given the extent to which 'Gomperism'[4] and a narrow trade unionist approach are in their eyes insufficient or problematic in a perspective of social transformation. At the same time, given the contemporary social situation, characterized by widespread employment instability and growing divisions between occupational categories, between different employment statuses and between generations (in particular with the growth of temporary employment agencies), it is hardly surprising that doubt is cast on the very existence of a working class, in the eyes of both workers and of society as a whole.

Strike statistics in France

While statistics for strike activity in France look homogenous at ILO level, we need at the same time to look more closely at how these statistics are structured. In the government sector (state administration, local authorities, education and state hospitals), data are collected by the responsible civil servant of the local unit (for example, the school director), which tends to play down the number or size of strikes. The same applies to the private sector where the downing of tools and strikes of less than ten persons are not recorded. On top of this, strikes in the government sector are not always included in the annual series or are mixed in with data from the private sector (see the note on statistical data in Appendix 2 for more detail).

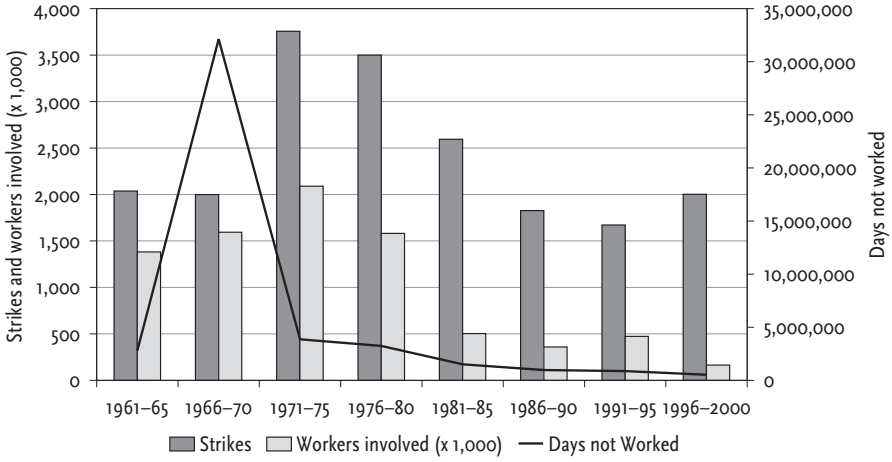
Observation of strike activity over the longer term calls first and foremost for certain methodological clarifications. In the French literature on the question, it seems that certain people measure strike activity by the number of strikes per 1,000 employees, others by number of days not worked per 1,000 employees. This changes a lot of things: using the first criterion, France appears as the country in which strike activity has been amongst the highest in Europe since the Second World War. Applying the second category, France can be said to be much less conflictual than Italy or the United Kingdom.

But long-term statistics also pose other methodological problems: ways of calculating them change over time, and one is never certain that they cover the same cat-

egories of companies (private sector, public sector). Moreover, in measuring strike activity, it is just as important to relate this to the number of (economically active) employees as it is to measure their average duration or frequency. It is possible, for example, to have fewer but more concentrated strikes (in certain enterprises) with higher participation rates or localized in enterprises with longer-lasting conflicts, without the ratio of individual days not worked per 1,000 employees showing this difference. Certain indicators allow us to measure the structure of strikes; these tell us about the *average length* of strikes (still referred to as *striker determination*) or their size (that is the average number of workers involved in the conflicts; we also speak here of *striker mobilization*), or again employee *participation rates*. To give an order of size, in France today, strikes have involved an average of 82 employees each between 1997 and 2000 (Sirot 2002: 58), have lasted on average 1.9 days between 1990 and 1993 with (on average per year) 1.6% of the country's workers taking part (Aligisakis 1997: 92, 88). This sort of description in fact leaves us little the wiser on the issue.

Figure 1 and Appendix 2 show that conflicts, measured by the number of strikes, workers involved and days not worked, have developed differently. The number of disputes remains rather high whereas the number of workers on strike has decreased much more since the 1980s. Still, there were resurgences of conflict in 1995 and 2003. In the intervening years, levels have run at around one million or less days not worked. Even so, the private sector share of the volume of days not worked has fallen significantly, from 462,000 in 2001 to 248,114 in 2002, 223,795 in 2003 and 193,423 in 2004 (i.e. from 50% to 40%). This last period nonetheless merits closer study.

Figure 1. ***Strike activity (in five-year annual averages), 1961–2000***



Source: Data are based upon figures provided by Bachy (1981: 162) but there are no data for 1968 and 1971; Furjot and Noël (1987: 56); DARES (2002); and ILO figures.

For the more recent period, the statistics produced by the Ministry of Labour (the *Départment d'animation de la recherche et des statistiques* or DARES) indicate a clear reduction in social conflicts between 2001 and 2004 in private sector enterprises, leading to people to talk of a generalized decrease in labour conflicts (Jobert 2005). However, if we widen the focus of the analysis and take into account other 'atypical' forms of conflict, the picture changes. The *REPONSE* survey,[5] undertaken at regular intervals, is of inestimable value here: by asking a large number of questions on the social climate and conflict, it permits more precise contextualization (Brochard 2003: 97–115, Denis 2005: 37–50). While an analysis of the administrative data of 'days not worked' appears to point to a fall in collective conflict situations at work, 30% of company managements declared that they had experienced at least one collective conflict between 2002 and 2004 compared with 21% between 1996 and 1998. This discrepancy is explained not just by the fact that the statistics count the number of days not worked while the survey counts the number of companies in which conflicts have occurred. The *REPONSE* survey records the existence of downing tools, selective strikes, working-to-rule, overtime bans, demonstrations, petitions and 'other forms of conflict'. Table 1 confirms that the increase in conflicts is linked not only to the widening of the repertoire of actions perceived by management, but also to the increase in the number of conflicts themselves, with management in particular reporting more single-type conflicts between the two periods.

TABLE 1. ***Percentage of establishments experiencing collective conflicts***

Number of conflicts*	***REPONSE* 1996–98**	***REPONSE* 2002–04**
At least one type of conflict	20.7%	29.6%
of which:		
one type	11.7%	16.5%
two types	4.7%	7.0%
three or more types	4.3%	6.1%
no type	79.3%	70.4%
	(100%)	(100%)

Source: Carlier and Tenret (2007).
Note: *The types of conflict proposed in the questionnaire to management representatives are: down-tools, strike of less than two days, strike of two days or more, selective strike, work-to-rule, overtime ban, demonstration and 'other forms of conflict'. The scope is establishments with 20 employees or more.

This increase covers all sectors of activity, albeit with strong differences between them (see table 2). Certain authors, like Sirot (2002: 52), believe that 'the tertiary sector, in particular in its public version, is increasingly taking the front stage for strike activity'. But an analysis of the data of the *REPONSE* survey shows that manufacturing industry remains the largest source of conflicts with 41.5% of business establishments concerned in 2002–04 compared with 30.1% of service sector establishments. It is also in manufacturing that conflict has grown most between

the two surveys (+ 12.9 percentage points compared to + 8.4 percentage points for services).

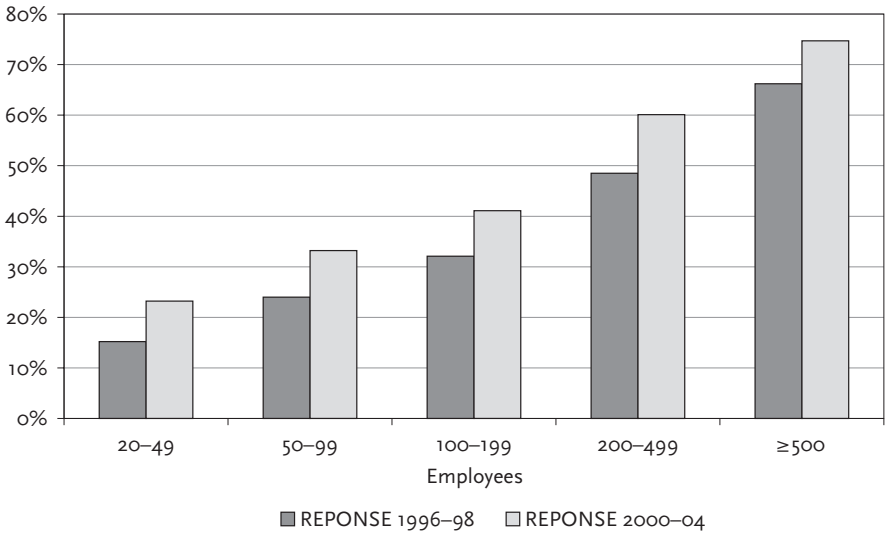
TABLE 2. ***Percentage of establishments and of employees involved in a collective conflict, by economic activity in private sector***

	***REPONSE* 1996–98**		***REPONSE* 2002–04**	
	Establishments	*Employees*	*Establishments*	*Employees*
Manufacturing	28.6%	50.1%	41.5%	63.6%
Construction	12.3%	19.5%	18.3%	23.8%
Trade	11.2%	15.4%	18.7%	28.7%
Services	21.7%	38.5%	30.1%	44.6%
Total private sector	20.7%	38.8%	29.6%	47.2%

Source: *REPONSE* survey.
Note: According to the declarations made by management representatives (in a questionnaire), 28.6% of manufacturing establishments experienced a collective conflict between 1996 and 1998; these establishments represent 50.1% of the employees in the sector. The scope is establishments with 20 employees or more.

The occurrence of conflict correlates strongly with the size of the enterprise: the larger the enterprise, the greater the likelihood of its having experienced a strike (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. ***Conflict and establishment size (percentage of establishments), 1996–2004***



Source: Carlier and Tenret (2007).
Note: Based on management responses, collected by *REPONSE*.

Small workplaces remain places where conflict expresses itself with greater difficulty for well-known reasons (the predominance of informal, interpersonal relations). Conflicts still come about there, but tend to take a more legal form. The 2002–04 *REPONSE* survey also confirms one of the classical postulates of the sociology of strikes: that a conflict is all the more likely to come about if employees have a framework for collective action, in other words if active and experienced militants are working with them (Kelly 1998). The fact is, whatever their size, business establishments more often experience conflict when they have elected employee representatives and in particular when they have trade union delegates.[6] Trade unionism remains one of the main vectors of collective mobilization in the working world. This said, it would be wrong to oppose too schematically formalized social dialogue and practices, since the *REPONSE* survey attests to the coexistence of negotiations, which themselves have risen sharply between 1996–98 and 2002–04, and collective conflicts in the same establishments. The move to a 35-hour week has certainly supported this concomitance of practices since a good number of negotiations have been preceded or followed by strikes aimed at supporting demands or rejecting the results of negotiated agreements.

But the main contribution of the *REPONSE* survey is that it takes account of changes in types of action and conflict which largely escape administrative statistics, whether direct (down-tools of at least one day), diffused (overtime ban, selective strike), one-off (down-tools, demonstration, petition) or longer lasting (strike or more than two days, work-to-rule, for example).

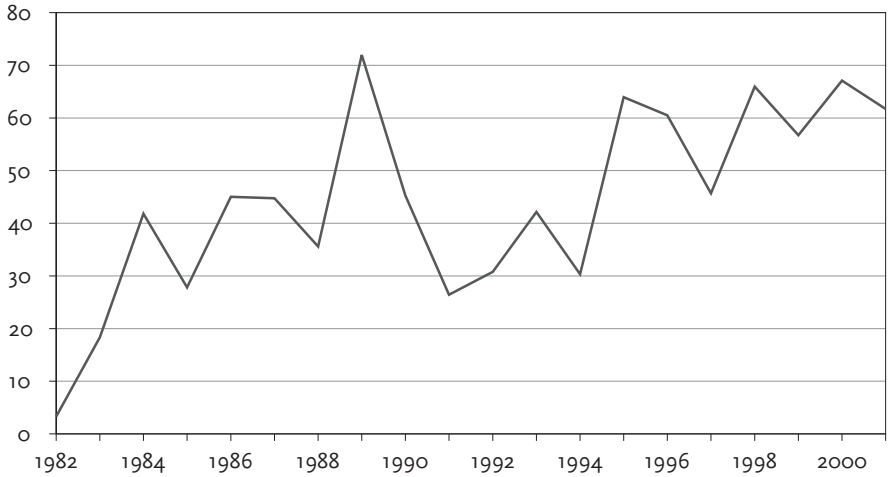
Comparison of the results of the 1996–98 and 2002–04 surveys shows an increase in the number of strikes of less than two days in those cases where the number of strikes of two days or more falls; and a considerable increase in the number of down-tools (from 7.5% to 10% of establishments) and overtime bans (from 3.2% to 9.6% of establishments) points to the growth of forms of action that are not necessarily less effective (Giraud 2006). The same trend can be found at the level of individual conflicts, with an increase in the number of employees instigating industrial tribunal proceedings (from 36% of cases between 1996 and 1998 to 42% between 2002 and 2004).

In an analysis of the first *REPONSE* survey of 1992–93, it was already observed that 'policies based on 'modern' forms of management go hand-in-hand with 'traditional' conflicts' (Cézard *et al.* 1996). The 2002–04 *REPONSE* survey again showed a correlation between the appearance of collective conflicts and the introduction of participatory structures. The fact that these results are significant *whatever the size of company and level of trade union presence* shows that the relationship between conflict levels and participatory structures is relatively strong, as it is not confined to large or highly unionized companies.

On the level of quantitative analysis, it is important to draw a distinction between the public sector (composed of the government sector and public companies such as post, telecommunications, gas and electricity), the private sector and

the nationalized industry sector. Between 1980 and today, one might be tempted to observe a reduction of conflict in the private and privatized companies sector and an unchanged situation if not an increase on the public sector side. This would, however, be misleading, as Figure 3 shows.

FIGURE 3. ***Days not worked in the public sector as a percentage of total days not worked, 1982–2001 (%)***



Source: Lecou (2003).
Note: The public sector contains the government sector and public companies such as post, telecommunications, gas and electricity, but excludes nationalized industries.

Taking as our starting point the number of days not worked, we can observe a continual shift in the centre of gravity of conflict. We can define a first period, running from 1982 to 1988, during which the public sector (as defined above) experienced significantly fewer days not worked through strikes. This is partly explained by the arrival in power of the left. From 1989 onwards, certain years are marked by a majority of conflicts on the public sector side. But the first of these relate specifically to the public hospital sector (1989 and 1990). 1995 was marked by the movement of November–December which first, but not only, mobilized whole services from the public sector (urban transport, post and telecommunications, railways, as well as health, administration and education). The second half of the 1990s, with the right in power and a series of structural reforms (privatizations, pensions, salary freezes), is marked by manifestly higher strike activity. The reduction in strike activity in the private sector is reinforced by unemployment and job instability. From 1982 to 2001 there is a similar order of magnitude in terms of number of days not worked through strikes, making the comparisons more credible.[7]

In summary, a long-term quantitative analysis shows up certain trends which go hand in hand: the continuance of strike activity, albeit with a downward trend

at macro-level over the past ten years; analysis at sectoral and local level also shows a greater concentration of strike activity in large and medium-sized companies and the government sector; last, but not least, the most recent period shows a rise in 'atypical' forms of protest, less costly than strikes and possibly heralding a forthcoming renewal of strike and protest action in those situations in which employment instability and the fear of unemployment are currently working to reduce conflict (Durand 2007: 63–78).

A qualitative analysis of changes in social conflict

The evolution of social conflict can be assessed not only in quantitative terms. In the longer term we can discern four distinct periods. The full import of this can be understood only by linking social events with those in the political and institutional field, a situation that in itself demonstrates just how dependent the socio-economic field in France remains on the political sphere.

1955–74: growing conflict

During these twenty years the trade union movement slowly emerged from the torpor into which the post-war divisions and then the Cold War had plunged it, with the CGT fighting isolated battles. Starting in the early 1960s, the Christian confederation CFTC moved towards a doctrinal basis which is more open to social conflict and the expression of interests differing from those of employers. Inspired by the doctrines of personalism and led by a generation of trade unionists coming out of the JOC (Young Christian Workers) movement, active in the (1940–44) resistance to German occupation, tensions with a corporatist wing grew and in 1963 a majority split off from the CFTC to form the CFDT. Seeing itself as a secular trade union confederation, the CFDT began from as early as 1965 to start to form a common front with the CGT. Several national action days, directed in particular at improving social protection, were to add a national dimension to social conflict. In May 1968 there erupted a general strike which was to last for two months and mobilize almost 10 million employees. This general strike – heralded by particularly vigorous local strikes (in particular at Saviem in Caen in January 1968) – spread like wildfire to most industrial centres and to large and medium-sized companies, including those where trade unionism had been repressed by authoritarian employers. Developing parallel with, but also linked to, the university student revolt, the movement of May–June 1968 was to lead France to the brink of an open institutional crisis. In the economic field, the strike movement expressed both the crisis of paternalist management methods of a family-based capitalism and a resistance towards a Taylorist division of labour linked with mass production (consumer society), which developed later in France than in many other countries. With the modernization of the production apparatus, the num-

ber of skilled workers had remained stable, while the unskilled or semi-skilled component, consisting in many cases of workers from rural environments or former colonies, had grown. Apart from differences in income between skill levels and also between Paris and the provinces, the working class had, since the second half of the 1960s, experienced an erosion of its purchasing power against a background of general economic growth.

Mid-way through the strike, towards the end of May, the 'Grenelle accords' were negotiated with difficulty between the representatives of the De Gaulle government and the leaders of the trade union confederations, with the exception of the CFDT. But these Grenelle accords failed to halt the strike movement. Certain unions, like the CGT, saw these accords as 'historic', since they finally announced a return to the 40-hour week, a 7% wage increase on 1 July 1968 with another 3% in October 1968, as well as the abandonment of the government's decision to freeze social security expenditure. But with no date set for the application of these accords (other than the salary increases), the mobilization continued in certain companies until 30 June, focused in part on local, company-specific demands. A feeling of having been in a position to impose a radical transformation of society, and push the Gaullist regime into crisis, was not to be abandoned so easily.

In the wave of this movement of quasi-rift, social struggles were to increase crescendo-like at both company and sector levels. A trade union counter-power took root on the shop floor and in offices, with the unionization rate climbing to 35% in 1973. Having failed to impose a regime change during the events of May–June 1968, and after facing a consolidation of the right in the 1969 elections, all hopes were now pinned on a victory of the 'Union of the Left' (an electoral alliance of the PS (Socialists), PCF (Communists) and other groupings on the political left), supported by the majority of trade union confederations. However, the 1974 presidential elections brought a president of the right back into power.

1975–86: an ebb in social struggles

From 1975 strikes and conflicts in general began to ebb, even though this was not so clear at first. Between 1975 and 1978 there was an attitude of waiting for the next elections, in particular in sectors in which the CGT predominated. At the same time, the economic crisis reduced workers' combativeness (Kergoat 1979); factory occupations grew in number but strikes reduced in size and frequency. The social field was marked at regular intervals by major sector-level conflicts (steelmaking in the Lorraine region, textiles–clothes manufacturing) and by national action days organized by a common trade union front until the break-up of the Union of the Left in 1978. The conflict in the steel industry with the future of 15,000 jobs at stake produced many demonstrations and strikes in the parts of the country affected. But apart from a small number of large emblematic conflicts (e.g. a press strike against *Le Parisien*), it was only in the early 1980s and in partic-

ular with the arrival of the left in power in 1981 that a wave of strikes would break out again, but this time concentrated in particular on the private sector.

The first target was the automotive industry, with the overexploited immigrant worker in pole position. Carmakers Peugeot, Citroën and Talbot (formerly Simca), rather than modernize and automate, had opted during the 1970s to recruit North African immigrants, adopting at the same time a particularly authoritarian and paternalist management style. The left's arrival in power changed the situation for this group of workers. A decade late, they began to contest a repressive managerial system. The strike movement in the car industry made headlines in 1983 and 1984 and was at times a source of embarrassment for the Socialist and Communist coalition government. While what the strikers were demanding was the maintenance of jobs and the application of the same democratic and social rights inside these companies, acts of prayer during the strikes were seen as proof of an inclination towards Muslim dominance. The same stigmatization occurred in certain cities, including by Communist mayors. It is no accident that racism developed very vigorously right at the time when the unification of the working class, beyond ethnicized cleavages, was becoming a priority issue. The xenophobia that had existed latently in work collectives now found official legitimation with the accusation of religious fundamentalism on the one hand and government measures in support of repatriation. This 'return to home' proved a failure, however, as very few immigrant workers accepted the financial assistance offered to return. The application of an austerity policy by the government of the left at the end of 1983 ended with the PCF leaving the government in 1984 and a number of violent and highly publicized social conflicts (Thomson and SKF). More generally, trade union organizations had obtained new collective bargaining rights (the Auroux Acts) parallel to the intervention and participation rights that workers now enjoyed at workshop level. But the context of economic crisis, restructuring and rationalization placed the labour movement on the defensive.

1986–95: the timid return of social conflictuality

Between 1986 and 1988 France experienced a period of 'cohabitation' (with a Socialist president and a government of the right). This appears to have been propitious for the return of social mobilizations. The first large-scale conflict involved the student population and the movement against university reform. In November and December 1986, larger and larger mobilizations were to place the government on the defensive. The death of a demonstrator pushed the trade union movement to express its solidarity and, afraid of creating a new 'May 1968', the government withdrew its plan for university autonomy. After this political defeat of the government and the remobilization of the student population, the working class returned to the path of struggle. The period from the end of 1986 to 1989 saw a re-emergence of sector- or company-based social conflicts: SNCF (railways), Peugeot, the postal services, the hospital sector and elsewhere. In

many cases strike actions and demands were managed by coordinating committees (strike committees and inter-trade-union committees at one and the same time). Trade union organizations were not opposed to these strikes, but did not always appreciate their loss of direct influence in managing a social movement. These conflicts produced compromises either in terms of salaries (partial catching up with the cost of living) or of employee status (civil servant or public company employee).

The return to power of the left from 1988 to 1993 was again accompanied by a return to austerity policies and the first structural reforms of the labour market. The flexibility paradigm began to feature in questions of both working hours and employment status. The category of temporary employees (employees on temporary contracts and agency personnel) began to grow in number and stay as a quasi-structural element of company workforces. But once again social remobilization was to express itself again only under a government of the right, during a second period of cohabitation (1993–95). Apart from a large strike at Air France in early 1993, it was the student population that would again mobilize *en masse*. The 'Five Year Framework Employment Act' of 1993 sought to introduce a young person's minimum wage (SMIC) at 80% of the standard rate, facilitate the annualization of working hours and partly regionalize employment policies and vocational training. The special minimum wage for young people was a setback for the social aspirations of those young people seeking to climb the social ladder by means of professional and technical studies. Two months of demonstrations led by students from grammar schools and higher technical and professional institutes – in many cases in liaison with the CGT, CFDT and FO – led to the repeal of this discriminatory measure. This 'hot spring' was followed by a period of social calm during which the government went as far as to create a legal structure for negotiating the reduction of working hours. The 1994 Robien Act authorized a reduction of working time down to 32 hours per week, with a reduction in employers' social-security contributions, in order to keep people in work or create employment. The period ended in May 1995 with presidential and then parliamentary elections.

1995–2002: growing resistance to neo-liberalism

In 1995 Jacques Chirac defeated Lionel Jospin, the Socialist candidate, in the Presidential election on a commitment to combat the 'social rift'. But, as in 1986, the political victory of the right in the parliamentary elections was followed by a social confrontation on a scale not seen since 1968. Reform of the special pension schemes for government employees, and for railway workers in particular, was at the centre of two months of strikes and ever larger demonstrations. Employees in these companies and sectors felt these measures to be particularly unjust (working longer) and unjustified in a period of mass unemployment (almost three million unemployed). With two million demonstrators on the streets in mid-

December, the Juppé government decided to step back and abandoned its plan. Significantly, the trade union front was split – with a strong mobilization front around the CGT, FO and public sector unions, while the CFDT was divided and a large minority of its rank and file was involved in the movement. Apart from a political defeat for the desire to reform the social protection system on liberal bases, the popularity of this social movement is probably the most significant fact. What certain people were to call the 'strike by proxy' in fact represented a latent solidarization of workers in the private sector. The strike movement was perceived as positive by the majority of public opinion, despite the discomfort caused by the absence of public transport in major urban centres. The victory obtained on the social front was to be followed by a resurgence of strike activity, including in the private sector. After several years marked by the left coming to terms with business, profit and liberalism, its criticism of unemployment, of job instability and worsening labour conditions was widely echoed in civil society. The writings of a number of critical sociologists converged with criticism of 'neo-liberalism' as the 'sole idea'. Particularly active intellectual circles drew inspiration from social mobilizations and provided effective intellectual opposition. The early dissolution of the National Assembly in 1997 produced a parliamentary majority of the left with a 'pluralist left' government including the PS, PCF and the Greens. One indirect effect of the emblematic 35-hour-week reform was an impact on collective bargaining in companies, particularly in terms of contractual production volumes.[8]

The measures taken by the pluralist left seemed to be working, with unemployment and employment insecurity decreasing and new jobs being created under the effect of economic growth. But the movement by unemployed people in October–December 1998 for higher minimum unemployment benefits achieved very little. Relocations and restructuring were affecting even profitable companies. Faced with this situation, the left in power remained inactive, even when Michelin decided to make 3,000 workers redundant. In companies, the question of salaries and jobs became increasingly conflict driven. The pluralist left again lost the elections in 2002. Almost seven years after 1995, the Raffarin government again took pensions as its target. This time, after a period of summit negotiations with all 'social partners' in spring 2003, the government succeeded in splitting the trade union front along almost the same fault lines as in 1995.

The new measures aimed at extending the pension contribution period in the public sector from 37.5 to 40 years (160 quarters), bringing it in line with the private sector. Several days of demonstrations with work stoppages and strikes took place throughout the negotiating period. At the end of April 2003, the signing of a separate agreement between the government and the CFDT and CFTC changed the situation and the probability of winning for the movement. The other trade union camp, opposed to pension reform (CGT, UNSA-FSU, FO and *Solidaires*), continued its mobilization, with some tempted by a 'general strike' and others hoping to be able to impose a withdrawal of the austerity measures. Many sections of workers

from the private sector joined in the demonstrations but, with no prospect of real coordinated action, the mobilization fizzled out by mid-June. The private sector would probably have taken a more prominent part in the demonstrations and would have downed tools significantly on those days but for the absence of unified orders. In this way the government succeeded in 2003 where it had failed in 1995. The following years were marked by further labour market reforms: in small and micro-firms (less than 20 employees) a 'new employment contract' in July 2005 (a two-year trial period, with the possibility of firing an employee without reason) and then 'the first employment contract' (2006). This was, however, massively rejected by students, many of whom worked part-time and were well aware how employers might act if such contracts were allowed. The government was finally defeated after two months of intense mobilization, in which students and sixth-formers got the better of a reform of employment contracts that would have permitted firing without reason for two years. In private sector companies, strikes have continued, if not increased, since 2002–04. Salaries are a particular point of conflict, demonstrating the aspiration of a large part of the working class to make good the losses in purchasing power suffered throughout the 1990s.

Conclusions

This placing of social conflict into a long-term perspective demonstrates several things, some of them specific to France, others much more common to EU-member states. First of all we need to remind ourselves that France is not 'the homeland of strikes', and it does not have a strong tradition of collective bargaining. But it does nonetheless witness important strike activity, though this is now concentrated on those places where trade unionism remains representative and well-rooted. And trade unions do have an institutional embeddedness and play an active role regarding individual workers' rights and collective issues, such as working time and wages. Second, it should be stressed that, unlike in other countries, social conflictuality is, on the one hand, either local or linked to a particular enterprise or occupation or state organization or, on the other hand, national. Sector-based strikes are rare, and very few sector-based strikes involve pay. Conflictuality tends to be explosive in the case of national conflicts (social movements) and intermittent at company level. It regularly hits the headlines with vital questions (closures, relocations) but does not as such reflect trade union activity aimed at establishing a balance of power. Third, the division and weakness of trade unions in the private sector and especially in SMEs are tending to distance them from everyday working life, with a concomitant loss of their capacity to represent the workforce and to regulate pay and conditions. Company management is often hegemonic (if not despotic, but in new ways) in decisions affecting working conditions (such as assessment, remuneration, career), with workforces structured on segmented bases (stable and temporary), with sharp

distinctions between those on permanent company contacts, employment agency contracts and temporary company contracts.

A high degree of politicization of trade union activists and the existence of radical currents can nourish trade union life in terms of programmes and demands, but do not *per se* give it a wider audience. While the ability to lead social movements or labour conflicts appears to be unaffected, the ability to win these conflicts is much less proven. But this does not appear to be of particular concern for the trade union movement. Maybe the shades of 1968 are still with us, with the possibility of a social eruption continuing to strike fear into employers and leading its organization, MEDEF, towards openness and dialogue as a way of limiting the scope for conflict. On the trade union side, the shades of 1968 are equally present, with the ability to repeat major mobilizations more recently (1995 and 2003) making its leaders believe that social revenge is still possible. In this way, despite its weak numbers, its divisions and its limited ability to affect the changing face of work and employment (instability and pauperization), trade unionism does not at all see itself as being 'in crisis' because sooner or later social conflictuality will come to its rescue – which is not exactly the picture we have sought to paint.

Notes

1 The original French term (*conflictualité*) broadens the English word 'conflict' to include other forms of conflict than strikes.

2 The *comité d'enterprise* is chaired by the head of the enterprise and is composed of elected personnel representatives (in particular, but not exclusively, from trade union lists). The minimum company size for a *comité d'enterprise* is 50 employees, and the number of elected representatives varies between 3 and 15 depending on the size of the company. The employee delegates form another representative body. Since 1993 this may be merged with the *comité d'enterprise* to constitute the sole employee representative body. The Health, Safety and Working Conditions Committees are the child of the first Auroux Acts (1982) and are found in enterprises with 50 employees or more. Since 1991 these latter committees have had a legal personality which allows them to present themselves as a civil party in litigation. The CHS-CT is elected by an electoral college consisting of all titular elected representatives in the enterprise.

3 This aspect is currently a subject of debate in both employers' and trade union organizations. A consensus in favour of a majority agreement seems to be slowly building up.

4 After Samuel Gompers, the head of the American Federation of Labor in the USA, who theorized this limited definition of trade unionism, which also approximates to that which Lenin attributed to practical 'trade unionism' – at once insufficient from the viewpoint of social transformation but clearly no less necessary for improving the condition of the working classes.

5 The REPONSE (*Relations professionnelles et négociations d'entreprise*) survey is a statistical survey undertaken by DARES of senior company managers and worker and employee representatives. The objective is to understand the dynamics of employer–employee relations in companies, as these relate to the employer's organizational, managerial and competitive strategies. The survey covers companies having 20 or more employees

in the non-agricultural business sector. Three surveys have been undertaken to date (1992–93, 1998–99, 2004–05).

6 50% of establishments with trade union representatives had at least one conflict, as against 19% of establishments with only employee representatives (no trade union affiliation) and 15% of establishments with no representative at all.

7 2.37 million days in 1982 and 2.4 million days in 2000. Here the 1990s stand out with an annual volume of only 1–1.5 million strike days per year, compared with an annual volume of 1.5–2 million days in the 1980s (see figure 1 and Appendix 2).

8 The annual number of accords signed has grown significantly since the Aubry Acts (1998–2000), from just under 3,500 before 1997 to almost 28,000 (particularly in small firms) (Bouquin 2006).

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Glossary

CFDT	*Confédération Française démocratique du travail*, French Democratic Federation of Labour
CFTC	*Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens*, French Christian Workers' Confederation
CGC	*Confédération générale des cadres*, General Conf. of Staff
CGT	*Confédération générale du travail*, General Confederation of Labour
CGTU	*Confédération générale du travail unitaire*
CHS-ST	*Comité d'hygiène, de sécurité et des conditions de travail*
CNPF	*Conseil national du patronat Français*, French employers' organization (until 1996)
CSL-CFT	*Confédération des syndicates libres / Confédération Française du travail*
DARES	*Direction de l'animation de la recherche et de la statistique*
DGAFP	*Direction générale de l'administration et de la fonction publique*
DRT	*Direction des relations du travail*
ETUC	*Europea, Trade Union Confederation*
FEN	*Fédération de l'education nationale*, national teachers' union
FO	*Force Ouvrière*, (Workers' Power)
FSU	*Fédération syndicale unitaire*, Unitary Trade Union Federation
JOC	*Jeunesse ouvrière chrétienne*
MEDEF	*Mouvement des entreprises de France*, French employers' organization (from 1996)
PCF	*Parti communiste française*
PS	*Parti socialiste*
SNCF	*Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer*
SUD	*Solidaires Unitaires et Démocratiques*
UNSA	*Union nationale des syndicats autonomes*, National Union of Independent Trade Unions

Appendix 1. Trade union organizations

Three representative confederations affiliated to the ETUC account for the majority of trade union members and gain over half of the votes in workplace elections. The CGT, with 650,000 members in 2000, won 33.1% of votes in the industrial tribunal members' elections in 1997 and 22% of votes in the *comité d'enterprise* elections in 1996 (36.5% in 1980, 50% in 1966). Despite its decline, it is still the biggest confederation, based in large establishments, in transport and industry and in the public services. It is formed by 95 department-level unions and 34 national industry federations, chiefly in energy, metalworking, railways, posts and telecommunications and public services (social affairs). There has been a great deal of internal controversy about the CGT's historic links with the PCF. The CGT joined the ETUC in 1999. The CFDT, declaring 757,000 members in 1999, gained 25.3% of votes in the industrial tribunal members' elections in 1997 and 21.6% of votes in the *comité d'enterprise* elections in 1996 (21.3% in 1980). It is represented chiefly in medium-sized establishments, in the financial sector and among white-collar workers, technicians and managerial staff. Historically linked to the PS, it is organized into geographical unions and industry federations, including those for health, iron and steel, and chemicals and energy. The CGT–FO split in 1947 from the CGT; it is pure syndicalist with anti-Communist/anti-Stalinist roots. With an estimated 370,000 members in 1995, it gained 20.6% of votes in the industrial tribunal members' elections in 1997 and 12.5% votes in the *comité d'enterprise* elections in 1996 (11% in 1980). Most of its members are in the public sector. It was set up as a reaction to the Communist leanings of the CGT in 1948 and contains a range of political sensibilities from right to radical left. FO is also organized into industry federations and department-level unions.

There are two other confederations considered to be nationally representative. The CFTC, with an estimated 93,000 members in 1993, gained 7.5% of votes in the industrial tribunal members' elections in 1997 and 4.4% of votes in the *comité d'enterprise* elections in 1996 (2.9% in 1980). Of Christian inspiration, and very powerful in Alsace, it is affiliated to the ETUC. The CGC was set up in 1944. With an estimated 111,000 members in 1993, it gained 5.9% of votes in the industrial tribunal members' elections in 1997 and 6.2% of votes in the *comité d'enterprise* elections in 1996, 28% from the third college (managerial staff and engineers). Organized by department and industry, the CGC, as the representative of professional and managerial staff, is affiliated to the ETUC.

The other unions are not considered representative at a national multi-industry level. They gained 7.9% of votes in the industrial tribunal members' elections in 1997 and 6.4% of votes in the *comité d'enterprise* elections in 1996. UNSA is representative in the public service and achieved 12.3% of votes in the elections for the joint administrative committees in 1996/1997. With an estimated 365,000 members in 1998, it includes the FEN which remained after the split, and other public sector unions and union members. Organized into centres of activity and

regional unions, UNSA has been affiliated to the ETUC since 1999. The Group of Ten or *Solidaires*, including 19 independent trade unions, is chiefly in the public sector, focusing around the SUD unions set up largely as a result of expulsions and departures from the CFDT, and represented particularly in telecommunications, post and taxation; it had 85,000 members in 1999. FSU arose out of the breakdown of the FEN in 1992 and was represented chiefly in education and the state civil service in 1996/97.

Note: Membership numbers – which are difficult to pinpoint because of the issues that this raises for the unions concerned – are taken from trade union statements and documents, and from the estimates drawn up by Labbé (2000: 177, 178). *Comité d'enterprise* election results do not include the SNCF (railways) (Labbé 2000: 273).