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Labor Conflict as a Global Phenomenon: Issues and Implications

By Maxime Quijoux

Some social phenomena require more attention than others, especially while they are in full swing. The phenomenon of labor conflict¹ is one such. After having occupied since the 1960s a hegemonic place in the social sciences,² the theme of labor conflict has subsequently somewhat faded in France³ and the rest of the world.⁴ This loss of interest is generally explained by the demographic or political decline of the working class, eclipsed by a service society more inclined to negotiate.⁵ In “a context marked by the reconfiguration of the economic crisis and labor force recomposition”, it is of course difficult to “draw upon the categories of conflict and negotiation” that were in use fifty years ago.⁶ However, research perspectives have also changed. Sociologists and political scientists have gradually abandoned labor mobilization for other objects and population categories, even in the framework of research on labor and social movements.⁷ Over the past decade, some French scholars have thus shown that, though conflict did not disappear from the companies in metropolitan France, the manner in which it is expressed has been transformed: strikes, for example, are shorter and less intense than in the past, partly replaced by other forms of expression and labor mobilization.⁸ After having accepted, for some time, the idea of a decline in “materialist” mobilizations, particularly regarding wage issues, and their replacement by more “qualitative” ones, French political scientists now seem to have adopted a more cautious stance: instead of

¹ By “labor conflict”, I am referring to all forms of occupational or employment protest and what relates to them. While it includes labor union mobilizations, our object of investigation cannot reasonably be limited to them given the absence of labor union organizations and the recurrent repression to which they are subject in many parts of the world. By contrast, the polysemous, polyscenic and polymorphous definition of labor conflict offered by Guy Groux seems particularly well-adapted to its international dimension. See Guy Groux, *Vers un nouveau du conflit social?*, Paris, Bayard, 1998.

² Jean-Claude Javillier, *Les conflits du travail*, Paris, PUF, 1981; Roland Pfefferkorn, *Inégalités et rapports sociaux. Rapports de classes, rapports de sexes*, Paris, La Dispute, 2007.

³ Richard Hyman, “À la recherche de la mobilisation perdue”, in Amélie Pouchet (ed.), *Sociologie du travail: quarante ans après*, Paris, Elsevier, 2001, pp. 35-51.

⁴ For Latin America, see Timonhy Wickham-Crowley, Susan Eckstein, “Économie et sociologie politiques du militantisme et des répertoires des mouvements sociaux récents en Amérique latine”, *Revue internationale de politique comparée*, 17 (2), 2010, pp. 29-52; for Africa, see Jean Copans, “Pourquoi travail et travailleurs africains ne sont plus à la mode en 2014 dans les sciences sociales”, *Politique africaine*, 133, 2014, pp. 25-43.

⁵ For an overview of these arguments, see Baptiste Giraud, “Des conflits du travail à la sociologie des mobilisations: les apports d’un décloisonnement empirique et théorique”, *Politix*, 86, 2009, p. 20. See also Leïla de Comarmond, *Les vingt ans qui ont changé la CGT*, Paris, Denoël Impacts, 2013, or, for an historical approach, Stéphane Sirot, *Le syndicalisme, la politique et la grève (France et Europe, XIX^e-XXI^e siècles)*, Nancy, Éditions Arbre bleu, 2011.

⁶ Odile Join-Lambert et al., “Au-delà du conflit et de la négociation?”, special issue, *Sociologie du travail*, 53, 2011, p. 163.

⁷ Frédéric Sawicki, Johanna Siméant, “Décloisonner la sociologie de l’engagement militant. Note critique sur quelques tendances récentes des travaux français”, *Sociologie du travail*, 51 (1), 2009, pp. 97-126; B. Giraud, “Des conflits du travail à la sociologie des mobilisations: les apports d’un décloisonnement empirique et théorique”, op.cit

⁸ Jean-Michel Denis, *Le conflit, en grève?*, Paris, La dispute, 2005; Sophie Bérout et al. *La lutte continue?*, Paris, Les Éditions du Croquant, 2008.

thinking in terms of the replacement of one type of mobilization by another, they admit that the old model has persisted since the 1990s and note the porous boundaries between associative and employee organizations.⁹

Claims of pacification of labor relations, which are increasingly contested in the French academic field, seem simply inconceivable at an international level: since the mid-1990s, the number of disputes in Chinese companies has steadily risen¹⁰ while in many countries and regions of the world labor-related conflicts and mobilizations are ever more intense and frequent.¹¹ Recent news testifies to this major unrest, which moreover only represents the most “visible” – because most widely reported – aspect of the global social conflict. Nor have “post-industrial” countries been spared occupational mobilizations, which may have taken different and even new forms in terms of their genesis and expression. Marked by the decline of industrial bastions, the gradual liberalization of labor codes and the emergence of the third sector, the present historic conjuncture

⁹ Érik Neveu, *Sociologie des mouvements sociaux*, Paris, La Découverte, 2011 (5th edition); Isabelle Sommier, “vers une approche unifiée de la conflictualité sociale”, and Jérôme Pélisse, “Ce que la juridiction des relations de travail fait au conflit et à la négociation”, in O. Join-Lambert et al, “Au-delà du conflit et de la négociation?”, op. cit., pp. 176-180 and pp. 185-190.

¹⁰ In 1994, there were 1482 collective labor conflicts involving 52,637 workers. According to the China Labor Statistical Yearbook, in 2008, 21,800 such conflicts took place, involving 502,713 workers. The number of workers involved in individual and collective labor conflicts is even more striking: over the same period, it rose from 77,794 to 1,214,328 – i.e., a fifteen-fold increase. Since then, these numbers have somewhat diminished, with “only” 7252 cases of collective conflict in 2011, though this figure is nearly 5 times greater than that of twenty years earlier. In fact, the “socioprofessional” situation is still very unstable in China, as evidenced by regular reports on the part of the China Labor Watch NGO as well as the most recent conflict, which in April 2014 involved between 30,000 and 40,000 sports shoe workers in the southern province of Guangdong.

¹¹ In Morocco, the number of strikes doubled between 2010 and 2011. According to that country’s Ministry of Labor, it reached a ten-year record, with more than 350 movements taking place. Since 2013, Brazil has witnessed social movements protesting the cost of living and mobilizations against the cost of the 2014 Football World Cup. With less than one month to go before the start of the event, the mobilizations continued as calls for strikes proliferated at stadium construction sites as well as in the transport, education and police sectors. In South Africa, on 10 August 2012, the workers at the Marikana mine in the country’s north went on strike to demand a wage increase. On 16 August, the conflict deteriorated, with the police firing on strikers, killing 34 of them. See the article by Raphaël Botiveau in the second number of this two-part issue (65, October-December 2014). In the past two years, Cambodia has experienced sustained strikes in one of its main sectors of economic activity – textiles – as well as general strikes during the 2013 legislative elections. In Turkey, on 13 May 2014, an explosion in a coal mine in Soma, a town located in the western part of the country, caused a fire to break out and galleries to collapse. More than 300 deaths resulted. This catastrophe led to a series of sometimes violent protests against the government, which was accused of being too lax in regards to conditions and the application of safety rules. For twenty years, Bangladesh has experienced regular tragedies in its textile factories, the most serious being that of Rana Plaza, a building located near Dacca, which collapsed on 24 April 2013, causing the death of more than 1100 people and injuring more than 2000 more. The country has since experienced a series of mobilizations, particularly in the course of elections, accompanied by a wave of general strikes. This accident also provoked international mobilization, resulting in a series of specific actions, including the 15 May 2013 signature of an agreement regarding labor conditions and the standardization of the country’s factories between the IndustriAll federation of European industries, Uni Global Union and a hundred clothing brands. Regarding the role of labor unionism in the Egyptian revolution, see Françoise Clément et al., “Le rôle des mobilisations des travailleurs et du mouvement syndical dans la chute de Moubarak”, *Mouvements*, 66, 2011, pp. 69-78. On Tunisia, see Allal Amin, “Réformes néolibérales, clientélismes et protestations en situation autoritaire”, *Politique africaine*, 117, 2010, pp. 107-125.

forces workers and their organizations to engage in what is, in terms of both time and energy, an often long and costly process of adaptation.¹² Often involving labor “communities” characterized by a strong tradition of labor union activism¹³, present-day sustained protests against restructuring and the massive general strikes set off by the 2008 financial crisis and its attendant policies have been accompanied by increased legal professionalization¹⁴ of “traditional” labor union practices. At the same time, new forms of mobilization have gradually emerged and been seized upon by what were until recently “invisible”¹⁵ and/or inexperienced populations.¹⁶

Faced with the persistence of this issue and the manner in which it has developed, this issue seeks to stimulate a new research dynamic. Given the limits of the present format and the still very incomplete nature of scholarship on this theme, this is less a matter of advancing theories than of exploring new avenues for existing debates. In this sense, the contributions brought together in this number put forward three particularly rich issues.

Causes and Repertoires of Action: The Heuristic and Epistemological Virtues of a Decentered Approach

The past thirty years have witnessed a twofold dynamic characterized by the decline of the working class and the spread of precarious work among new categories of worker. This has led French social scientists to reconsider the causes and conditions of mobilization in the working world. After having taken note of the effects of the decline of the labor world on the plummeting number of workplace struggles,¹⁷ the sociology of occupational mobilization has since the early 2000s turned its attention to what are most often described as “unlikely” mobilizations.¹⁸ Because these

¹² S. Bérout, J.-M. Denis, “Le développement interprofessionnel de Solidaires: entre volonté d’expérimentation et reproduction du ‘modèle’ confédéral”, *La Revue de l’Ires*, 75, 2012, pp. 67-92.

¹³ Claude Didry, Annette Jobert (ed.), *L’entreprise en restructuration. Dynamiques institutionnelles et mobilisations collectives*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2010; Nicolas Renahy, “Une occupation d’usine, chant du cygne d’un syndicalisme villageois”, *Ethnologie française*, 35 (4), 2005, pp. 691-702; Cédric Lomba, “Restructurations industrielles: appropriations et expropriations des savoir ouvriers”, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 196-197, 2013, pp. 34-53.

¹⁴ Aristeia Koukiadaki, Claude Didry, “Droit et conflits du travail dans l’Angleterre du New Labour”, *L’Homme et la société*, 182, 2011, pp. 11-23; J. Péliasse, “Judiciarisation ou juridicisation?”, *Politix*, 86, pp. 73-96.

¹⁵ Mathieu Bonzom, “Syndicats et immigrés aux États-Unis”, *Plein droit*, 89, 2011, pp. 19-22; Pierre Barron et al., *On bosse ici, on reste ici, la grève des sans-papiers, une aventure inédite*, Paris, La Découverte, 2011.

¹⁶ Marlène Benquet, “Les raisons de l’action collective: retour sur la mobilisation improbable des salariés d’hypermarchés”, *Sociologie du travail*, 52, 2010, pp. 305-322; Catherine Sauviat, “Résurgence des luttes sociales et renouvellement des stratégies syndicales”, *Chronique internationale de l’IRES*, 145, 2014, p. 3-17.

¹⁷ Stéphane Beaud, Michel Pialoux, *Retour sur la condition ouvrière*, Paris, Fayard, 1999.

¹⁸ Lilian Mathieu, “Les mobilisations improbables: pour une approche contextuelle et compréhensive”, in Stéphane Cadiou, Stéphanie Dechezelles, Antoine Roger (eds.), *Passer à l’action: les mobilisations émergentes*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 2007; Annie Collovald, Lilian Mathieu, “Mobilisations improbables et apprentissage d’un répertoire

struggles are pursued under unstable employment and working conditions by actors who possess limited political skills and an ephemeral occupational identity, they disrupt objects of study, disciplinary frontiers and some analytic routines regarding the forms of labor mobilization. Given the nature of some political regimes and the absence of a labor code and/or labor union organizations in certain countries, international examinations of labor conflicts contribute – sometimes radically – to deconstructing our scholarly archetypes, which are often reduced to measuring strikes and the degree of wage integration.¹⁹ In fact, the plurality and wealth of repertoires of action – which include rioting (Raphaël Botiveau), multiple strategies for circumventing labor union repression (Quentin Delpech and Mathieu Hocquelet), appropriation of social movement strategies (Sophie Bérourd)²⁰ and transnational campaigns²¹ – allow one, not only to better account for the “evolving dynamics of conflicts, negotiations and actors behind them”,²² but also to shed light on their specific properties. Moreover, bringing an international perspective to bear on labor conflict also provides a different in-depth vision of the manner in which these repertoires circulate²³ and the links among the various actors in these struggles. Here, too, we are invited to move beyond our customary analytic frameworks.

Rethinking the Field of Industrial Relations

Three main actors are traditionally represented in the analysis of labor conflicts: workers and/or their representatives, employers and public authorities.²⁴ The importance given to the production of rules and institutions – from their genesis to their effects on the working world – has led researchers to make law and negotiation central notions, alongside conflict and strike, for understanding the strategies developed by these various actors.²⁵ Since the mid-1980s, the effects

syndical”, *Politix*, 86, 2009, pp. 119-143; Maxime Quijoux, “Mobilisations et politisations ouvrières contemporaines: les usines ‘récupérées’ en Argentine”, *Critique internationale*, 57, 2012, pp. 111-132.

¹⁹ B. Giraud, “Des conflits du travail à la sociologie des mobilisations: les apports d’un décroisement empirique et théorique”, op. cit.

²⁰ C. Sauviat, “Résurgence des luttes sociales et renouvellement des stratégies syndicales”, op. cit.

²¹ On the construction of transnational mobilizations relating to labor conditions in textile factories and the social responsibility of companies, see Pauline Barraud de Lagerie, “L’affaire Spectrum”, *Revue française de sociologie*, 52 (2), 2011, pp. 245-275. For a very illuminating example of other forms of transnational mobilization, see the case of the IBM cyber-protest reported by Jean-Emmanuel Rey, “Nouveaux conflits collectifs dans notre société de réputation: de la grève interne à l’action collective externalisée”, in O. Join-Lambert et al., “Au-delà du conflit et de la négociation?”, op. cit., pp. 170-175.

²² O. Join-Lambert et al., “Au-delà du conflit et de la négociation?”, op. cit., p. 162.

²³ Applying it to the global level, I borrow the idea of “a comparative approach regarding the forms of circulation of people and ideas among the employer, labor union, associative, state and political worlds”, *Ibid.*, p. 164.

²⁴ At least for the “system of professional relations” theory. Antoine Bevort, Annette Jobert, *Sociologie du travail, les relations professionnelles*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2011.

²⁵ *Ibid.*; Nicolas Hatzfeld, “Les conflits du travail, source renouvelée d’expérience et de connaissance”, in O. Join-Lambert et al., “Au-delà du conflit et de la négociation?”, op. cit., pp. 160-193.

of the globalization of exchange and the emergence of new commercial and institutional spaces – first and foremost, the European Union – have significantly modified this approach. In line with analyses of the decline of industrial bastions, many observers have thus underscored the inability of labor union organizations to adjust their analytical frameworks and methods of struggle in keeping with ever more volatile capital movements.²⁶ Others, by contrast, have endeavored to account for the manner in which the various actors have attempted to produce new norms and actions in keeping with gradually emergent economic and political configurations.²⁷ New rules and novel measures have emerged, reinforcing the shift from an activist-centered labor unionism to an expert – indeed, technocratic²⁸ – one. Once again, the internationalization of “labor conflict” has permitted decentering, which in turn has allowed new research perspectives to be identified.

A simple preliminary observation justifies this: many labor conflicts appear in political and social contexts in which the system of professional relations is ineffective due to the lack of a formal labor market, a regulatory state and/or independent social partners.²⁹ There have certainly been efforts – mainly in Europe³⁰ – to form transnational representative institutions but these have stumbled against the absence of employers’ organizations and the difficulties for professional organizations to move beyond the national framework.³¹ As a consequence, “traditional” institutions cede the international scene to a collection of actors whose particularity is often the fact that they are external to both the national framework and the particular economic sector. More sharply than in the context of metropolitan France,³² the international perspective on labor conflicts sheds light on the porous boundaries between the associative and professional worlds as well as that of international institutions.³³ Does the international scale for all that disqualify the professional relations approach? Despite its difficulties, labor union action continues and the

²⁶ Georges Ubbiali, “Syndicalisme en crise, syndicalisme en mutation. Note critique”, *Politix*, 6 (23), 1993, pp. 84-101.

²⁷ Donna Kesselman, “Travail et salariat aux États-Unis: quels droits, quelles perspectives?”, *Revue française d’études américaines* 111, 2007, pp. 6-26; A. Koukiadaki, C. Didry, “Droit et conflits du travail dans l’Angleterre du New Labour”, op. cit.; Arnaud Mias, “Les registres de l’action syndicale européenne”, *Sociologie du travail*, 51, 2009, pp. 461-477.

²⁸ Anne-Catherine Wagner, “La fabrique de syndicalistes ‘européens’: une enquête sur les formations européennes de la CES”, *Politique européenne*, 27, 2009, pp. 105-127.

²⁹ For the case of Bangladesh, see P. Barraud de Lagerie, “L’affaire Spectrum”, op. cit.; for China, see Claude Didry, Annette Jobert, Yi Zhenzhen in this issue and Chloé Froissart in the next number (65, October-December 2014); for that of Guatemala, see Quentin Delpech, *Mobilisations syndicales et violences au Sud*, Paris, Karthala, 2014.

³⁰ Élodie Béthoux, “Vers une représentation européenne des salariés. Les comités d’entreprise européens face aux restructurations”, *Sociologie du travail*, 51, 2009, pp. 478-498.

³¹ François Aballéa, Arnaud Mias (eds.), *Mondialisation et recomposition des relations professionnelles: un état des lieux*, Toulouse, Octares, 2010. Despite the attempts at transnational mobilization, the case of European rail workers provides a good illustration of this situation. Hilal Nadia, “L’Europe, nouvelle figure de la crise syndicale: les syndicats face à la libéralisation du rail en Europe”, *Politique européenne*, 27, 2009, pp. 75-103.

³² J.-E. Rey, “Nouveaux conflits collectifs dans notre société de réputation: de la grève interne à l’action collective externalisée”, op. cit.; I. Sommier, “Vers une approche unifiée de la conflictualité sociale”, op. cit.

³³ As in the case of the Rana Plaza disaster: On 15 May 2003, with an NGO collective acting as witness, the global labor unions (IndustriALL) signed an agreement at the Geneva offices of the ILO with the outsourcing brands and companies.

gradual emergence of new “mega” structures³⁴ (whose involvement in recent negotiations³⁵ and international actions³⁶ has had national and global repercussions) argues for redefining the field of these professional relations – its actors as well as their roles and interactions – rather than abandoning it.

An International Relations Issue

Finally, the international approach to labor conflict leads us to reconsider its political dimension. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union, scholarly and lay perceptions of labor as a space of social tension and an arena of democratic struggle have significantly declined. On the national and international scene, the growing place occupied by patriotic³⁷ and religious rhetoric since the early 2000s has pushed the social question to the political margins. At the start of the present decade, it resurfaced in the countries of North Africa and the Mideast – regions nevertheless “known” as strongholds of nationalism and religion. In a context less marked by economic slowdown than by the “crisis of the social authoritarian state”,³⁸ the revolts that shook these regions were driven by job scarcity and disturbances in the “traditional” forms of employment access.³⁹ Taken alone, the issue of labor does not, it is true, explain the genesis of these revolts⁴⁰ or the array of countries⁴¹ affected by them. Yet it can be argued that it has been a major cause of the political transformations that have taken place in them. This makes our object

³⁴ Anne Dufresne, “Naissance d’un euro-méga-syndicat. La fédération des industries européennes IndustriALL”, *Chroniques internationales de l’IRES*, 141, July 2013, pp. 21-34.

³⁵ Since the signature of the Rana Plaza agreement, IndustriALL claimed to have organized more “than 40,000 workers in 120 factories and workshops” in the space of one year (<http://www.industriall-union.org/fr/premier-anniversaire-de-laccord-du-bangladesh>).

³⁶ Over the course of summer 2013, the International Labor Union Federation carried out a campaign to denounce the slave-like conditions in which Nepalese workers were employed at the construction sites for the 2022 World Cup, which is to be held in Qatar. After an initial report in the *Guardian* reported 44 deaths in two months, the ITUC attempted to mobilize, predicting that more than 4000 people would die before the World Cup was held should nothing be done to improve labor conditions. Although it set no calendar, Qatar was obliged to announce that it would relax its very restrictive conditions on the employment of foreign workers.

³⁷ Françoise Daucé, Anne Le Huérou, Kathy Rousselet, “Les diversités du patriotisme contemporain”, *Critique internationale*, 61, 2013, pp. 11-17.

³⁸ Eberhard Kienle, Laurence Louër, “Comprendre les enjeux économiques et sociaux des soulèvements arabes”, *Critique internationale*, 61, 2013, pp. 11-17.

³⁹ Allal Amin, “Trajectories ‘révolutionnaires’ en Tunisie”, *Revue française de science politique*, 62 (5), 2012, pp. 821-841. Among the mosaic of profiles presented by A. Allal, one of the “ordinary” causes of the Tunisian revolution was the dysfunction of clientelist practices relating to hiring. Given its position, it would be worth carefully examining the role played by the UGTT, Tunisia’s main group of affiliated trade unions, in drawing up the country’s new constitution.

⁴⁰ E. Kienle, L. Louër, “Comprendre les enjeux économiques et sociaux des soulèvements arabes”, op. cit.

⁴¹ Myriam Catusse, “La question sociale aux marges des soulèvements arabes: leçons libanaises et marocaines”, *Critique internationale*, 61, 2013, pp. 19-34.

of investigation a genuine question of international relations. However, the democratic and global dimensions of labor conflict are not limited to the emblematic case of the “Arab Spring” uprisings. They manifest themselves elsewhere as well, particularly in countries that supply cheap labor. Indeed, the competitiveness of these countries is very often predicated on a concentration of economic and political power that is reflected, among other things, in the absence of protection and rights both within and outside of companies. It is therefore not unusual for general strikes to accompany elections or for wage demands to be mixed with political slogans as in Cambodia and Bangladesh. While these conflicts have not spread throughout their respective regions, for historical and cultural reasons, their particular struggles have assumed other forms and have been internationalized, with global repercussions. For, in the aftermath of some industrial disasters, the attempts of Western mobilization entrepreneurs to hold companies responsible for the labor conditions of their contract manufacturers in producer countries have had a series of national and international consequences. Although they are in an embryonic state and can thus still be perfected (Q. Delpech),⁴² these campaigns have – in terms both of their forms⁴³ and their results – produced novel modes for regulating the international division of labor, ones that remain to be measured and examined. In a global market that remains profoundly anomic, such conflicts are just the “visible” portion of these mobilizations. It is thus imperative that a central role once again be accorded to labor – alongside the economy, nationalism and religion – in efforts to understand the current dynamics of contemporary societies.⁴⁴

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⁴² And P. Barraud de Lagerie, “L’affaire Spectrum”, op. cit.

⁴³ J.-E. Rey, “Nouveaux conflits collectifs dans notre société de réputation: de la grève interne à l’action collective externalisée”, op. cit.

⁴⁴ I would like to thank the contributors to these two issues, *Critique internationale*’s anonymous readers and the members of its editorial committee for their support and constant help in the preparation of this project. In particular, I would like to thank Sophie Bérout and Annette Jobert for closely reading and commenting on the present introduction. Any errors, it goes without saying, are mine alone.