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Strikes as Revolutionary History?

Probing the Potential for a Revolution in Post-1945 Europe through Wildcat Strikes*

Why was there no proletarian revolution after the Second World War? This is a question that historians have been debating for decades. After all, right across post-liberation (continental) Europe, the circumstances for a revolution seemed so propitious: the interwar ruling class had been discredited by the Great Depression and by its collaboration with fascism, state authority had all but collapsed during the final stages of the war, and workers in bombed industrial cities found themselves in a truly desperate material situation. To be sure, the first post-war years witnessed considerable industrial activism and unrest. In the wake of liberation, some factories that had been abandoned by their (collaborationist) owners were placed under worker self-management. During the years that followed, the continent was swept by recurrent waves of largely spontaneous strikes and agitations. Yet these episodes were mostly short-lived and certainly pale by comparison with the larger outbursts of 1917–1921 or even 1968–1969.

The debate about the labour movement's failure to mount a revolutionary challenge to (state) capitalist reconstruction dates back to the late 1960s. In the charged socio-political atmosphere of the time, a new generation of radical historians first began to study the struggles that workers had fought in the aftermath of the war. These historians have often stressed that the industrial working class emerged much radicalised from the war and stood ready to take political power. This found its reflection in the grassroots participatory councils that sprung up all over continental Europe – »Antifa« in Germany, »Comitati di Liberazione Nazionale« in Italy, »Comités Départementaux de la Libération« in France et cetera – and assumed control over local administration and industrial management.¹ For historians in the radical tradition, these councils carried the germs of an altogether different Europe, based on direct democracy and worker self-management. Such historians have frequently attributed the fact that this different, more radical, Europe never came into being to the unwillingness of communist and/or socialist leaders to place themselves at the head of the revolutionary council movement. For by throwing their full weight behind the reconstruction effort and cold-shouldering the revolutionary fervour at their grassroots, the leaders of the post-war labour movement not only caused much disillusionment among their rank and file but also gave the capitalist class vital time to get back on its feet; thereby squandering a golden opportunity to remake the continent from below.² In this context,

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1 The standard work on these bodies is still *Ulrich Borsdorf/Lutz Niethammer/Peter Brandt* (eds.), *Arbeiterinitiative 1945: Antifaschistische Ausschüsse und Reorganisation der Arbeiterbewegung in Deutschland*, Wuppertal 1976.

2 For examples of this sort of reasoning see e. g. *Fernando Claudín*, *The Communist Movement: From Comintern to Cominform*, vol. 2: *The Zenith of Stalinism*, New York 1975; *Ernst-Ulrich Huster*, *Die Politik der SPD 1945–1950*, Frankfurt am Main/New York 1978; *Grégoire Madjarian*, *Conflits, pouvoirs et société à la Libération*, Paris 1980.

some of the radical historians have even spoken of a *verhinderte Neuordnung*³ or a »betrayed resistance«.⁴

The notion that post-war Europe could have been transformed if only the leaders of the labour movement had taken a less cautious line attracted much criticism in the 1980s and 1990s. On the basis of newly available documents in state archives, historians started arguing that a proletarian revolution had never been on the cards in post-war (western) Europe. There were at least two reasons for this. In the first place, the desperate hunt for food, coal, and raw materials in the *Mangelwirtschaft* of the post-war years swallowed up all the energies of ordinary workers and their representatives at the helm of the council movement, leaving precious little scope for the pursuit of a revolutionary agenda.⁵ Secondly, and more importantly, geo-political realities ruled out a revolution in post-war western Europe – as the fate of the communist insurrection in Greece, disowned by Stalin and crushed with the assistance of the western Allies, so clearly showed.⁶ What is characteristic for many of these accounts is a more positive evaluation of the role played by the leaders of the labour movement.⁷ Having been dealt a difficult hand, communist and socialist leaders are often credited with taking a pragmatic outlook. This secured socialist politicians and trade unionists a permanent seat at the negotiating table and even saw communist leaders achieve some success in their efforts to integrate communism in national political cultures.⁸

Since the turn of the century, however, the interpretation of the post-war era as a period of radical contestation has experienced a revival. Perhaps inspired by fresh research on grassroots radicalism and workplace democracy in eastern Europe⁹, which followed the

3 Eberhard Schmidt, *Die verhinderte Neuordnung 1945–1952. Zur Auseinandersetzung um die Demokratisierung der Wirtschaft in den westlichen Besatzungszonen und in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, 6., um e. Nachw. erg. Aufl., Frankfurt am Main/Cologne 1975 (first published 1970).

4 Renzo Del Carria, *Proletari senza rivoluzione. Storia delle classi subalterne italiane dal 1860 al 1950*, 2 vol., Milan 1966.

5 Diethelm Prowe, *Economic Democracy in Post-World War II Germany: Corporatist Crisis Response, 1945–1948*, in: *The Journal of Modern History* 57, 1985, pp. 451–482.

6 Donald Sassoon, *The Rise and Fall of West European Communism, 1939–1948*, in: *Contemporary European History* 1, 1992, pp. 139–169. On the failure of the far more tentative communist attempts to take power in post-war France: Philippe Buton, *Les lendemains qui déchantent. Le Parti communiste français à la Libération*, Paris 1993.

7 In his comments following a panel on »The Postwar Social Contract: Perspectives from France, Germany, Japan, and the United States« at the 1995 Annual Meeting of the American Historical Association, Charles S. Maier noted that »these papers reach a significantly different evaluation of labor's role than counterpart essays would have twenty-five years ago«. There was no longer »imputation of either sellout or capitulation on the part of the noncommunist labor leadership. Instead the moderate unions [...] achieved significant gains«. Charles S. Maier, *The Postwar Social Contract: Comment*, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 1996, no. 50, pp. 148–156.

8 On the socialists: Stefan Berger, *European Labour Movements and the European Working Class in Comparative Perspective*, in: *id./David Broughton* (eds.), *The Force of Labour. The Western European Labour Movement and the Working Class in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford 1996, pp. 245–262, here: p. 247. Among the western European communists, the Italian Communist Party under the leadership of Palmiro Togliatti is generally deemed to have been the most successful in these efforts. See Aldo Agosti, *Palmiro Togliatti: A Biography*, Turin 1996. If the post-war French communists never achieved a similar measure of integration into state structures, Irwin M. Wall has argued that this was not for want of trying: Irwin M. Wall, *French Communism in the Era of Stalin. The Quest for Unity and Integration, 1945–1962*, Westport 1983.

9 See on these themes e. g. Peter Heumos, *State Socialism, Egalitarianism, Collectivism: On the Social Context of Socialist Work Movements in Czechoslovak Industrial and Mining Enterprises, 1945–1965*, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 2005, no. 68, pp. 47–74; Mark Pittaway, *The Politics of Legitimacy and Hungary's Postwar Transition*, in: *Contemporary European History* 13, 2004, pp. 453–475.

opening-up of archives in the region after 1989, historians have taken a renewed interest in the struggles that workers fought across liberated Europe.¹⁰ To be sure, these historians forgo the highly polemical tone so characteristic of the work that radical historians produced in the 1960s and 1970s and largely concede that the advent of the Cold War spelled the end of the revolutionary aspirations of the liberation period. Yet, their accounts also stress that the years between the liberation in 1944/45 and the division of the continent in 1947/48 constitute a historical era in their own right, which knew a very different dynamics compared to the »brutal stability«¹¹ of the Cold War. This was a time of »radical openness«, as Geoff Eley has pointed out repeatedly, during which there was a real »opportunity for radical democratic change«.¹² In his view, this opportunity was embodied in the various post-liberation council movements: »these were the molecular forms of a different and more radical version of post-war reconstruction, not dissimilar in principle from the workers' councils that mushroomed in large parts of revolutionary Europe in 1917–1921«. In both East and West, however, returning national elites and the Allied occupiers looked with suspicion at the councils, and they were demobilised »before any proto-revolutionary challenge could coalesce«.¹³

The idea that the first years after the war should be understood as a distinct historical period when alternative outcomes still seemed possible has proved very pervasive.¹⁴ Newer textbooks on post-war Europe frequently start with sections on the »new opportunities«¹⁵ that arose or the »paths not taken«¹⁶ following the liberation before moving on to the more familiar territory of the Cold War. This is often accompanied by calls for further research into the febrile atmosphere across post-liberation Europe. Or, as Neal Ascherson put it in his review of one of these textbooks, there is »a missing book« entitled »Europe's Buried Revolution, 1943–1948«, »a study of the revolutionary consensus on post-war change which arose in all the Resistance movements, East and West, and how that consensus sank under the floods of Stalinism and Cold War mobilisation«.¹⁷

If such a book-length analysis is obviously beyond the scope of this essay, it does address one of the key dimensions of the putative revolutionary consensus: the wildcat strikes that engulfed Europe's industrial heartlands in the aftermath of the war. With trade union leaders taking strong anti-strike attitudes during the first post-war years, fully invested as they were in the reconstruction effort and the concomitant production »battles« to increase industrial output, many thousands of such unauthorised strikes erupted in East and West

10 See e. g. the essays on workers in: *Eleonore Breuning/Jill Lewis/Gareth Pritchard* (eds.), *Power and the People. A Social History of Central European Politics, 1945–56*, Manchester 2005.

11 *Mark Mazower*, *Dark Continent. Europe's Twentieth Century*, London 1998, p. 249.

12 *Geoff Eley*, *Forging Democracy. The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000*, Oxford/New York etc. 2002, p. 295.

13 *Id.*, *When Europe was New: Liberation and the Making of the Postwar Era*, in: *Monica Riera/Gavin Schaffer* (eds.), *The Lasting War. Society and Identity in Britain, France and Germany after 1945*, Basingstoke 2008, pp. 17–43, here: pp. 34f. See for a similar line of reasoning *Rebecca L. Boehling*, *A Question of Priorities. Democratic Reform and Economic Recovery in Postwar Germany*, New York 1996.

14 See *Frank Biess/Robert G. Moeller* (eds.), *Histories of the Aftermath. The Legacies of the Second World War in Europe*, New York/Oxford 2010; *Norman Naimark*, *Stalin and Europe in the Postwar Period, 1945–53: Issues and Problems*, in: *JMEH* 2, 2004, pp. 28–57.

15 *Tony Judt*, *Postwar. A History of Europe since 1945*, London 2005, p. 63.

16 *Dan Stone*, *Goodbye to All That? The Story of Europe since 1945*, Oxford/New York etc. 2014, p. 15.

17 *Neal Ascherson*, *The Atlantic Gap*, in: *London Review of Books* 27, 2005, no. 22, pp. 7–9, here: p. 7.

between the liberation and the onset of the Cold War.¹⁸ As spontaneous outbursts of worker militancy, these strikes occupy a central place in the narrative of post-war radicalism. In fact, the wildcat strikes have frequently been understood as an undiluted expression of the revolutionary sentiments within the working class, pitting radicalised workers against the political moderation preached by trade union leaders. Even if historians readily acknowledge that the direct cause of the bulk of these strikes was the disastrous food situation, their accounts stress the more properly political demands formulated by striking workers.¹⁹

There is indeed a long tradition among historians to view wildcat strikes, sparked by a set of specific bread-and-butter or wage-related grievances, as stepping-stones towards a proletarian revolution. This is especially true for accounts of strike waves that swept Europe during the first decades of the twentieth century. In their well-known book on strikes in revolutionary Russia, Diane Koenker and William Rosenberg argue that strikes »were central to the course of Russia's revolution«, for strikes saw the regional, shop, and trade loyalties that had divided workers prior to the war replaced by a clear-cut class identity.²⁰ More recently, other historians have pointed out how ordinary workers acquired a revolutionary consciousness through participation in wildcat strikes. The largely spontaneous strike militancy of the early twentieth century, explains Ralph Darlington in his comparative research on western Europe and the United States, saw syndicalist ideas around direct action and rank-and-file control over trade union leaders gain purchase among a much wider segment of workers.²¹ In the same vein, Gerald Friedman has pointed out that unauthorised mass strikes »challenge *all* authority, that of the union leadership as well as that of the employer«. During these »moments of upheaval«, he continues, »striking workers create a *political* movement for a democratic revolution«.²²

This article revisits that hypothesis for the turbulent aftermath of the Second World War. To that end, it deals with five sets of political and/or radical demands that have often been ascribed to the post-war European working class: a root-and-branch purge of political and economic life, the unification of the trade union (and broader labour) movement, the abolition of (individual) piecework and other performance bonuses, the socialisation of industry and worker participation in industrial management, and claims for workers to have a decisive voice in the political arena. In its efforts to provide a truly pan-European overview, this article focuses on five industrial regions in East and West that were particular hotbeds for wildcat strikes: the »industrial triangle« of Milan, Turin, and Genoa in Northern

18 See for national overviews *Stefan Berger/Marcel Boldorf* (eds.), *Social Movements and the Change of Economic Elites in Europe after 1945*, Cham 2018; *Jan De Graaf*, *No Italian Stalins: The C.G.I.L. and the Working Class in the Northern Industrial Heartlands, 1945–1955*, in: *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 23, 2018, pp. 620–639; *Peter Heumos*, *Zum industriellen Konflikt in der Tschechoslowakei 1945–1968*, in: *Peter Hübner/Christoph Kleßmann/Klaus Tenfelde* (eds.), *Arbeiter im Staatssozialismus. Ideologischer Anspruch und soziale Wirklichkeit*, Cologne/Weimar etc. 2005, pp. 473–497; *Łukasz Kamiński*, *Strajki robotnicze w Polsce 1945–1948. Próba bilansu*, in: *Dzieje Najnowsze* 29, 1997, no. 4, pp. 47–56; *Christoph Kleßmann/Peter Friedemann*, *Streiks und Hungermärsche im Ruhrgebiet 1946–1948*, Frankfurt am Main/New York 1977.

19 See e. g. *Tom Behan*, *The Long Awaited Moment. The Working Class and the Italian Communist Party in Milan, 1943–1948*, New York 1997.

20 *Diane P. Koenker/William G. Rosenberg*, *Strikes and Revolution in Russia, 1917*, Princeton 1989, pp. 326–329.

21 *Ralph Darlington*, *Syndicalism and Strikes, Leadership and Influence: Britain, Ireland, France, Italy, Spain, and the United States*, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 2013, no. 83, pp. 37–53.

22 *Gerald Friedman*, *Is Labor Dead?*, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 2009, no. 75, pp. 126–144, here: p. 135.

Italy, the Walloon coal belt comprising Mons, Charleroi, and Liège in Belgium, the »steel heart« of Czechoslovakia around the city of Ostrava, the Upper Silesian coalfield around Katowice in Poland, and the Ruhr in (West) Germany.

In doing so, this article not only sheds fresh light on the links between (wildcat) strikes and revolutions, but also makes two contributions to debates on the revolutionary potential of post-war Europe. First of all, it questions the radical aspirations of the post-war working class. Elaborating on the research that Martin Conway has conducted on Belgium and western Europe more generally, it observes that workers across Europe emerged from the war in a severely weakened position. In these circumstances, wildcat strikes were mostly less a show of political strength than »desperate gestures by workers, who, after years of suffering, had almost nothing left to eat or to wear«.²³ Secondly, it draws attention to the profound divisions within the working class. In fact, wildcat strikes often revealed how the labour movement was fragmented along lines of gender, generation, background, and skill. These divisions, frequently made deeper still by trade unionists desperate to bring the wildcat strikes to a halt, ruled out any unified worker challenge to (state) capitalist reconstruction in post-war Europe.

I. THE PURGE

Conventional wisdom about post-liberation Europe has it that the working class demanded nothing less than a merciless purge of former fascists, their interwar and wartime collaborators, and the managerial class more broadly. Insofar as collaborationist industrialists and supervisors had not fled the workplace during the final stages of the war, workers refused to relaunch production under their command in the wake of the liberation, with those foremen who dared to show up frequently threatened with violence or public humiliation.²⁴ It was only by promising a thorough purge of the industrial apparatus that the returning leaders of the labour movement managed to restore calm and get production going again. Yet the productivist aims of the reconstruction effort proved difficult to reconcile with a massive overhaul of management, and plans for a root-and-branch purge were quickly shelved by communists and socialists within the trade union movement and national government.²⁵ As most of the managers who had abandoned or were forced out of industry in the immediate aftermath of the war were rehired, radicalised workers were left with a deep sense of betrayal that manifested itself during the wildcat strikes of the first post-war years.²⁶

23 *Martin Conway*, *The Sorrows of Belgium. Liberation and Political Reconstruction, 1944–1947*, Oxford/New York etc. 2012, p. 286.

24 *Serge Curinier*, *Les communistes, le charbon et la Reconstruction (1944–1947)*, in: *Michel-Pierre Chélini/Philippe Roger* (eds.), *Reconstruire le Nord – Pas-de-Calais après la seconde guerre mondiale (1944–1958)*, Villeneuve d'Ascq 2017, pp. 87–108, here: pp. 99f.; *Thomas Bertram*, »Revolution wird nicht geduldet«. Der Gelsenkirchener Bergbau im Spannungsfeld gewerkschaftlicher Neuordnungsvorstellungen und alliierter Wiederaufbaupolitik, in: *Hartmut Hering/Hugo Ernst Käufer/Michael Klaus* (eds.), *Für uns begann harte Arbeit. Gelsenkirchener Nachkriegslesebuch*, Oberhausen 1986, pp. 207–232, here: p. 212.

25 The Italian case was perhaps emblematic. For even though communists and socialists had monopoly control over the governmental departments directly responsible for the reckoning with fascism – with communist leader Palmiro Togliatti serving as justice secretary and socialist leader Pietro Nenni chairing the High Commission for Sanctions against Fascism – the purge »proved a disastrous failure«. See *Paul Ginsborg*, *A History of Contemporary Italy. Society and Politics 1943–1988*, London 1990, p. 92.

26 See e. g. *Dick Geary*, *Social Protest in the Ruhr, 1945–49*, in: *Breuning/Lewis/Pritchard*, *Power and the People*, pp. 17–28.

Recent accounts have already suggested that the question of industrial purges cannot be reduced to a clear-cut dichotomy between grassroots radicalism and elite moderation. First of all, the spontaneous purges performed by ordinary workers did not always revolve around the political record of the accused managers and foremen. In fact, the industrial purge often became enmeshed with shop floor conflicts in which workers sought to cleanse their workplace of »anti-social« bosses who had taken an authoritarian line on industrial discipline and production before and during the war.²⁷ This is also borne out by the wild-cat strikes against the reinstatement of purged personnel. During these conflicts, workers usually framed their shop floor grievances in the official vocabulary of the purge, but mostly failed to convince arriving trade union and state officials of the validity of their claims. That is what happened when miners at the Gottwald pits in Horní Suchá (Czechoslovakia) went on strike in October 1946 against the rehiring of a supervisor who, according to the strikers, had committed an »offense against national honour«²⁸ by insisting on higher production during the occupation and used »coarse language« against miners in doing so. Yet the district court to which he had been referred quickly released him and he was re-hired with the consent of the works council. After a stoppage of twenty minutes, the miners agreed to resume work.²⁹

Much to the frustration of the local and national elites of the post-war labour movement, even bosses with an impeccable political record found themselves caught up in the wild purges. In the Ruhr, workers repeatedly demanded the dismissal in the context of the denazification programme of foremen who had not even been members of the Nazi Party.³⁰ Within weeks of the liberation of Czechoslovakia, meanwhile, the leadership of the trade union movement stepped in against the »egoistic motivations« that had informed shop floor purges.³¹ One typical example saw the works council of the Pilsen waterworks, backed by the local trade union chapter, demand the removal of an engineer from management for reasons wholly unrelated to the official purge. In fact, its petition readily acknowledged that the complaints against the engineer »are not of a political nature and do not concern his national reliability«. The workforce much resented »his aggression and morbid ambition«, though, and therefore did not want to work with him.³²

What is clear is that the purge carried very different connotations for ordinary workers than it did for the leaders of the labour movement. For communist and socialist leaders,

27 *Till Kössler*, *Confrontation or Cooperation? The Labour Movement and Economic Elites in West Germany after 1945*, in: *Berger/Boldorf*, *Social Movements and the Change of Economic Elites in Europe after 1945*, pp. 21–41; *Jakub Šlouf*, *Očista průmyslových závodů od kolaborantů a »asociálních živlů« v roce 1945*, in: *Soudobé Dějiny* 24, 2017, pp. 538–581.

28 The »offense against national honour« was enacted in the Small Retributive Decree, adopted by the Czechoslovak government in October 1945. Its aim was to punish those who, during the occupation, had »undermined public morale by unbecoming behavior insulting to the national sentiments of Czech or Slovak people«. See *Benjamin Frommer*, *National Cleansing. Retribution against Nazi Collaborators in Postwar Czechoslovakia*, Cambridge/New York etc. 2005, pp. 186–227.

29 Situational report of the National Security Corps in Horní Suchá, 7.10.1946, Archiv Bezpečnostních Složek, Prague (ABS), Fond A17, inv. j. 113.

30 *Kössler*, *Confrontation or Cooperation?*, pp. 34f.

31 Quoted in: *Jaromír Balcar/Jaroslav Kučera*, *The Works Councils in Czechoslovakia 1945–1949. Remarks on the Fate of a Social Movement in the Process of Transformation*, in: *Berger/Boldorf* (eds.), *Social Movements and the Change of Economic Elites in Europe after 1945*, pp. 113–135, here: p. 121.

32 Minutes of the meeting of the District National Committee, 19.7.1945, Archiv Města Plzně, Pilsen, Zápisy o schůzích Národního Výboru a rady Okresního Národního Výboru a Místního Národního Výboru statutárního města Plzeň 1945, fo. 162.

the aims of the purge were political first and foremost: to cleanse industry of those capitalists who were held responsible for the rise of fascism. Conversely, workers were primarily concerned with removing despised bosses and overseers, quite irrespective of their political convictions, from their immediate environment. In the absence of specific local or shop floor grievances, purges with political or anti-capitalist overtones frequently failed to resonate among ordinary workers.³³ This was even true in the historic heartlands of the labour movement. Police reports on public opinion in the communist stronghold of Solingen (Ruhr), nicknamed the *bergisches Moskau* on account of the radical traditions of its metalworkers³⁴, noted that its inhabitants judged the denazification programme »very unfavourably«. ³⁵ And that was not because denazification was considered to be overly lenient. Popular grumbling after the September 1948 acquittal of Hjalmar Schacht, who had served as president of the Reichsbank and Minister of Economic Affairs under Hitler, not so much concerned the acquittal itself, which had broad support, but »the great injustice« that »many humble [Nazi] party members have been penalized heavily for small transgressions«. As a result, »the entire denazification programme is regarded as a complete scam«. ³⁶

If the post-war purge was manifestly not about a political reckoning with the old order, how should we understand worker efforts to rid their workplaces of unwanted elements? Looking at how the industrial purge played out on the shop floor, two dimensions stand out. First of all, the purge was often closely intertwined with generational conflict. The pushback against unpopular bosses in most cases emanated from younger workers or newcomers to traditional industries. Reports on industrial discipline in the pits of the Gutehoffnungshütte complained that newly hired miners in particular explained »any resolute behaviour« on the part of pit officials »as slave driving«. ³⁷ Especially where officials were »politically burdened« by their wartime record, it was very difficult for them to maintain their authority. ³⁸ As most of the new recruits to the Ruhr coal mines had only arrived in the region after the war, however, allusions to the wartime wrongdoings of supervisory personnel seem to have acted largely as a lightning rod for the many grievances of these newcomers. Across the continent, youngsters from a rural background were lured to coal basins with great promises, only for them to end up living in shacks with severely limited perspectives, in western Europe at least, of upward mobility. The backlash against unyielding bosses, even if it was formulated with reference to their political past, must therefore be viewed in the context of the generational struggles that shaped industrial relations in post-war Europe. ³⁹

Secondly, worker efforts to purge the shop floor of (alleged) former fascists and collaborators often had xenophobic undercurrents. This was the case for the strike wave that swept the Walloon coal basin when thousands of Polish miners, who had been forced labourers in the Reich, arrived in June 1945. Most of these miners had already worked in Belgian pits prior to the war and had, when given the choice by their American and British liberators,

33 See e. g. *Adrian Grama*, *Laboring along. Industrial Workers and the Making of Postwar Romania*, Berlin/Boston 2019, pp. 84–91.

34 *Patrick Major*, *The Death of the KPD. Communism and Anti-Communism in West Germany, 1945–1956*, Oxford/New York etc. 1997, p. 89.

35 Report on popular attitudes and public opinion in Solingen, 15.12.1947, Landesarchiv Nordrhein-Westfalen, Abteilung Rheinland, Duisburg (LAV NRW R), BR 2025/30.

36 Report on popular attitudes and public opinion in Solingen, 17.9.1948, LAV NRW R, BR 2025/30.

37 Situational report for July 1947, 9.8.1947, LAV NRW R, BR 105/67.

38 Situational report for July 1947, 1.8.1947, LAV NRW R, BR 105/67.

39 On these struggles see e. g. *Mark Roseman*, *Recasting the Ruhr, 1945–1958. Manpower, Economic Recovery and Labour Relations*, Oxford 1992; *Mark Pittaway*, *The Reproduction of Hierarchy: Skill, Working-Class Culture, and the State in Early Socialist Hungary*, in: *The Journal of Modern History* 74, 2002, pp. 737–769, here: pp. 753–757; *Padraic Kenney*, *Rebuilding Poland. Workers and Communists, 1945–1950*, Ithaca/London 1997.

opted against returning to war-ravaged and communist-dominated Poland. Their refusal to contribute to the (re-)construction of »People's Poland« attracted the ire of the Belgian Communist Party, a strong force in the Walloon coal mines, which branded these Poles »fascists« for supporting the Polish government-in-exile in London. Upon the arrival of the first crews of Polish miners, wildcat strikes broke out at several pits that reproduced this narrative: miners refused to work with their new Polish colleagues, claiming that they had been wartime collaborators who had worked in Germany voluntarily and that there were even former SS members among them. These claims appear to have been largely spurious⁴⁰, and a closer look at the demands that the strikers formulated suggests the strikes had a rather different cause. What had sparked particular anger among Belgian miners was the fact that, whereas they had been waiting for months for their worn kits to be replaced, the Polish recruits were supplied with brand new outfits, prompting the strikers to ask why they »were considered less deserving than foreigners«. Traditional resentments against migrant workers were also reflected in murmurs that »our own collaborators« should be put to work before »foreign collaborators« were brought in⁴¹ and thus seem to have played a far more important role in triggering the strikes than any concerns about the political record of the new recruits. After stoppages of at most one day, accordingly, work was resumed without the Poles having been released.

To sum up, the purge frequently served as a proxy for altogether different struggles, both between workers and their direct superiors and among different groups of workers. Even if worker protests and strikes against the presence of elements compromised by their wartime record might at face value be understood as a political movement, a more thorough analysis shows that workers often invoked a political discourse to press a specific shop floor agenda. For ordinary workers, the industrial purge thus lacked the politico-ideological significance that it carried for the elites of the labour movement. In Milan, for example, factory workers repeatedly petitioned the authorities to re-appoint owners who had been purged in the wake of the liberation. With the demobilisation of the war industry raising the spectre of mass unemployment in post-war Italy, these bosses had promised to bring in vital orders through their connections in the old boys' network of industrialists or their good relations with the Allies.⁴² In these circumstances, a root-and-branch purge of the capitalist class, so often seen as part and parcel of the revolutionary desires of the working class, was the furthest thing on the minds of workers.

II. CLASS UNITY AND SOLIDARITY

The strength of the working class has often been attributed to its fundamental unity. It is customary for historians to argue that the struggle against fascism generated a profound sense of solidarity among workers. This found its reflection first and foremost in a groundswell of worker support for the organisational unification of the trade union movement, which had been divided both along political lines and in rival sector-based unions prior to the war.⁴³

40 On the sketchy basis of some of the accusations see: »Grèves dans les mines«, in: *Journal de Charleroi*, 3.7.1945.

41 *Jos Dedoyard*, *Les »Polonais«*, in: *La Wallonie*, 13.7.1945.

42 *Luigi Ganapini*, *Una città, la guerra. Lotta di classe, ideologie e forze politiche a Milano, 1939–1951*, Milan 1988, pp. 203f.

43 *Kevin McDermott*, *Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945–89. A Political and Social History*, Basingstoke 2015, p. 51; *Lutz Niethammer*, *Structural Reform and a Compact for Growth: Conditions for a United Labor Union Movement in Western Europe after the Collapse of Fascism*, in: *Charles S. Maier* (ed.), *The Origins of the Cold War and Contemporary Europe*, London/New York 1978, pp. 201–243.

In the belief that these divisions had been instrumental in the rise of fascism, the trade union rank and file exerted considerable pressure on sometimes reluctant leaders to merge their organisations into mammoth confederations that united the industrial working class, or at any rate large sections of it.⁴⁴ If the newly unified trade union movements that emerged across continental Europe »eloquently expressed the wartime solidarities« among workers of all persuasions⁴⁵, they quickly succumbed to infighting in the context of the nascent Cold War. In western Europe, the communists were either marginalised in the trade union movement or, where they were too strong to be sidelined (notably in France and Italy), confronted with socialist and/or Catholic breakaway unions financed by the United States.⁴⁶ In eastern Europe, meanwhile, the communists took complete control over the trade unions, which increasingly abandoned their traditional function of worker representation to become »transmission belts« for the regime.⁴⁷ The re-politicisation of trade unionism could not destroy the underlying solidarity among ordinary workers, however, to which the many solidarity protests of the first post-war years testify.⁴⁸

This »myth of labour unity« has already been challenged from a socio-spatial perspective. Far from finding universal resonance among the working class, it has been shown that calls for unity emanated chiefly from the »aristocracy of labour« of skilled workers in the main mining and metalworking regions.⁴⁹ What this section aims to demonstrate is that there were considerable divisions and resentments even between the skilled workers in the historic heartlands of the labour movement. This often revolved around the special privileges accorded to miners. As coal production was vital to the reconstruction effort, governments were desperate to halt the exodus from the mines that had followed the liberation. In the aftermath of the war, rather crude means were employed to achieve this: decrees that prohibited miners from changing jobs were adopted as massive recruitment programmes were launched to lure workers from other industries and regions to coal basins.

These measures, however, did not result in a marked increase in coal production and caused significant consternation within mining regions. As a consequence, trade unionists in the coalmines were quick to argue that the only effective way to attract (and retain) manpower was to offer better pay and conditions. During a shop floor meeting at the Osterfeld pits (Ruhr) in June 1946, a delegate of the Oberhausen trade union chapter insisted that »nothing is to be gained from hiring alien [*bergfremde*] workers«. The real problem, he went on, was that the miner only occupied »the ninth position in terms of pay; he should be in the first position and have the best provisions for his old age, then new recruits will find their way [to the mines]«. ⁵⁰ Very similar sounds were to be heard in the coalmines around Ostrava. At a June 1946 meeting of miner's representatives in the Moravian coal basin, various speakers pointed out that the »brigades« of workers from other sectors, which

44 See e. g. *Rik Hemmerijckx*, *Van Verzet tot Koude Oorlog. Machtsstrijd om het ABVV, 1940–1949*, Brussels 2003, pp. 125–167.

45 *Eley*, *Forging Democracy*, p. 277.

46 *Federico Romero*, *The United States and the European Trade Union Movement, 1944–1951*, Chapel Hill 1992.

47 *Ben Fowkes*, *The Rise and Fall of Communism in Eastern Europe*, London 1993, p. 13.

48 *Jill Lewis*, *Worker Protest and the Origins of the Austrian Social Partnership, 1945–1951*, in: *Breuning/Lewis/Pritchard* (eds.), *Power and the People*, pp. 42–56; *Padraic Kenney*, *Working-Class Community and Resistance in pre-Stalinist Poland: The Poznański Textile Strike, Łódź, September 1947*, in: *Social History* 18, 1993, pp. 31–51.

49 See *Patrick Pasture*, *Window of Opportunities or Trompe l'Oeil? The Myth of Labor Unity in Western Europe after 1945*, in: *Gerd-Rainer Horn/Padraic Kenney* (eds.), *Transnational Moments of Change. Europe 1945, 1968, 1989*, Lanham/Boulder etc. 2004, pp. 27–49.

50 Protocol of shop floor meeting at the Osterfeld pits, 16.6.1946, *Bergbau-Archiv*, Bochum (BBA), 30/267.

the authorities had despatched to coal mines to make up for the desperate shortage in manpower, had only undermined morale among the permanent workforce.⁵¹ It was »useless to send brigades to the pits«, argued one delegate; instead »wage policies should make sure that new recruits flock to the mines voluntarily«. This could be achieved »either by raising wages [in the mining sector] or by cutting wages in other industries«.⁵²

If wages in other industries were not actually cut, the various material incentives that governments started offering coal miners from 1947 on certainly weakened the purchasing power of those workers outside the coal sector. The »points system« that was introduced in the Ruhr coal mines in January 1947, in which miners were awarded vouchers that could be traded for food and clothing in the rationed economy, not only ate into the stocks available to other workers but also drained the free market of scarce goods since points were increasingly used as currency to purchase freely tradable products and even services.⁵³ Small wonder that the system was much detested by those who had no access to points. Their anger quickly turned on the coal miners themselves, with regard to whom the population at large was making its feelings »quite clear«, as a July 1947 report on the situation at the Gutehoffnungshütte noted: »People are envious of the points that miners earn and reproach them for their low production«. As a consequence, »propaganda to abolish the points system is gaining ground«.⁵⁴

Far from being abolished, however, the special benefits bestowed on miners were steadily extended over the next months and years. Complaints about the preferential treatment of miners were a recurring theme, therefore, during strikes in other sectors. In the strike wave that swept the Ruhr in early 1948, in which miners barely participated⁵⁵, the leader of the metalworkers' union in Essen voiced the frustrations of the workers in these sectors: »Metalworkers, construction workers, and transport workers [...], who mostly also perform their job loyally and conscientiously, have no understanding whatsoever for the fact that they are discriminated against in the supply system«. ⁵⁶ For where coal miners »only make up 1 % of the total population of the Ruhr«, he lamented, »between 10 and 15 % of the supply for the entire population is earmarked for their special provisions«. ⁵⁷ Contrary to conventional wisdom about close-knit labour communities, such resentments were all the greater where those without special privileges worked in close proximity to coal mines. In Upper Silesia, for example, discontent about the lack of meat available on the free market manifested itself primarily in brickyards, which were often situated near

51 The brigadiers found themselves accused of having not only a poor labour discipline but also a propensity to »arguments, drunkenness, and thoughtless visits to women of ill-repute«. See on this last point *Heumos*, State Socialism, Egalitarianism, Collectivism, p. 49.

52 Minutes of meeting of the regional committee of the coal mining union in Moravian Ostrava, 6.6.1946, Všeodborový Archiv, Prague (VOA), Odborový Svaz Hornictví, Karton 1, inv. j. 2.

53 Situational report of the Bergamt Duisburg for March 1947, LAV NRW R, BR 108/236.

54 Monthly report on coal mining at the Gutehoffnungshütte for July 1947, 11.8.1947, LAV NRW R, BR 105/67.

55 On this strike wave, and the absence of miners in it, see *Jan De Graaf*, »Arbeiten ist eine Magenfrage.« Fehlschichten, wilde Streiks und Proteste im Ruhrbergbau, 1945–1948, in: *Der Anschnitt. Zeitschrift für Montangeschichte* 71, 2019, pp. 62–75, here: pp. 71–73.

56 Extract from speech by Richard Riegel delivered at trade union rally in Essen, 9.1.1948, Archiv Ernst Schmidt, Essen, Bestand 19-252, Dokumentation Richard Riegel, Mappe 5.

57 Quoted in: *Neue Streiks an der Ruhr*, in: *Die Welt*, 10.1.1948. The claim that miners made up only 1 % of the population of the Ruhr was a strong understatement. In 1948, there were on average 402,000 miners employed in the Ruhr mining sector, meaning that miners made up roughly 10 % of the 4,000,000 inhabitants of the Ruhr at the time. See for the numbers *Joachim Huske*, *Die Steinkohlenzechen im Ruhrrevier. Daten und Fakten von den Anfängen bis 2005*, 3rd rev. and ext. ed., Bochum 2006, p. 29.

collieries. Unlike the miners at neighbouring pits, brick makers did not receive vouchers for meat. This was the reason for a one-hour strike at the Waleska brickyard in Łaziska Średnie in September 1951.⁵⁸

Even in its traditional heartlands, the post-war labour movement thus emerges far more fragmented than historiography has suggested. Accordingly, the protests and strikes instigated by the »aristocracy of labour« often attracted hostility rather than solidarity among other segments of the working class. The strike wave in the Walloon coal belt of May 1945 was »severely criticized« in public opinion in La Louvière, the capital of the Centre industrial region. Miners were widely held responsible for the lack of coal, which had made the cold winter of 1944/45 such a gruelling experience. More specifically, »workers in other industrial branches, metalworkers especially, accuse miners of selfishness«. For the strike movement in the mines had paralysed local industries dependent on coal supply, forcing these industries to reduce hours and robbing its workers of the opportunity to fight for their own demands.⁵⁹ In the unemployment crisis that followed the liberation of northern Italy, the metalworkers who made up the local »aristocracy of labour« likewise found themselves accused of selfishness. This had already been the case in the immediate aftermath of the war, when shop floor trade union bodies in the Genoese metal sector showed themselves unwilling to reduce overtime in a bid to hire more unemployed workers.⁶⁰ Similarly, the »struggle of three months« (February–May 1949) in the Turin metal sector, during which the main metalworkers' union sought to force a wage rise by short daily strikes and go-slow operations, drew unfavourable comments among the unemployed. What had sparked their anger was the fact that the wage demands as well as the agitation itself »would obstruct the recruitment of manpower«.⁶¹

From this perspective, it is not at all surprising that the impetus for trade union unity emanated chiefly from the »aristocracy of labour«. For it was workers in the heavy industries who stood to benefit from numerically strong trade unions. That was because class solidarity within these large trade union confederations was mostly a one-way street. When there were major conflicts in the mining or metal sectors, workers in other sectors, even if their wages and conditions were much worse, were expected to strike in solidarity.⁶² Reciprocal support from the »aristocracy of labour« for struggles in other sectors was often not forthcoming, though. When state employees, who were among the worst-paid groups across Europe⁶³, went on strike in Milan province in May 1946 over a wage conflict that had been dragging on for months, they called for an »act of solidarity« from workers in other sectors. Their pleas for workers across industry to strike for five minutes every day until the conflict was resolved, however, were flatly rejected by the industrial unions. As a result, there was »great distrust« towards the Milanese trade union authorities among

58 Monthly report of the Head of the Mining Department of the District Office for Public Security, 3.10.1951, Instytut Pamięci Narodowe, Warsaw (IPN BU), 01206/41.6, fo. 447.

59 Police report on general situation in La Louvière, 25.5.1945, Archives générales du Royaume, Brussels (AGR), Haute Commission pour la Sûreté de l'État, 1656.

60 Minutes of meeting of the Executive of the Genoese Chamber of Labour, 10.9.1945, Istituto Ligure per la Storia Sociale, Genoa, Archivio Storico della Camera del Lavoro di Genova, Busta 2, Fascicolo 8, doc. no. 00616.

61 I metallurgici in lotta. Bollettino d'informazione della Segreteria Provinciale della F.I.O.M. di Torino, 16.3.1949, no. 6.

62 See e. g. *De Graaf*, No Italian Stalingrads, p. 633.

63 I have dealt with this issue for four major industrial cities in: *Jan De Graaf*, Socialism across the Iron Curtain. Socialist Parties in East and West and the Reconstruction of Europe after 1945, Cambridge/New York etc. 2019, pp. 78–80.

state employees.⁶⁴ In fact, workers outside the »aristocracy of labour« were often the first to abandon the large trade union confederations when their precarious unity began to crumble under the weight of the Cold War.

III. EGALITARIANISM

The post-war working class is famed for its egalitarian instincts. Historians have often explained how, right across Europe, workers associated democracy with income levelling and demanded that all would get their fair share in the rationed economies of the post-liberation era. This found its clearest expression in their efforts to introduce a fairer wage system in industry. In the wake of the war, with the capitalist class still in disarray, piece rates were abolished almost everywhere as »rigidly egalitarian wage and social policies« were brought in.⁶⁵ Yet hopes that liberation would usher in an age of social and economic equality proved short-lived. Even the communist parties, which had been the most vociferous opponents of piecework during the interwar years, rapidly got behind its (re-)introduction in the context of the reconstruction effort. In fact, communist and socialist leaders in the post-war governments even reneged on some of the hard-won victories that the interwar labour movement had won in its struggles against piecework.⁶⁶ The industrial struggles of the post-war years have therefore often been described as a manifestation of worker resistance against the rollback of the egalitarian spirit that had accompanied the liberation.⁶⁷ Even if these struggles were mostly lost, their persistent echoes in the industrial conflicts of the 1950s (e. g. the re-emergence of the old *Akkord ist Mord* slogan during the June 1953 strikes in the German Democratic Republic) attest to the strong passions that the question of piecework continued to evoke among the working class.⁶⁸

A survey of the five industrial regions under scrutiny in this article offers some support for the egalitarian dispositions of the post-war working class. Especially during the first months after the liberation, the (re-)introduction of performance bonuses caused much resentment among industrial workers. This was linked both to the material legacy and to the bitter memory of the war. At the Jacobi pits in Oberhausen, miners refused to accept the piece rates offered by their foremen in June 1945, claiming that performance levels in the war-ravaged economy were so low that taking up piecework would see their wages drop well below the daily minimum of 6.25 Reichsmark.⁶⁹ In the Walloon coal belt, meanwhile, miners threatened to go on strike after the Allied authorities introduced differential rations

64 Minutes of meeting of the Executive Commission of the Milanese Chamber of Labour, 11.5.1946, Archivio del Lavoro, Milan (ADL), Archivio Camera Confederale del Lavoro di Milano, ESE 1, Fascicolo 2, doc. no. 12.

65 *Heumos*, State Socialism, Egalitarianism, Collectivism, p. 50.

66 The individual (performance-based) salary in the French coalmines, which had been abolished under the interwar Popular Front government, had already made a return during the occupation. Despite widespread calls to abolish it once more in the wake of the liberation, it was codified in the Mineworkers' Statute of 1946. See: *Bruno Mattéi/Evelyne Desbois/Yves Jeanneau*, *La foi des charbonniers. Les mineurs dans la Bataille du charbon 1945–1947*, Paris 2014, pp. 21f.

67 *Mark Pittaway*, *Making Postwar Communism*, in: *Dan Stone* (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Postwar European History*, Oxford 2012, pp. 265–282, here: pp. 274f.

68 See *Jörg Roesler*, *Akkord ist Mord, Normenerhöhung ist das Gleiche. Eine Tradition des ökonomischen Kampfes der deutschen Arbeiterklasse und der 17. Juni 1953*, in: *Jahrbuch für Forschungen zur Geschichte der Arbeiterbewegung* 2, 2004, pp. 4–17; *Małgorzata Mazurek*, »Taniej i szybciej« – »dokładniej i więcej«. *Codziennosc w zakładach pracy w PRL i NRD w latach 1953–1961*, in: *Przegląd Historyczny* 95, 2004, pp. 349–369, here: p. 360.

69 Operational meeting of the Neue Hoffnung pits, 8.6.1945, BBA, 30/268.

in January 1945. The Allies had hoped to attract new manpower to the pits by offering coal miners additional rations of meat and fats. Yet the differential treatment of underground and overground personnel – with face workers receiving double the rations of their surface colleagues – triggered a protest movement across the Borinage basin. Face workers quickly joined the protests begun by the surface workers, insisting that they wanted equal rations for all »even if that required reducing the rations accorded to underground workers«. ⁷⁰ There was, as one observer noted, »a rough and rudimentary solidarity« among miners, drawing its inspiration from earlier protests against similar measures introduced under the German occupation. ⁷¹

Such examples of egalitarian solidarity among workers co-existed, however, with a more instrumental attitude towards piecework and other performance incentives. In the face of the extreme material hardships of the first post-war years, skilled workers tended to see (individual) piecework as a means to boost their meagre income. The individualist pursuits of skilled workers often clashed with the more collectivist ethos propagated by shop floor elites. After the reintroduction of piecework in Italy in early 1946, the shop floor trade union bodies charged with negotiating piece rates at factory level initially opted for an egalitarian approach. Yet they would find quickly themselves under pressure from skilled workers to change tack. As one communist delegate at the Fiat Mirafiori plant in Turin, known for its radical traditions, later recalled:

»At the outset, we were fighting for equality. But then the skilled workers started to argue: ›but wait a minute, equality ... we have more responsibilities‹. So instead of a [collective] rate for the entire plant, they requested a piece rate at shop level. Afterwards they requested that shop rates be replaced by team rates. And then they demanded the introduction of individual piecework, as: ›In total, there are 40 of us, but should I compare myself to him?‹«⁷²

In the Ruhr, skilled workers likewise exerted a strong influence on the implementation of piecework on the shop floor. When local employers in the coal-mining sector launched a concerted campaign to replace collective with individual rates for underground workers during the autumn of 1949, they initially encountered strong opposition from works councils in the Gelsenkirchen-Buer district. Once miners learned that average earnings had risen at those neighbouring pits where individual piecework had been introduced, however, all resistance to this form of production was abandoned. ⁷³ In fact, the spread of piecework in the Ruhr coalmines, irrespective of whether it occurred under collective or individual rates, saw skilled workers exercise tight social control over their unskilled colleagues. Especially at the growing number of pits operating the longwall mining method, which required the maintenance of a steady labour rhythm to secure an orderly workflow, »the workshy are often urged by their colleagues to increase their production«. If such admonitions failed to have the desired effect, it was »not uncommon for workers who do not meet the required targets to be transferred to another company at the behest of their comrades«. ⁷⁴

The embrace of piecework by skilled workers came at the expense not only of the unskilled workers within their own companies but also of those sectors where trade unions were weak and employers could manipulate the system to their advantage. This was the

70 Report on rations allocated to miners by American military authorities, 15.1.1945, AGR, Cabinets Affaires Économiques, 603.

71 Report on strike threat at Anderlues pits, 4.1.1945, AGR, Cabinets Affaires Économiques, 603.

72 Quoted in: *Donato Antonello*, *Da Mirafiori alla S.A.L.L. Una storia operaia*, Milan 2004, p. 124.

73 Situational report of the Oberbergamt Dortmund for the fourth quarter and the entire year of 1949, 2.5.1950, LAV NRW R, BR 112/75; Situational report of the Oberbergamt Dortmund for the first quarter of 1950, 6.7.1950, LAV NRW R, BR 112/75.

74 Situational report of the Oberbergamt Dortmund for the third quarter of 1949, 23.12.1949, LAV NRW R, BR 112/75.

cause of a strike at a garment factory in Sosnowiec (Poland) in April 1946. According to a report drawn up for the Ministry of Industry, the managing director of this factory treated the collective agreement for the textile sector, which laid down the rules and regulations for piecework, as »fiction«. For when payday arrived, he would single-handedly cut piece rates that had been agreed with the works council.⁷⁵ The re-introduction of piecework wreaked similar havoc for workers in the Milanese textile sector. This sector was made up of many small shops, employing a predominantly female workforce, whose owners often refused to respect the minimum wage for pieceworkers that had been stipulated by collective agreements. As a result, noted a rapporteur for the provincial trade union leadership, there was »great hostility« towards piecework among textile workers, »so much so that they demand its abolition«.⁷⁶ Such demands were in vain, however, as trade union policy was mostly set by the skilled workers in the large (and heavy) industries. In the context of the »politics of productivity«⁷⁷, which accompanied the Marshall Plan in western Europe, the trade unions thus helped to implement a highly individualised system of performance bonuses tailor-made to the preferences of skilled workers.

If the dynamics of struggles over the state's production drive were very different in communist eastern Europe, the question divided the working class all the same. During the era of high Stalinism (1948–1953), overt resistance to performance bonuses emanated mostly from more experienced skilled workers. That was because production targets, which were constantly revised upward under the various Five- and Six-Year Plans, increasingly lost any bearing on and relation to productive reality. As one worker at the Batory ironworks in Chorzów (Poland) described it vividly: »Why would we work hard? If we achieve 125% [of our target] this month, then the plan will be increased by 20% next month and there will be no bonuses«.⁷⁸ In these circumstances, production targets came to serve a political rather than an economic purpose, with participation in »socialist work movements« (e.g. carrying out shock-work, outperforming production norms in the Stakhanovite labour competitions, volunteering for labour brigades) considered a token of ideological allegiance to the regime. This politicisation of the production process encountered strong opposition from older skilled workers, who devised various ways to resist and circumvent the Sovietisation of the shop floor.⁷⁹ At the same time, though, many unskilled newcomers to industrial life (women, rural migrants, youngsters et cetera) eagerly embraced the emancipatory opportunities that participation in state-sponsored productivist campaigns offered them.⁸⁰ Amid the chorus of complaints about labour brigades in the coal mines

75 Report of inspection at Garment Factory in Sosnowiec, 18.4.1946, Archiwum Akt Nowych, Warsaw (AAN), Ministerstwo Przemysłu i Handlu, 2.5. Delegatura w Katowicach, 190, fo. 40.

76 Minutes of meeting of the Executive Commission of the Milanese Chamber of Labour, 31.8.1946, Archivio del Lavoro, Milan (ADL), Archivio Camera Confederale del Lavoro di Milano, ESE 1, Fascicolo 2, doc. no. 21.

77 See *Charles S. Maier*, *The Politics of Productivity: Foundations of American International Economic Policy after World War II*, in: *International Organization* 31, 1977, pp. 607–633.

78 Monthly report of Department IV of the District Office for Public Security, 30.6.1948, IPN BU, 01206/41.3, fo. 72.

79 Rather than fighting labour competitions on an individual level, the workforce in many Czechoslovak factories developed a system whereby workers took turns »winning« the competition for best worker (and the attendant monetary bonus). See *Peter Heumos*, »Der Himmel ist hoch, und Prag ist weit!« Sekundäre Machtverhältnisse und organisatorische Entdifferenzierung in tschechoslowakischen Industriebetrieben (1945–1968), in: *Annette Schuhmann* (ed.), *Vernetzte Improvisationen. Gesellschaftliche Subsysteme in Ostmitteleuropa und in der DDR*, Cologne/Weimar etc. 2008, pp. 21–41.

80 In her work on the youth brigades that were deployed help construct the »socialist model town« of Nowa Huta in Poland, Katherine Lebow has demonstrated how the opportunity to acquire

around Ostrava (see above), for instance, it was acknowledged that female brigadiers had »proven themselves« by outperforming their male counterparts.⁸¹ However, as the communist regimes kept tightening the screws on the working class with the breakneck industrialisation programmes of the late 1940s and early 1950s, those willing to comply with incessant state demands to produce more and work longer hours were faced with increasing hostility on the shop floor. During episodes of industrial unrest, therefore, the younger newcomers who made up the bulk of brigadiers and shock workers often fell prey to acts of intimidation, sabotage, and violence.⁸²

The post-war controversies surrounding piecework and performance incentives more generally show the working class to have been both weak and divided. If the re-introduction of performance payments was certainly linked to the desperate material situation in which the working class found itself, some workers quickly found that the system offered them manifold opportunities to improve their incomes and/or social position at the expense of others. To be sure, there were countless protests and strikes over piece rates during the late 1940s and early 1950s, but these mostly concerned the levels at which rates had been set rather than the principle of (individual) performance payments itself. In fact, the most serious misgivings about the rapid return of piecework were frequently expressed by shop floor activists and lower-level trade unionists, who were fearful of the divisive and detrimental effects of performance bonuses.⁸³ Yet their post-liberation dreams of creating a more egalitarian workplace foundered on the opposition not only of trade union leaderships closely involved in state production-raising campaigns, but also of those ordinary workers who reaped the fruits of these campaigns on the shop floor.

IV. INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY

The struggle for industrial democracy has frequently been described as a central plank of the radical agenda espoused by the post-war working class. The relevant historiography has highlighted two (interconnected) dimensions of this struggle. In the first place, it has underlined worker desires to bring industry under public ownership, a desire often formulated as a demand for socialisation (worker ownership) rather than nationalisation (state ownership). These aspirations to break the power of capitalists and rebuild the economy on entirely different foundations were shared among the wider population, to which broad support for socialisation measures in post-war opinion polls⁸⁴ and the June 1946 referendum

skills and qualifications as well as the chance to escape from village life inspired many youngsters from a disadvantaged background to join the brigades. *Katherine Lebow*, *Public Works, Private Lives: Youth Brigades in Nowa Huta in the 1950s*, in: *Contemporary European History* 10, 2001, pp. 199–219.

81 Minutes of meeting of the regional committee of the coal mining union in Moravian Ostrava, 6.6.1946, VOA, Odborový Svaz Hornictvi, Karton 1, inv. j. 2.

82 *Jan De Graaf*, *The Occupational Strikes in the Dąbrowa Basin of April 1951: Stalinist Industrialization against the Traditions of the Polish Working Class*, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 2020 (forthcoming); *Heumos*, *Zum industriellen Konflikt in der Tschechoslowakei 1945–1968*, p. 478.

83 Protocol of meeting of communist personnel managers in the Katowice steel industry, 11.1.1946, AAN, Ministerstwo Przemysłu i Handlu, 2.5. Delegatura w Katowicach, 147, fos. 45–53; Minutes of meeting of the Executive Commission of the Milanese Chamber of Labour, 31.8.1946, ADL, Archivio Camera Confederale del Lavoro di Milano, ESE 1, Fascicolo 2, doc. no. 21.

84 *Antoine Prost*, *Une pièce en trois actes*, in: *Claire Andrieu/Lucette Le Van/id.* (eds.), *Les Nationalisations de la Libération. De l'utopie au compromis*, Paris 1987, pp. 236–246, here: p. 237.

in Hessen (Germany) attest.⁸⁵ Second, and more importantly, historiography has drawn attention to efforts by workers to participate in the day-to-day management of their firms. The revolutionary works councils that had placed »ownerless« (*herrenlose*) companies under worker self-management in the wake of the liberation showed the way in this respect. In fact, it has been argued that workers were willing to make sacrifices to the reconstruction effort and participate in the production battles as long as they felt that the voice of the councils was being heard.⁸⁶ This constructive attitude notwithstanding, the revolutionary works councils were quickly stripped of their competencies by the occupying powers and the returning elites of the labour movement. Participation thus became »the democratic fault-line of the postwar settlements in Western Europe«⁸⁷, as an increasing fear of communism saw industrial democracy becoming »the main casualty« of the onset of the Cold War.⁸⁸ In eastern Europe, meanwhile, worker frustrations about »the continuing power of management« were an important factor in causing strikes.⁸⁹

Claims that participation in management was a key concern of the working class are often based on a sketchy source basis⁹⁰, however, and it was rarely a major factor in the spontaneous agitation and strikes in the five regions discussed in this article. Quite on the contrary, trade unionists often encountered considerable worker apathy or even hostility towards shop floor participatory bodies. Already in early 1946, a local trade union leader urged workers in the Val Bisagno industrial district (on the outskirts of Genoa) to take »a more active interest« in the newly-created management councils (*consigli di gestione*), the shop floor consultative bodies that brought together management and worker representatives and from which communists and socialists hoped to create full-fledged organs of worker co-determination.⁹¹ That these efforts failed was due not only to the political headwinds which the Italian Left faced in the early stages of the Cold War but also to the strong tensions between the conflicting interests that the councils were supposed to reconcile.⁹² As a consequence, ordinary workers never truly came to identify with the management councils. During a joint October 1948 meeting of the elected members (i. e. the workers' representatives) of the two management councils at Olivetti, the office equipment manufacturer, several speakers explained that their work could expect little sympathy from workers. Bugged down by »marginal problems«, noted the secretary of the management council at its engineering plant, »the

85 Major, *The Death of the KPD*, pp. 92f.

86 See Adam Steinhouse, *Workers' Participation in Post-Liberation France*, Lanham/Boulder 2001.

87 Eley, *Forging Democracy*, p. 271.

88 Herrick Chapman, *France's Liberation Era, 1944–47: A Social and Economic Settlement?*, in: Andrew Knapp (ed.), *The Uncertain Foundation. France at the Liberation, 1944–1947*, Basingstoke 2007, pp. 103–120, here: p. 110.

89 Mark Pittaway, *The Workers' State. Industrial Labor and the Making of Socialist Hungary, 1944–1958*, Pittsburgh 2012, p. 66.

90 In his account of »the first major strike« in the German Democratic Republic in August 1951, for example, Andrew Port makes much of worker desires to participate in industrial management. He argues that the miners who went on strike at the East German Wismut mine »compared their situation unfavourably with that of West Germans«, who had just »wrung important concessions from the Adenauer government with respect to worker representation (*Mitbestimmung*) in the coal and steel industries«. Yet his article fails to offer any examples of the striking miners making reference to the new co-determination law in the Federal Republic of Germany or even more general demands for workers to be involved in industrial management. See Andrew Port, *When Workers Rumbled: The Wismut Upheaval of August 1951 in East Germany*, in: *Social History* 22, 1997, pp. 145–173, here: p. 156.

91 »Il Consiglio generale delle Leghe della Val Bisagno«, in: *La Voce del Lavoro*, 21.1.1946.

92 See Ferruccio Ricciardi, *L'échec de la démocratie industrielle dans l'Italie d'après-guerre: L'expérience du »conseil de gestion« chez Alfa Romeo, 1945–1951*, in: *Histoire, économie & société* 26, 2007, issue 1, pp. 125–142.

management council is an unpopular entity [...] both among the workforce at Olivetti and within the working class more generally«. This was backed up by the representative of the management council at its smaller mechanical shop, who reiterated »the unpopularity of the management council« and pointed to the conflicts that emerged between shop floor representatives and ordinary workers »when, in the interest of the operation of the company, decisions have to be taken which at face value have a negative impact on the workforce«. ⁹³

The works councils (*radz zakładowe*) in post-war Poland, which had sprung up spontaneously in the wake of the liberation but were quickly brought under trade union control, were likewise criticised for failing to put workers' interests first. Miners at the Kazimierz pits in Będzin were outraged when, in early 1947, its works council acquiesced in a new wage system whereby blue-collar wages were reduced by 500 zlotys per month while higher white-collar wages were left untouched. Scolding the works council for »neglecting [manual] workers and failing to stand up for worker demands«, they threatened to go on strike if the managing director and works council would not be replaced. ⁹⁴ This was by no means an isolated incident. The annual report of the Polish Labour Inspection for 1948 observed that works councils »often lose their character of worker representative and turn into an auxiliary body for company management«. ⁹⁵ In these circumstances, workers came to look back with considerable nostalgia on industrial relations during the interwar period, when there had been no works councils in Polish industry. In their view, after all, the »state capitalism« that was being introduced in »People's Poland« was far worse than interwar capitalism. For where it had been possible to »struggle and negotiate with the private capitalist«, workers were confronted with »some horrendous machine today«. ⁹⁶

Far from being enamoured with the new participatory structures that emerged in the aftermath of the liberation, workers thus often seemed to prefer more conventional forms of industrial bargaining. It could of course be argued that these structures, having been divested of key competencies in western Europe and submerged into top-down trade union hierarchies in eastern Europe, no longer provided workers with meaningful participation in management or actual control on the shop floor. Yet even when workers' representatives were offered a measure of control over the production process, other considerations often prevailed. This was the case for the strikes that broke out at the President Beneš and Hlubina pits after the Ostrava-Karviná Mines conglomerate introduced new production targets in October 1947. These targets had led to increased production and higher wages in pits in the Ostrava part of the coal basin, leaving miners in the Karviná part (in which the President Beneš and Hlubina pits were situated) aggrieved at the resulting wage differences. When negotiators had agreed that the new targets would be reviewed by »a workers' commission« in return for extraction to be resumed, however, miners refused »to follow their own negotiators and went home«. If the communist authorities were therefore quick to attribute the strike to the machinations of »foreign espionage services and anti-state elements«, it rather appears that residual resentments over the lack of textiles in the region outweighed any worker desires to participate in the running of their workplace. ⁹⁷

93 Meeting of the management council (elected part) at Olivetti, 12.10.1948, Istituto Gramsci Torino, Fondo FIOM, Busta 495, Fascicolo 1.

94 Ten-day report of Department IV of the District Office for Public Security, 3.3.1947, IPN BU, 01206/41.2, fo. 148.

95 Annual report of the activities of the Labour Inspection for 1948, AAN, Ministerstwo Pracy i Opieki Społecznej, 739, fo. 36.

96 Quoted in: *Jędrzej Chumiński/Krzysztof Ruchniewicz, Arbeiter und Opposition in Polen 1945–1989*, in: *Hübner/Kleßmann/Tenfelde, Arbeiter im Staatssozialismus*, pp. 425–451, here: pp. 431f.

97 Economic Commission of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia to Rudolf Slánský, 21.10.1947, Národní Archiv, Prague, Fond KSČ ÚV 100/1, svazek 106, arch. jednotka 688, fos. 1–2.

The real thrust for shop floor participation mostly emanated not from ordinary workers but from local and national trade union elites. In fact, the question of participation at times divided workers and trade unionists during strikes. The post-war strikes in the Liège metal sector offer a prime example of this. Led by the Liège Metalworkers' Federation of André Renard, a left-wing socialist with strong syndicalist beliefs, these strikes placed worker participation in industrial management front and centre. The seven immediate demands that had been formulated during the June 1946 general strike in the Liège metal factories, including lower prices and a fixed minimum wage, were nothing but »accessories« according to Renard. The »principal« demands, he went on, concerned the designation of permanent trade union delegates within factories and the creation of »genuine works councils« which had the right to participate in technical management and control the books.⁹⁸ This strong focus on the more abstract and long-term aims of participation and co-determination, however, often bewildered ordinary workers. When a wage conflict triggered a strike at the Cockerill steelworks in Seraing in September 1945, workers asked why the strike had not, as shop floor delegates had promised, been extended to other factories. The answer, delivered by the trade union representative at the nearby Tubes de la Meuse factory, is most revealing of trade union priorities. For he insisted that wage disputes had to be fought out at factory level, that a strike could only be extended to other factories when it concerned »a question of principle«, and that the trade union organisation had to »spare its energies for more important questions like trade union participation in the works councils«.⁹⁹

What went for »worker participation« thus frequently denoted trade union participation in practice. In the Ruhr, some trade unionists even conceived of co-determination as a means for the trade union movement to regain its once dominant position among the working class. Following complaints about the high number of non-unionised workers at the Emscher-Lippe pits in Datteln, the district representative of the Mineworkers' Union noted that this problem would solve itself once the »socialisation question« had been settled. For »when the time arrives that we finally get a say in the companies, the unorganised workers run the risk of being unable to reap the fruits of trade union benefits; then they will flock [to us] automatically«.¹⁰⁰

This is not to diminish the real struggles that West German workers fought for the right of co-determination, which was won on the back of a general strike in November 1948 and further strike threats in the early 1950s. Unlike the vast majority of the strikes covered in this article, however, these struggles were stage-managed by national trade union leaderships. Contrary to the claim that »demands for socialisation« already »played a central role« in the spontaneous strike wave that swept the Ruhr coal mines during the first months of 1947¹⁰¹, the protest resolutions adopted by (striking) miners in this period barely address the issue.¹⁰² This is symptomatic of the low priority that the question of public ownership carried for the working class. In the Embo electric appliances manufacturer in Třebovice

98 »Dans tout le bassin de Liège des grèves éclatent qui ont essentiellement pour objet des revendications de principe. Une déclaration d'A. Renard«, in: *La Wallonie*, 27.6.1946.

99 Report of strike meeting at Seraing Theatre, 5.9.1945, Archives de l'État à Liège, Archives de la Société anonyme d'Ougrée-Marihaye, 870.

100 Minutes of workforce meeting at Emscher-Lippe pits, 9.2.1947, BBA, 35/235.

101 *Kleßmann/Friedemann*, *Streiks und Hungermärsche im Ruhrgebiet 1946–1948*, p. 45.

102 Out of the 15 protest resolutions for the first three months of 1947, available in the archives of the »Industrieverband Bergbau«, only three mention the question of socialisation. In this respect, socialisation ranked far behind the bread crisis, the plight of miner's wives who had to get up in the middle of the night to queue up at food stores in the blistering cold, and the demand for the dismissal and/or prosecution of the leadership of the Food Agency. The resolutions can be found in: Archiv für soziale Bewegungen, Bochum (AfsB), Archiv Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau, 13004.

(near Ostrava), workers even went on a nine-day strike against plans to nationalise the plant in March 1947.¹⁰³

V. POLITICS

The assumption in most of the historiography discussed so far is that the working class emerged from the war not only radicalised but also profoundly politicised, the war and the liberation struggle having driven workers to the political extremes. The main beneficiaries of this »distinct political radicalisation« were often the communist parties.¹⁰⁴ In fact, historians have pointed out how communist leaders within coalition governments in East and West had to walk a narrow tightrope to restrain their radicalised working-class supporters.¹⁰⁵ The fury of the strike waves that followed the (forced) communist departure from governments in western Europe, rather than reflecting some insurrectionary design on the part of communist leaders, was caused by the release of worker frustrations built up during the long years of compromise and moderation.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, it has often been argued that the elimination of the non-communist parties in eastern Europe could, initially at least, count on considerable worker support.¹⁰⁷ Whether it concerned the mass strikes in support of the February 1948 Prague Coup¹⁰⁸ or the ease with which trade unionists convinced Northern Italian workers »to strike on purely *political* issues« in the late 1940s and early 1950s¹⁰⁹, historians have frequently stressed that the working class could be united and mobilised around a political agenda.

Accounts taking a grassroots perspective have already questioned the notion that post-war labour conflict mirrored political struggles¹¹⁰ and ordinary workers in the five regions under scrutiny here mostly showed themselves disinterested in all matters political. In the wake of the liberation, the food crisis completely consumed the working class. An early 1945 report on public opinion in Charleroi noted that the ongoing governmental crisis had passed by almost unnoticed. Where »in normal times« the resignation of socialist ministers from the government »would have caused some consternation«, the news was now received »with complete indifference«. The announcement that a new government would present itself before parliament the following week had likewise provoked »no reaction« among the public; »everything in the region is geared towards the food question«.¹¹¹ The same was true for post-war Upper Silesia. Workers in its metal sector looked at the government »mostly through a material prism«, observed a May 1946 report for the provincial

103 Report on strike at Bojda firm in Třebovice, 31.3.1947, ABS, Fond A17, inv. j. 248.

104 *Harald Espeli*, Political Radicalisation and Social Movements in Liberated Norway (1945–1947), in: *Berger/Boldorf* (eds.), *Social Movements and the Change of Economic Elites in Europe after 1945*, pp. 179–198, here: p. 179.

105 This has often been called *doppiezza* (duplicity) in the context of the Italian Communist Party: the mechanism which allowed party leader Palmiro Togliatti to win rank-and-file support for his post-war policies of restraint and moderation by suggesting that a future proletarian revolution was firmly on the horizon. See *Pietro Di Loreto*, *Togliatti e la doppiezza. Il PCI tra democrazia e insurrezione*, Bologna 1991.

106 *Robert Mencherini*, *Guerre froide, grèves rouges. Parti communiste, stalinisme et luttes sociales en France. Les grèves »insurrectionnelles« de 1947–1948*, Paris 1998.

107 *Pittaway*, *The Workers' State*.

108 *Martin Myant*, New Research on February 1948 in Czechoslovakia, in: *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, 2008, pp. 1697–1715, here: p. 1709.

109 *Ginsborg*, *A History of Contemporary Italy*, p. 91.

110 See e. g. *Kenney*, *Rebuilding Poland*, p. 53.

111 Report on general situation in Charleroi region, 3.2.1945, AGR, Cabinets Affaires Economiques, 603.

security services. »They speak and think only about food and wages [...] political questions are not even mentioned«. ¹¹² As a result, there was a distinct »lack of interest« in the upcoming »people's referendum«, in which the communist-led government hoped to win popular backing for the abolition of the Senate, for nationalisation and land reform, and for Poland's new western borders among workers in the region. ¹¹³

It followed that ordinary workers often shied away from events with political overtones. Much to the frustration of trade unionists at the Emscher-Lippe pits, only »a handful of people« turned out for the May Day celebrations in 1946. Prior to the war, complained one of them, organised labour had been so dominant that even the office clerks had no choice but to participate in May Day marches. These days, however, miners themselves could hardly be mobilised. »They rather sleep in [and say]: ›What are we supposed to do there? Only the Communists, Social Democrats, and CDU-people [Christian Democrats] go there, we want nothing to do with that««. ¹¹⁴

When ordinary workers did express an interest in politics, this was often linked closely to their material situation. In the wake of the Italian institutional referendum of 2 June 1946, in which Italians had voted by 54 to 46% to replace the monarchy with a republic, workers demanded a monetary bonus. This *premio della Repubblica* (republican premium) was to mirror the *premio della liberazione* (liberation premium), the bonus (equal to a monthly wage) that employers had been forced to pay out to workers in recognition of their contribution to the anti-fascist resistance. In a much stronger position than they had been the previous year, however, the employers initially refused to award the premium. As a result, the question of the republican premium became an important factor in the spontaneous strikes that rocked the Northern Italian industrial heartlands during the summer of 1946. ¹¹⁵ The efforts that trade unionists undertook to contain these strikes reflected their strong misgivings about the instrument of political premiums. During a meeting of the provincial trade union leadership in Milan, several speakers spoke out against the republican premium. For not only had the question complicated their ongoing wage negotiations with the employers, they also felt that the abolition of the monarchy was already a working-class victory and that worker demands for a premium devalued the struggles that had been fought in favour of the republic. However, the provincial trade union secretary struck a more conciliatory note. To be sure, he granted that »the continuous push for premiums« was a remnant of »a fascist mentality« within the working class. In the »situation of misery« in which workers found themselves, however, it did not suffice to »tell them that the [fact that we now have a] republic is already a premium in its own right«. ¹¹⁶

Yet even after the material situation had taken a turn for the better and the prospect of acute starvation had receded somewhat, workers remained at best indifferent towards politics. After the June 1948 currency reform had put West Germany on the road to its economic miracle, workers in the Ruhr still took little interest in domestic politics. Only those geo-political events that raised the spectre of a new war, like the Berlin Blockade or the onset of the Korean War, were much debated in public opinion. ¹¹⁷ But the consultations of

112 Ten-day report of Department IV of the District Office for Public Security, 10.5.1946, IPN BU, 01206/41.1, fo. 74.

113 Ten-day report of Department IV of the District Office for Public Security, 11.6.1946, IPN BU, 01206/41.1, fo. 113.

114 Minutes of workforce meeting at Emscher-Lippe pits, 19.5.1946, BBA, 35/234.

115 On these strikes see *De Graaf*, No Italian Stalingrads, pp. 626f.

116 Minutes of meeting of the Executive Commission of the Milanese Chamber of Labour, 15.6.1946, ADL, Archivio Camera Confederale del Lavoro di Milano, ESE 1, Fascicolo 2, doc. no. 16.

117 Report on popular attitudes and public opinion in Solingen, 18.7.1948, LAV NRW R, BR 2025/30; Situational report of the Oberbergamt Dortmund for the second quarter of 1950, 4.9.1950, LAV NRW R, BR 112/75.

the Parliamentary Council in Bonn, which was in the process of drawing up a constitution for the Federal Republic of Germany, attracted »little interest« and were »mostly seen as a useless effort«. ¹¹⁸ This lack of interest even extended to issues that were at the heart of the struggles of the labour movement. For the late 1948 adoption of the Ruhr Statute and Law Number 75, which laid down the Allied preconditions for West German statehood and definitely closed the door on any remaining hopes to socialise the Ruhr industries, did »not get the attention among workers that their significance merited«. ¹¹⁹

In these circumstances, communist efforts to politicise workers in the context of the early Cold War mostly fell flat. In eastern Europe, the hyper-politicisation of the workplace met with indifference or outright hostility among workers. The efforts of communist agitators in Czechoslovak industry, who delivered daily lunch talks on topics like the Korean War or West German »revanchism«, hardly registered with workers. ¹²⁰ Reports of shop floor meetings in Upper Silesia likewise noted how the political speeches of local party leaders were often followed by worker complaints about their material grievances. A meeting at the Mysłków metal works, held at the height of the 1951 meat shortage, descended into chaos as the speaker was heckled with comments like »we don't want a speech, we want meat«, and many workers left the room during the speech. ¹²¹ But even in western Europe, where the communists were in opposition and could not be held directly responsible for the material woes of the working class, communist attempts to politicise industrial conflict often backfired. ¹²² The incessant mobilisation of Italian workers for the geo-political campaigns of the Soviet Union contributed to the series of defeats that the communist-led trade union confederation suffered in the early 1950s. For there was increasing »nausea« among those workers who were not »politically conscious«, declared a communist activist at the Fiat Mirafiori plant. These workers had »had enough of going on strike against the Atlantic Pact or the atomic bomb because, at the end of the month, they were short on lire and in these circumstances it became easy [for them] to break off«. ¹²³

Politics as such was thus by no means a key concern of the post-war working class. The only political issues that were able to capture the imagination of workers were those with a direct relevance to their everyday predicament. So while the Moscow and London conferences of the Big Four to discuss the future of Germany were barely noticed by workers in the Ruhr ¹²⁴, the breakdown of negotiations between the British occupation authorities and the Netherlands over the delivery of vegetables to the Ruhr »caused great disappointment«. ¹²⁵ If strikes had any overt political connotations at all, it was often because workers had learned to appropriate the language of politics to press their bread-and-butter demands. A report on the recent strikes in the Dąbrowa basin (Upper Silesia) lamented that

118 Report on popular attitudes and public opinion in Solingen, 17.9.1948, LAV NRW R, BR 2025/30.

119 Situational report of the Oberbergamt Dortmund for the fourth quarter of 1948, 19.2.1949, LAV NRW R, BR 105/68.

120 *Johann Smula*, The Party and the Proletariat: Škoda 1948–53, in: *Cold War History* 6, 2006, pp. 153–175.

121 Internal Information Bulletin of the Provincial Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party in Katowice, 26.9.1951, AAN, Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza, Centralny Komitet, Część I, Wydz. Organizacyjny, 1948–1954, 237/VII-857, fo. 224.

122 See e. g. *Irwin M. Wall*, The French Social Contract: Conflict Amid Cooperation, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 1996, no. 50, pp. 116–124, here: p. 121.

123 Quoted in: *Antonello*, Da Mirafiori alla S.A.L.L., pp. 129f.

124 Report on popular attitudes and public opinion in Solingen, 15.5.1948, LAV NRW R, BR 2025/30; Report on popular attitudes and public opinion in Solingen, 17.9.1948, LAV NRW R, BR 2025/30.

125 Situational report of the Bergamt Duisburg for September 1947, LAV NRW R, BR 108/236.

miners, during an August 1945 protest meeting at the Andaluzja pits in Piekary Śląskie, had presented a sharp list of demands »under the guise of a struggle with the reaction«. In fact, the resolution adopted during the meeting indicated that miners had interrupted their work for half an hour to »protest against the reaction«. If that chimed well with the rhetoric of the communist-led government, still engaged in an armed struggle with so-called »reactionary forces« (i. e. the remnants of the wartime Polish resistance), the resolution immediately went on to argue that reactionaries had also found their way into state institutions and were »sabotaging the development and regulation of social life«. The seven grievances that followed were mostly of a material nature (concerning e. g. wages, pensions, and speculation) and were accompanied by threats of a full-blown strike »if our moderate and legitimate demands are not met within fourteen days«.¹²⁶

VI. CONCLUSION

A study of the wildcat strikes that followed the liberation of Europe, and of worker sentiments more broadly, casts serious doubt on the revolutionary aspirations of the post-war working class. On each of the five themes explored in this article, ordinary workers appear to have been less radical and more divided than historiography has generally assumed, and nowhere near as politicised. The article has identified three reasons for the dearth of radical contestation in post-liberation Europe. First and foremost, the hunger and cold suffered by the working class trumped all political considerations, allowing those at the helm of nationalised or private industries to divide and rule by offering certain groups of workers preferential treatment. Against the conventional wisdom on strikes and revolutions, this article demonstrates how (wildcat) strikes in times of severe material hardship divided rather than united the working class.

Yet the desperate material situation alone cannot account for the absence of revolutionary struggles, as the proletarian revolutions in the wake of the First World War were hardly born out of material opulence. The failure to develop a comparable revolutionary challenge after 1945 must therefore also be attributed to the specific effects that the Second World War had on the labour movement. For this was a war during which working-class communities had their »heart [...] ripped out by policies of repression and exploitation«.¹²⁷ In the first place, the war (and its aftermath) wreaked massive changes to the social fabric of industrial regions, with millions of workers displaced or on the move on account of first the forced labour programmes implemented by the Nazis, subsequently the post-liberation displacement and expulsions, and last the recruitment drives launched by post-war governments. The concomitant tensions between established communities of older skilled workers and younger unskilled newcomers to industrial life divided the working class just as capitalism seemed momentarily in retreat. Secondly, the war did great damage to the bonds between the elites of the labour movement, forced underground or into exile, and ordinary workers. Upon their return, labour leaders were never quite able to command the working class like they used to, as the constant eruption of unauthorised wildcat strikes shows.

The disconnect between a moderate leadership and a radicalised rank and file is of course a key theme in the recent historiography of the post-war European labour movement. Yet as this article has shown, this often gets the dynamics of post-war industrial struggles the

126 Report on strikes in the Dąbrowa Basin, 16.9.1945, AAN, Ministerstwo Przemysłu i Handlu, 1. Gabinet Ministra H. Minca, 40, fos. 26f.

127 *Martin Conway*, *The Rise and Fall of Western Europe's Democratic Age, 1945–1973*, in: *Contemporary European History* 13, 2004, pp. 67–88, here: p. 74.

wrong way around. In fact, the most radical views were usually espoused not by ordinary workers but by local and shop floor elites like lower-level trade unionists and members of works councils. Whereas historians have frequently taken these views to be the authentic voice of the working class, this article has drawn attention to the wide gulf between workers and their direct representatives. The intervention of a delegate from Essen at a regional trade union conference, held at the height of the early 1947 hunger strikes in the Ruhr, illustrates this very well. Pointing to worker claims that life had been »ten times better« under fascism, he insisted that the food crisis jeopardised the democratic reconstruction of Germany. »We can only overcome this state of affairs«, he concluded to bravoes of the conference, »if we, in our struggle for a piece of bread, do not lose sight of the most important thing [...], that is the question of socialisation, that is the expropriation of war criminals without compensation«. ¹²⁸ As we have repeatedly seen in this article, however, bread-and-butter issues far outweighed the questions of industrial democracy and the purge in the minds of ordinary workers, and trade union attempts to steer industrial conflict in a more ideological direction fell on deaf ears.

If recent scholarship has tended to overestimate both the radicalism and the openness of the post-war era, this does not necessarily vindicate the older literature praising the leaders of the post-war labour movement for their pragmatic attitudes. What this article has demonstrated is that trade unions were mostly concerned with bolstering their own role on the shop floor and in wider economic decision-making, while the everyday concerns of workers were neglected or dismissed. That was because the first post-war years had been a sobering experience for many trade unionists, who often complained bitterly about the selfishness and obsession with instant gratification that the war had engendered among workers. In their efforts to regain control over the working class, however, trade unionists preyed on exactly these instincts by favouring some groups of workers over others, thereby deepening the existing divides within the post-war labour movement. Even though these efforts ultimately succeeded in stemming the tide of wildcat strikes, which had become a rarity across continental Europe by the early 1950s, their divisive effects would be felt for years to come. In western Europe, workers outside of the aristocracy of labour became a thorn in the side of trade unions and were particularly active during later wildcat strikes. ¹²⁹ In eastern Europe, meanwhile, skilled workers were to exact their revenge on communism during the upheavals of the mid-1950s, forcing the post-Stalinist regimes to show more respect for traditional hierarchies on the shop floor. ¹³⁰

128 Minutes of regional trade union conference for Ruhr, 2.4.1947, AfsB, Archiv Industriegewerkschaft Bergbau, sign. 13004.

129 See *Peter Birke*, *Wilde Streiks im Wirtschaftswunder. Arbeitskämpfe, Gewerkschaften und soziale Bewegungen in der Bundesrepublik und Dänemark*, Frankfurt am Main/New York 2007.

130 *Mark Pittaway*, *The Revolution and Industrial Workers: The Disintegration and Reconstruction of Socialism, 1953–1958*, in: *Hungarian Studies Review* 34, 2007, pp. 115–154.