

January 1984

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### Recommended Citation

P.K. Edwards, *Approaches to Industrial Conflict: A Note*, 6 BERKELEY J. EMP. & LAB. L. 126 (1984).  
Available at: <http://scholarship.law.berkeley.edu/bjell/vol6/iss1/4>

### Link to publisher version (DOI)

<http://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38105F>

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# RESPONSE TO BOOK REVIEW

## Approaches to Industrial Conflict: A Note

P.K. Edwards†

*In Volume 5 of the Journal, Charles Tilly and Roberto Franzosi critiqued P.K. Edwards' Strikes in the United States 1881—1974. In his book, Edwards charts the development of United States strike patterns, setting them in the context of technical and organizational changes. He quantitatively examines three key phases of the strike movement: the impact of industrial change at the end of the nineteenth century, the upheaval caused by the New Deal, and the role of strikes in the institutionalized system of the post-war period. Edwards' data reveal that the overall pattern of strike activity, as measured by the frequency, size, and duration of strikes, remained remarkably constant despite enormous industrial and institutional changes. Edwards concludes that America's high strike rate in the early 1970s resulted from an unremitting struggle between employers and workers for control of the workplace. In arguing thus, Edwards directs considerable critical attention to the work of Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly, who are the major exponents of the view that strikes in most European countries reflect wider political forces.*

*In their review of Edwards' book, Tilly and Franzosi organize their discussion around three approaches to industrial conflict: the protest approach, the power struggle approach, and the industrial relations approach. One of the reviewers' contentions is that Edwards' analysis of industrial conflict falls within the industrial relations tradition, which stresses the containment of workers' and managers' demands within organizational forms that vary significantly over time and between places.*

*In the following Note, Edwards responds to Tilly and Franzosi. Edwards asserts that his analysis goes beyond a defined industrial relations approach. He maintains that his work comes within a broader sociological tradition concerned with the limitations and contradictions, as well as with the strengths, of industrial relations institutions.*

Charles Tilly and Roberto Franzosi organize their discussion of my book<sup>1</sup> around three approaches to industrial conflict: the protest approach views the level of conflict as a direct expression of workers'

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1. Tilly & Franzosi, Book Review, 5 *INDUS. REL. L.J.* 426-39 (1983).

discontent; the power struggle approach considers strikes and other manifestations of strikes to be products of a broad and continuous competition between "workers, managers, and government officials"; and the industrial relations approach "stresses the containment of workers' and managers' demands within organizational forms that vary strongly" over time and place. I am not sure whether this is the best way of articulating different views of industrial conflict. The non-specialist reader would certainly be hard put to see the significance of the difference between the power struggle and industrial relations approaches. Tilly and Franzosi try to capture the distinction between two broad schools of thought. Until the mid-1970s the field was dominated by what is now termed the "industrial relations school," which placed primary emphasis on the direct relationship between workers and employers. The school focused on collective bargaining and argued that the pattern of industrial conflict would reflect the character of bargaining institutions. The "power struggle" approach developed in opposition to this position. Its distinctive contribution was the presentation of industrial conflict as part of a broader set of relationships which could be shaped by political action as well as by activities within the narrow confines of collective bargaining. The institutions of collective bargaining could be seen "primarily as intervening variables, which are themselves dependent on the power structure in society."<sup>2</sup>

With this clarification, Tilly and Franzosi's approach may now be considered. It is not clear whether all "protest" theorists are as crude as they are made out to be. Although protest theorists may view strikes as the expression of working class action, they generally regard a strike as action against something, namely the oppression caused by capitalism. I consider this perspective inadequate not because it looks only at workers but because its view of capitalism is undeveloped. The protest theorists' position that strikes are the direct product of the nature of society as a whole renders impossible serious consideration of why strike activity varies so much in form and content between different times and places.<sup>3</sup> Tilly and Franzosi do not, in any event, discuss this approach in detail, preferring to contrast the power struggle and industrial relations approaches. Neither is homogeneous.

The differences within the power struggle approach are well-illustrated by the sharp differences of interpretation which Hibbs and Shalev offer.<sup>4</sup> I am concerned primarily with the industrial relations approach. My work seriously considered the traditional concerns of

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2. Korpi & Shalev, *Strikes, Industrial Relations, and Class Conflict in Capitalist Societies*, 30 BRIT. J. SOC. 164, 170 (1979).

3. I have developed this line of argument in more detail in Edwards, *The "Social" Determination of Strike Activity: An Explication and Critique*, 21 J. INDUS. REL. 198 (1979).

4. Compare Hibbs, Jr., *On the Political Economy of Long-Run Trends in Strike Activity*, 8

writers who have focused on collective bargaining as the means of stabilizing labor relations. I attempted to go further than these writers, however, by exploring the specific reasons why collective bargaining arose, the limitations of the process, and the conditions under which stabilization breaks down. In particular, I attempted to show how the struggle for control over the process of production had been a persistent element in the American strike experience and how the system of collective bargaining which emerged from the New Deal only partially institutionalized this struggle. This analysis moves a long way from the "industrial relations approach" and gives serious attention to the balance of power in the workplace, a concern which is supposedly the property of power struggle theorists. The approach breaks down into at least two distinct approaches: the traditional writers on collective bargaining have generally developed a "pluralist" framework; the newer generation of writers has criticized this perspective's presumption that collective bargaining could permanently settle workplace struggles, and its failure to give proper attention to relations of domination and subordination, and power and resistance which occur in the production process.<sup>5</sup>

Failure to appreciate the force of this distinction leads Tilly and Franzosi incorrectly to place my work in the industrial relations tradition. My book is, rather, within a broader sociological tradition of concern with the limitations and contradictions, as well as with the strengths, of industrial relations institutions. The political struggle within the workplace is given central attention.

A great deal turns on the meaning of 'politics'. Tilly and Franzosi use the term to refer to different things at different points in their argument without making clear their shifts in usage. At one point, they refer to the work of Shorter and Tilly, and discuss the national political position of labor.<sup>6</sup> Later, they identify several problems with my depiction of American strikes as a struggle for job control, arguing that present-day collective bargaining, characterized as it is by bargaining over narrow bread-and-butter issues, is the product of past political defeats.<sup>7</sup> Although written as a critique of my position, this argument is largely consistent with my own. My position is that workers' job control could not develop and was indeed defeated because of the hostility of Ameri-

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BRIT. J. POL. SCI. 153 (1978) with Shalev, *Strikers and the State: A Comment*, 8 BRIT. J. POL. SCI. 479 (1978).

5. The debate on pluralism, and on the various "radical" alternatives, has been a central feature of much British writing on industrial relations. It cannot be considered in detail here. For a powerful exposition and critique of pluralism see Hyman, *Pluralism, Procedural Consensus, and Collective Bargaining*, 16 BRIT. J. INDUS. REL. 16 (1978).

6. Tilly & Franzosi, *supra* note 1, at 434.

7. *Id.* at 438.

can employers to challenges to their power within the workplace. I stress, for example, the period at the end of the nineteenth century, when craft workers were largely defeated, and when determined employers rooted out what Tilly and Franzosi call 'broad' job control.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, I agree that "American capitalists, with the aid of government, prevented American labor from taking a centralized, political stance."<sup>9</sup> In addition, I emphasized the way in which workers were tied in to struggles at the level of the workplace.

Tilly and Franzosi have interpreted my attack on what I called the organizational-political model of strike activity as an attack on any attempt to consider politics, be they workplace politics or national politics. My argument, in fact, has several strands, the most important being the denial of a national political focus in American strikes and the claim that the organizational side of the model cannot explain the continuing strand of strikes which have taken place without trade union involvement. The former point does not deny that strikes can have national political consequences. As Franzosi and Tilly write, "strike waves have far-reaching political implications,"<sup>10</sup> and as I wrote, "[i]nstead of concentrating on a supposed political orientation among workers . . . one should examine the role of the government and its decisions on when to intervene in labour disputes."<sup>11</sup> There is no argument about whether strikes have political consequences. My quarrel with the political interpretation of past American strikes is with the claim that the strikes had a national political focus and motivation. Therefore, I cited Shorter and Tilly's claim that "before the Depression, collective action was as much political as economic" and asked what they could possibly mean by this statement;<sup>12</sup> Tilly and Franzosi quote the same passage but do not offer any enlightenment.<sup>13</sup>

In short, my argument is that American strikes until 1974 had developed in a manner which was, in comparison with other countries, unusual. Strikes in the United States neither shortened over time nor became a means of putting pressure on political actors. Instead they remained very lengthy and they retained a strong focus on the work-

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8. The treatment of this point, and in particular the exposition of why American employers were so determined in their opposition to challenges within the workplace, was not, admittedly, as developed as one might have liked. For an attempt to sketch a more adequate argument see P.K. Edwards, *The Exceptionalism of the American Labour Movement: The Neglected Role of Workplace Struggle* (April 1983) (paper presented to the annual conference of the British Association for American Studies, Edinburgh).

9. Tilly & Franzosi, *supra* note 1, at 438.

10. *Id.* at 435.

11. P.K. EDWARDS, *STRIKES IN THE UNITED STATES, 1881-1974*, at 81 (1981).

12. *Id.* at 221-22 (quoting E. SHORTER & C. TILLY, *STRIKES IN FRANCE, 1830-1968*, at 329 (1974)).

13. Tilly & Franzosi, *supra* note 1, at 434.

place. My argument is definitely not that only "industrial relations variables" are important, either in general or in relation to the particular case of the United States. It is rather that these variables have come to be important in this country as the result of the particular way in which relationships between workers, employers, and the state have developed. To that extent, my book is an application of a perspective informed by power struggle theorists to a case in which the expectations of these theorists break down. My work is not an exemplar of an industrial relations approach which treats collective bargaining in isolation from wider "political" influences, but is instead an attempt to explain why collective bargaining became so important in America and why the system which emerged resulted in the pattern of long strikes which we know today.<sup>14</sup>

This leads to more general points about the power struggle approach, which at first seems to have everything in its favor. While protest theorists neglect stabilization and accommodation and industrial relations approaches question the view that strikes spring from struggles for power, power struggle theorists can incorporate both of these views.<sup>15</sup> Unless, however, an approach can specify how it can deal with all the complexities of the real world, it risks the charge of being vacuous or all-embracing. I have discussed at length elsewhere some of the major problems which the power struggle approach faces, and need indicate only the more salient points here.<sup>16</sup> As I have already implied, "power struggle" is an inappropriate label, for the more sensible industrial relations approaches also see collective bargaining as a struggle for power between employers and workers. The label "political economy" is preferable insofar as the key characteristic of the approach is the attempt to relate patterns of industrial conflict to the distribution of power in society as a whole. If it is to have any analytical bite, such an approach requires an explanation of the relationship between "economic" and "political" conflict.

A common argument is that in a country such as Sweden strike activity declined to insignificant levels as a result of the achievement of political success. According to this argument, the political power of the working class became so great that the workers no longer needed to do

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14. Even the most committed advocates of collective bargaining do not ignore the political struggle for power. During the 1930s and 1940s collective bargaining was recommended as a means of correcting power imbalances and restraining employers from the arbitrary use of their power. For a classic statement of such a view, see C. GOLDEN & H. RUTTENBERG, *THE DYNAMICS OF INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY* (1942).

15. Tilly & Franzosi, *supra* note 1, at 427.

16. Edwards, *The Political Economy of Industrial Conflict: Britain and the United States*, 4 *ECON. & INDUS. DEMOCRACY* (forthcoming 1983).

battle in the economic arena.<sup>17</sup> This approach purports to focus on the distribution of power in society as a whole. How, then, does it treat relations in the workplace? Does the power struggle approach suggest that conflict in the sphere of production can be permanently shifted to the political level, and, if so, does it suggest that capitalist relations of production can be rendered non-antagonistic? A related problem is defining the political sphere. Shorter and Tilly do not fully explain "admission to the polity";<sup>18</sup> they do not define the terms of admission or the nature of the polity itself. Further, they do not address the issue of whether working class organizations attain the same degree of legitimacy as other organizations. A position must be taken on the nature of capitalist production relations, the role of the state in capitalist societies, and the links between economic and political spheres. I find that the tradition of writing on which Tilly and Franzosi rely to develop their view of the power struggle approach has not yet adequately tackled these issues.

The choice, then, is not between an industrial relations approach and a power struggle or political economy approach. There are difficulties with both. An account of industrial conflict which is grounded in an explicit view of relations of production and the role of politics, both in and out of the workplace, is necessary. In *Strikes in the United States* and in subsequent work I have tried to explain why developments in America took the course they did. I did not adopt a particular *a priori* approach, stressing stabilization and largely ignoring continuous struggles, but asked why struggles in America produced a particular outcome in which collective bargaining came to play a significant part. This approach does not deny the concerns of power struggle analyses, but considers why the struggle for power in America took a certain direction.

Tilly and Franzosi correctly note that industrial conflict is not limited to strikes.<sup>19</sup> They are also probably correct in saying that industrial relations analysts of the pluralist school have tended to concentrate on strikes as such, or at least on the collective deployment of sanctions to attain a collective bargaining objective.<sup>20</sup> It is doubtful, however, how much serious attention protest or power struggle theorists have given to other forms of conflict. These theorists commonly make ritual statements of the importance of absenteeism or sabotage, but they much less often consider in detail the significance of such behavior for some un-

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17. See Korpi & Shalev, *supra* note 2; W. KORPI, *THE WORKING CLASS IN WELFARE CAPITALISM: WORK, UNIONS, AND POLITICS IN SWEDEN* (1978).

18. E. SHORTER & C. TILLY, *supra* note 12, at 330.

19. Tilly & Franzosi, *supra* note 1, at 428.

20. See, e.g., H. CLEGG, *THE CHANGING SYSTEM OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN GREAT BRITAIN* 1 (1979).

derlying concept of conflict. Tilly's work is, of course, the main exception, for one of his major contributions has been to study the history of collective protest in its many manifestations. Studies of industrial conflict, particularly during the twentieth century nonetheless rarely go beyond a focus on strikes. Although it is now almost thirty years since Clark Kerr produced his celebrated list of the ways in which conflict could be expressed,<sup>21</sup> detailed considerations of exactly why sabotage and absenteeism are legitimate aspects, indices, or measures of conflict are few.<sup>22</sup> Some industrial relations writers are aware of the whole range of forms of conflict. I, for instance, have since completing *Strikes in the United States* been engaged in a study of the various forms of workplace behavior which are commonly included in lists of the forms of conflict. My aim is to assess just how far and in what ways workplace behavior can be said to reflect conflict. I would contend that this represents, on the basis of fieldwork in seven factories, a sustained attempt to grapple with issues that are more often mentioned than analysed in depth.

Finally, an odd imbalance, in Tilly and Franzosi's review and in this note should be indicated. Tilly and Franzosi concentrated on my book's alleged approach and on some technical aspects regarding the use of econometric techniques. I have replied only to their criticisms of my approach. Although several aspects of their presentation of my use of econometric techniques also deserve attention, I will here address only one. Tilly and Franzosi say that I base my finding of a link between strikes and politics on regression results for two periods, and they ask why I look at only these two periods.<sup>23</sup> The passage which they cite comes at the end of a discussion of the attempt of one commentator, David Snyder, to apply the Shorter-Tilly model to the United States.<sup>24</sup> I criticize Snyder precisely for contrasting only two periods, and I refer to previously published work which provides evidence on three periods and contains the detailed justification of the argument which I summarize in the book.<sup>25</sup>

My argument about politics does not rest simply on regression results, and the book is not just, or even primarily, an econometric study. Only one of the five main empirical chapters is centrally concerned with regression methods. The other chapters describe the available in-

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21. Kerr, *Industrial Conflict and its Mediation*, 60 AM. J. SOC. 230, 232 (1954).

22. See P.K. EDWARDS & H. SCULLION, *THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF INDUSTRIAL CONFLICT: CONTROL AND RESISTANCE IN THE WORKPLACE* (1982).

23. Tilly & Franzosi, *supra* note 1, at 435.

24. Snyder, *Institutional Setting and Industrial Conflict: Comparative Analyses of France, Italy and the United States*, 40 AM. SOC. REV. 259-78 (1975).

25. Edwards, *Time Series Regression Models of Strike Activity: A Reconsideration with American Data*, 16 BRIT. J. INDUS. REL. 320-24 (1978).

formation on strike patterns and assess particular theories concerning them. Tilly and Franzosi have chosen to ignore the great bulk of the book's contents, preferring to try to identify its basic assumptions and approach. They have largely failed in this endeavor.