

Net-Strikes¹: A Proposal for Re-orienting Social Struggles in the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

The globalisation of the economy and the slow but steady loss of Nation-States' power to global enterprises and financial capital force us to redefine strikes as a weapon for advancing social causes. The institutions legitimising this form of protest have changed greatly in the 21st Century. They must recoup their ability to change things if they are to remain an effective tool. The following paper reveals the reasons behind the decline of strikes in the modern world and proposes the 'net-strike' concept (or networked strike): a formula for bringing strikes up to date to meet today's challenges.

Keywords: global enterprise, financial capital, globalisation, social rights.

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INTRODUCTION

"(...) because the day will come when we have had enough and that's when we will be capable of anything".²

Vicent Andrés Estellés (1983: 69)

A study by the consulting firm McKinsey Global Institute (2017: 21) forecasts that by 2030, as much as 20% of the world's workforce may be replaced by robots. The forecast gives a detailed breakdown by geographical area and profession and predicts a net destruction of employment in all sectors. These findings contrast with those of Autor and Salomons (2017) who carried out a retrospective study on earlier cases, concluding that overall employment would not fall but rather be redistributed. Autor and Salomons also argued that workers' real wages would fall.

Whether or not these forecasts come true, the fact that 2030 is only ten years hence raises many thorny ques-

1 We have used the term 'net-strike(s)' throughout for the sake of brevity rather than 'networked strike(s)' or 'strike network(ing)', employing the singular or plural as appropriate.

2 Freely translated from the Catalan original: "*Perquè hi haurà un dia que no podrem més i llavors ho podrem tot.*" (Andrés Estellés, 1983).

tions that are hard to answer. These questions include: What tensions will arise from global redistribution of employment?; Are governments and institutions doing anything to meet them, and if not, would it help if they did? What everyone seems to agree upon is the sheer speed of the transformation — something that is made patent by the endless stream of news stories on the topic.³

In our view, the process driving these changes is the transformation of industrial economies, which are shifting away from Nation-States and towards the consolidation of globalisation centred on global business and financial capital. Nation-States have been handing over their public management functions to: (1) supra-national entities eager to strip them of some of their regulatory powers; (2) global companies and financial capital, which are in many ways to blame for the widespread destruction of social, cultural, and economic values (Llorca-Abad, 2011).

This situation has sundry implications. In this paper, we strongly focus on re-formulating strikes as a way of protesting against a lack/violation of workers' rights. In tackling the subject, we shall only partially address economic and legal issues. That is because our aim is to draw up the concept of 'net-strikes' (or networked strikes) insofar as the issues at stake stem from communication needs and obligations that arise from an imposed form of globalisation.

The scale, implications, and complexity of the subject would require a methodological approach that lies beyond the scope of our study. That is why our paper is more in the nature of an essay. Yet within these limitations, it provides theoretical contextualisation and a well-defined methodology. Our analysis adopts a constructionist approach to the issues in which we prioritise texts by authors covering the theory and criticisms of 'The Information Economy'.

This approach begins with a literature review that gives a multi-faceted vision of the twists and turns of modernity. The conclusions reached are based on hermeneutical analysis of three kinds of information sources: (1) some of the main studies published annually by top consulting firms in the sector and their historical series; (2) proposals made by other leading authors in the field; (3) the use of illustrative, paradigmatic cases.

Our aim is to conduct a useful review of the strike concept and to consider how one might revive its strategic value as a way of controlling 'the powers that be'. The main challenge here is to identify these powers so that one can fight them on equal terms. In the 21st Century, information flows and 'fake news' make it hard to pick out one's enemy which, by contrast, knows who we are, what we think, and how we behave (Llorca-Abad and Cano-Orón, 2016). In our view, the chances are slim of repeating the general, revolutionary, wildcat strikes of the past that shook up crisis-ridden societies. That is why we stress the need to review the notion of strikes as a weapon in social struggle and demands.

STARTING CONCEPTS

What is a strike?

Assata Shakur, an activist and leader of the American Black Panther party, is said to have stated: "No one in history has ever achieved their freedom by appealing to the moral sense of their oppressors." The underlying problem raised here could be applied to many social struggles throughout history. These struggles stemmed from diverse clashes of interest. By the 19th century, strikes were already seen as tools for instrumentalising these conflicts. "All men recognize the right of revolution; that is, the right to refuse allegiance to and to resist the government, when its tyranny or its inefficiency are great and unendurable." (Thoreau, 2017: 10).

Over many decades, Thoreau's thought has influenced many civil rights defenders such as Ghandi

3 Doncel, L. (1st of April 2018). "El empleo no peligra; tu sueldo sí." [Your job isn't at risk but your wages are] *El País*. Source: <https://elpais.com>

or Luther King. Likewise, at the outset strikes were closely linked with the exercise of basic rights and demands for work-related improvements. This kind of protest or struggle (which ended up becoming a right in many countries) was exercised by those who wanted to continue working in the same place but under better working conditions (Gourevitch, 2016: 309). In this sense, a strike involved "subverting the normality of production based on the rejection of work as an instrument of domination exercised by a private power over people" (Baylos Grau, 2014: 22) — an issue that continues to spark conflict between citizens and public authorities.

We should recall that strikes began to make sense in highly-industrialised modern societies. The State was at the apex of political and administrative power. As such, it underpinned the legal order governing the relationship between factory owners and their workers. That is why strikes began as illegal political-economic struggles whose goal was to amend laws or have them repealed (Ruay Sáez, 2017: 130). Unlike other protest actions, strikes were long battles with employers. In their simplest form, they involved workers collectively withdrawing their labour (Santos Azuela, 2015: 480).

Over time, exercising this right "required a bilateral relationship between workers and the government authorities — something that involved haggling and a lot of give and take on both sides" (Baylos Grau, 2014: 14). Much of this mediation was taken on by workers' associations, which were the germ of today's trade unions and on whose role we shall speak later. In the first half of the twentieth century, articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948) and the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its follow-up (DOIT, 1944) gathered the fruits of this trend.

The UDHR states the "Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration, ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity" (UDHR, Article 23[3]). According to the Interational Labor Organization (ILO) Declaration,

work cannot be subject to shareholders' control and Articles 87 and 98 recognise the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining.⁴ This is still the conceptual framework for 21st Century strikes — namely as a mediating instrument for many conflicts, particularly those of a labour nature: "Strikes are a way of altering and orienting legislative design and social policy" (Baylos Grau, 2014: 19). Yet we urgently need to ask whether this definition still holds true in today's globalised world.⁵

Why and against whom are strikes held?

At the end of 2016, the textile giant Inditex had a worldwide workforce of over 160,000. In absolute terms, this was bigger than the number of Civil Servants employed by Bulgaria, or half that of Greece⁶. The company's economic impact was similar to that of many a modern Nation-State. The difference lies in Inditex's clearly global scope, which goes far beyond that of a Nation-State. In reality, Inditex is a fuzzy tangle of companies, subsidiaries and sub-contractors with investments, interests and capital spread throughout over 90 countries, as described by the company's own web site.⁷

Apple Inc., owner of the iPhone mobile phone brand, reached a market valuation of US \$886 billion in 2016.⁸ This figure is equal to or greater than the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of countries such as South Africa, Norway, and Sweden. Regarding Apple's structure, we could reach similar conclusions to those applicable to Inditex. The two companies operate in different industries but their global or-

4 The final draft of these Articles was made at the 86th session in 1998 at the ILO's International Conference.

5 Streeck (2017a: 38) notes that this model of making demands reached its zenith in the 1970s. From then on, the advance of Neo-Liberalism (among other factors) reduced its usefulness.

6 Villaécija, E. (March 16, 2017). "Inditex ya maneja magnitudes propias de un Estado." ["The Inditex company is now the size of many a State"] El Mundo. Source: <http://www.elmundo.es>

7 <https://www.inditex.com>

8 BBC News (December 14, 2017). "Las 10 empresas más valiosas del mundo." [The World's Ten Most Valuable Brands] BBC. Source: <http://www.bbc.com>

ganisation exceeds the management capabilities of many Nation States.⁹

Over 150 years have gone by since Thoreau's time and the power paradigm has undergone great changes over this period. Power has steadily been transferred from the structures of Nation States to those of Global Enterprises (hereinafter 'GE' or 'GEs', as the case may be). In this process, power has evolved, shifting away from a centralised modern form to a complex, highly decentralised structure. Although The State still controls some key areas of daily life, in practical terms it is more akin to an entity supporting GEs in their pursuit of profits and business expansion. Often, The State uses other supranational organisations for this purpose, and to which it has likewise transferred part of its management capacity (Fernández Martínez, 2009).

Yet States' management capacity is not only limited by supra-national companies and bodies by also by Neo-Liberalism's relentless drive to globalise economies. Here, the interests of financial capital take precedence over all others, even though this industry only seeks short-term profit (Dierckxsens, 2009: 152) (as do GEs). This clearly spawns the worst kind of speculation, which Carcanholo (2019: 44) has exhaustively described, defining it as 'parasitic'. Only 1% of daily financial transactions create 'new wealth'. Venture Capital Funds (VCFs) acquire firms in the real economy, hoping to turn a fat profit of between 20% and 25% (Fernández Martínez, 2009: 2). This is one of the reasons why economic growth often fails to yield a corresponding rise in employment (Dierckxsens, 2015; Horwitz and Myant, 2015: 9).

These dynamics lead to other perverse effects. Often, the function of supra-national bodies, GEs, and financial agents has been and is to force governments to privatise public services (Arrizabalo, 2013: 9), lower trade barriers, dismantle capital controls, slash public spending, and increasingly limit the scope of social

rights (Streeck, 2017a). In other words, multinationals and financial institutions drive social changes without citizens having the slightest say in them (Fernández Martínez, 2009: 25).

In 2000, *The Meltzer Report on International Institutions* (TMC, 2000) highlighted how the debt of many countries with bodies such as The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization, fostered speculation in goods, harming people's rights in the education, health, safety, and work fields. This revealed a dark side to globalisation that many experts immediately confirmed (Mikesell, 2001). In the European case, it emerged that such policies produced the "generation of huge volumes of fictitious capital" (Arrizabalo, 2013: 8). In turn, it became clear that all these structural changes had made cyclical economic downturns a great deal more destructive (Dierckxsens, 2015: 75).

Over time, these changes will continue to "increase economic insecurity when it comes to getting a job" (De Lange, Gesthuizen and Wolbers, 2014: 4). The authors stress that the globalised financial economy spurs demand for a few highly-specialised jobs and makes the prospects for low-skilled workers even bleaker (Dierckxsens, 2015: 77). Here, multi-nationals are given *carte blanche* to exploit the progressive deregulation of labour markets, helping them press for lower wages in every country they operate in (De Lange, Gesthuizen and Wolbers, 2014: 5; Arrizabalo, 2016: 6).

Having set the scene, some of the questions we opened this section with have been answered in whole or in part, while others have not. The reason for calling a strike in the 21st Century is broadly the same as it was in the 19th Century — namely, to resist corporate domination and abuse of labour markets (Gourevitch, 2016: 309). However, today these dominance structures are global in scale so the first challenge is to pin-point whom one should strike against. This requires "exploring new forms of vulnerability" in these structures (Webster, 2015: 7), using new strategies to win the struggle.

⁹ Pozzi, S. (September 3, 2016). "10 empresas más grandes que 180 países." ["Ten Companies are Bigger Than 180 Countries"] *El País*. Source: <http://www.elpais.es>

The economic and legal aspects of strikes

Neo-Liberal globalisation has imposed a hyper-consumerist economic model based on the programmed obsolescence of consumer goods (Dierckxsens, 2015). This model favours de-localisation of jobs to countries with *laissez-faire* labour markets and lax/non-existent environmental regulations. The same model leads to the destruction of well-paid jobs in developed countries (Libaert, 2017: 22 *et seq.*).¹⁰ This is all possible thanks to the ubiquity of GEs and financial capital that flood the world's stores with cheap, shoddy goods churned out by sweat-shop workers paid slave-wages. According to Dierckxsens (2015: 75), this relentless production-driven logic contradicts the system itself.

Furthermore, the individual is told that his or her life is based on 'consumer freedom' (Hardy, 2014: 51) to purchase this cornucopia of junk products. This dynamic thus closes the vicious circle of power production (Foucault, 2004), which is constituted and reinforced through corporate speeches. Citizens (whose jobs are ever worse and badly-paid) are driven to buy the trinkets thrust before them (De Lange, Gesthuizen and Wolbers, 2014: 9). One might well suspect that this is all part of an over-arching strategy, honed to perfection by ruthlessly effective advertising and political marketing machines. According to Latouche (2013), advertising excites the desire to consume; if credit is needed, it provides the means. Meanwhile, programmed obsolescence creates an endless but false 'need' for new fripperies. From a broader but complementary perspective, Streeck (2017b: 10) has defined the recent boom in the gushing dissemination of these Neo-Liberal narratives as part and parcel of 'The Post-Factual Age'.

¹⁰ An interesting point bearing on this concept is that it used to be so that one's profession was one of the values reaffirming the individual's identity for both himself and for his fellows (Fernández Martínez, 2009; Jones, 2013). The cultural and social implications of this statement need to be borne in mind in any analysis of the impact of economic Neo-Liberal globalisation.

What then is the economic and legal framework of strikes as a tool for reclaiming lost or damaged rights? The first variable to take into account is that the right to strike was recognised in relation to the Nation-State paradigm (Fernández Martínez, 2009). The second important issue is that such recognition also included the right to damage the employer's interests. This is explicitly contemplated in many laws, since the purpose of a strike is to drive the owner of the means of production into a "new relationship of forces that improves the workers' lot" (Céspedes Muñoz, 2017 : 270).

The legal system allows and tolerates so-called 'licit damage' caused by a strike. "The regulatory system, whether expressly or tacitly, accepts the possibility of workers inflicting economic damage on their employers in exercising certain rights and power, providing these fall within the scope of legislative policy" (Céspedes Muñoz, 2017: 250). Next, the author, citing various texts, maintains that lawful damage is something that the legal system not only accepts but that in certain circumstances embraces. If, as we have stated, the paradigm of power in the 21st century has changed from a local context to a global one, how far have these rights been maintained and how can they be exercised?

Internal limits were set where strikes were deemed: (1) abusive (because of their harmful potential), or (2) illegal (either because the strikes were unrelated to their purpose or because they flouted the procedure set out by Law (Céspedes Muñoz, 2017: 273). The external bounds to freedom to strike were set by the rights of Third Parties (moral order, public order, or the general security of The State) and arose from a clash with Constitutional rights or other higher-ranking laws (Céspedes Muñoz, 2017: 275).

In many countries, the economic problems arising from globalisation have been used to undermine workers' rights to strike and in other work-related fields (Arrizabalo, 1993: 64; Espinosa Meza and Chible Villadangos, 2015: 57 and following sections); Santos Azuela, 2015: 480). As a result, the labour

market is increasingly unfair, with the system being rigged to put workers at a disadvantage (Gourevitch, 2016: 315; Jansen, Akkerman and Vandaele, 2017: 101). In the Spanish case, Horwitz and Myant (2015: 6) highlighted the disastrous 2012 Labour Reform, which limits workers' ability to negotiate collective agreements and gives companies the final say in setting employment terms. Arrizabalo (2016; 2019: 275) attributes the precariousness of the labour market to States' relentless de-regulation.

The trend towards States making their legal frameworks more 'corporate-friendly' (together with measures to make labour markets more flexible) are blunting the value of strikes. "The subtlest form taken by structural domination [in the 21st Century] is the fear of being fired or of not being hired in the first place" (Gourevitch, 2016: 314). In their analysis, Jansen, Akkerman and Vandaele (2017: 101) find that while greater flexibility does not lessen worker mobilisation, it does affect other factors such as levels of union membership and job satisfaction.

This overall pattern (with differences here and there) is repeated to a greater or lesser extent in all local economies. Gupta (2017) noted that long stoppages in India have become well-nigh impossible. There, workers lack either the savings or other sources of income that would let them make ends meet without their wages in long strikes. De White (2018) has coined the term *job insecurity* to describe the way Europe's labour markets have changed since the 1990s. Today, taking part in a strike takes a lot of guts and entails big financial risks. That is why ever fewer people are willing to go on strike.

Many of these readings highlight the bounds placed on unions as mediating bodies. As we pointed out at the beginning of this paper, governments have also intervened directly by controlling and crippling unions (Santos Azuela, 2015: 492) and by institutionally protecting the market economy. As a result, unions have been hobbled in representing workers (Streeck, 2017a: 75). A general conclusion one can draw is that our institutions have not adapted to

the structural changes enshrining the new paradigm springing from the globalised economy (Boix, 2007: 132; De Lange, Gesthuizen and Wolbers, 2014: 4). Indeed, it is often the institutions themselves that are driving such changes by yielding to external pressures.

The communication factor in strikes

The notion that strong labour protection would lead to higher unemployment rates gained ground when the OECD took up the idea in 1994 (Horwitz and Myant, 2015: 10). Many authors consider the 1990s to be the decade in which the Second Neo-Liberal Revolution took root, bringing such ideas into the public arena. Here, we fully concur with Naomi Klein's analysis (2001 and 2007). She describes how, throughout the last decade of the 20th century, global companies occupied an ideological space from which they had hitherto been absent. Among other things, this led to multi-nationals foisting a series of force-concepts¹¹ on society, dialectically disarming Left-Wing discourses. As a result, unions were lambasted by Neo-Liberal interests, tarnishing their public image. This opened the door to "normative proposals consolidating government repression [of unions] through wide-ranging financial penalties" (Baylos Grau, 2014: 17).

How come companies can force workers to accept ever worse working conditions yet get away scot-free? How come GEs and finance capital can get away with great profit margins without the public being aware of how this is steadily undermining the commonweal? How come the very idea of the common good¹² has become so dreadfully cheapened? How come union membership levels and public acceptance of strikes is

11 In this process, Streeck (2017b: 7) highlighted the imposition of the TINA concept (There Is No Alternative) as a cross-cutting idea in the so-called 'Neo-Liberal Turn'.

12 Here we use the term 'common good' in the sense of "the management of goods and services for all with to consume or own" and the need to distribute such goods equitably (Tirole, 2017: 36 y 66).

dropping?¹³ We believe that one of the main sources of these problems lies in the social and structural control wielded by media and communication companies over the technological-communicative public space (López-García *et al.*, 2018: 779).

A worldwide concentration of the mass media began in the 1990s. This trend has led to growing links between multimedia, content, telecommunications and Internet companies (Hardy, 2014: 86). According to this author, one of the keys to grasping the impact of industry concentration is the way it leads to a loss of plurality, and even flagrant bias. Leaving the media to the mercy of market forces has not led to viable alternatives (Hardy, 2014: 62 *et seq.*). Over a quarter century of industry concentration has put the global communication and media fields in the hands of very few corporate players (Llorca-Abad and Cano-Orón, 2016).

In other words (and by contrast with the traditional paucity of information in the analogue media age) the new digital paradigm features a cornucopia of content that spreads virus-like throughout digital communication spaces. McNair (2006) sees the phenomenon as a shift away from control and towards chaos. However, it is a mistake to see the trend as either a shift from concentration to dispersion, or as one of control to mayhem. That is because the process has paradoxically led to greater industrial concentration and control. Thus criticism should not only be levelled at the production side of the industry but also at content distribution and consumption strategies. At the same time, massive use

of digital communication technologies has led to the emergence of less plurality and more 'fake news' than ever before (Virilio, 1996).

Media empires have drawn up strategies and taken measures to ensure that they also dominate the Internet market. Here, the most striking thing is that companies which hitherto focused on managing the communication infrastructure have now entered the content business sphere (Noam, 2016). While they do not yet fully control the new communicative sphere, they do strongly influence the way many people symbolically build their worldview¹⁴ (Winseck and Jin, 2012: 123). We see this as a good reason for not limiting the meaning of 'domination' to the distribution and ownership of content (Gourevitch, 2016: 312).

Against the background of the foregoing processes, one should also note the crisis in political institutions' legitimacy has gravely undermined strikes as both a concept and a practice (Streeck, 2017b: 8). In the case of labour markets, there is a yawning gulf between the sundry agents of social dialogue, which in turn has boosted the 'representation deficit' (Fernández Martínez, 2009: 20). We can say that the balance formerly struck between power structures and workers has now been greatly tilted in the former's favour. Jones' analysis (2013) on this score is especially incisive.

Baylos Grau (2014: 17) proposed two examples that nicely explain the paradox of strikes in the 21st Century. The General Strikes called in Spain in 2012 and 2013 were a success in terms of turnout. However, "union effectiveness [was] nil when it came to making worthwhile changes in labour relations." The strike no longer strongly alters daily life when it comes to shopping, withdrawing money, or social life. This

13 Gourevitch (2016: 307) explains that strike activity has fallen by roughly 90% since the 1970s. Streeck (2017a: 106) illustrates this drop by calculating the number of strike days per 1,000 workers over the period 1971–2007. Streeck (2017b: 8) also notes the collapse of trade unions — a trend that began in the early 1980s. Jones (2013) has described how Neo-Liberal communication campaigns set out to put the working class in a bad light. Klein (2007) has exhaustively covered the ideological measures that were used to throw the world's population into a state of shock. This strategy was cynically used to stop workers reacting to the brutal impact of putting Neo-Liberal policies into practice.

14 This focus continues the Sociology tradition in which the media are seen as socialising entities (Wolf, 1992; Berger and Luckmann, 2002) and as shaping 'reality' through a conceptual construct that accompanies the media's messages (Mills, 1963; Bourdieu, 1998).

turns strikes into merely a ritual lacking any practical effects. Put baldly, it is no longer an effective way of pursuing labour demands" (Baylos Grau, 2014: 18). This is why The State allows strikes because it knows that they seldom come to anything, and have very little impact on daily life.

The upshot is that it is becoming harder to explain to citizens what strikes are and what they are for. Despite a world of apparent pluralism of communications in which we are told that "everything is on the Internet", being able to access information does not mean that we can harness it for the common good (Morozov, 2012; Winseck and Jin, 2012: 108). This is so because new habits stemming from social networks trap users in an ideological bubble (Pariser, 2013; Mahrt, 2014: 130) within which it is hard to voice critical or analytical thinking and to take opposing positions.

In the 1970s, Gerbner and Gross (1976) came up with "Crop Theory." Their starting hypothesis was that greater exposure to television content tended to distort how viewers' see the world around them and that their vision was largely shaped by the medium's stance. The theory took up the analytical threads of critical approaches to the media since 1950. In our view, Pariser's 'Bubble Model'(2013) seems to build on some of Crop Theory's basic assumptions. The media then and the spaces of communication now give us the frame that we then project on the real world. However, its contents and behaviour "are not solely shaped by the way property is structured" (Winseck and Jin, 2012: 106) and micro-studies should be added to problematise the question of cultural production.

Repression through mass communication goes hand-in-hand with physical forms of the same. Thoreau's words (2017: 26) again ring down the years, revealing how governments resort to and instrumentalise violence when it suits them: "It [The State] is not armed with superior wit or honesty, but with superior physical strength." This strength is something that The State does not hesitate to use to serve the interests of hegemonic power, which in the 21st

century is global in nature (Klein, 2007). In other words, coercive power and symbolic power combine to control society (Winseck and Jin, 2012: 196).

DISCUSSION AND PROPOSAL

A change in strategy

What do we have so far? In the foregoing sections we noted the crisis assailing Nation States as they lose power to GEs. Here, we stressed the steady undermining of political legitimacy (and thus of democratic power) (Streeck, 2017a: 97), and of the modern institutions embodying it. Unions have a strong bearing on our analysis, as do strikes for making workers' demands and pressing for rights that have been repressed, annulled, or otherwise impaired. We also examine the communication structures controlled by GEs in this sector. These GEs not only condone rights imbalances but also openly foster a Neo-Liberal ideology that sunders communication among individuals (Virilio, 1998; Gitlin, 2005; Morozov, 2012 and 2013; Pariser, 2013). Taking all these factors into account, it is little wonder that citizens find hard to say just who the foe destroying their social and labour rights is.

From complementary perspectives, Castells (1996) and Standing (2010) have explained that the labour force should strive to meet the challenges posed by globalisation regarding work and other social rights. Given that Neo-Liberal globalisation has weakened traditional control and power (and the bodies that used to wield them), then the main goal of any resistance movement should be to find out who are what is now in the saddle (Horvat, 2020). This approach ties in with the idea of pinning down the weaknesses of the new control paradigm dominated by GEs, financial capital and the rump apparatus of Nation States mentioned earlier.

As we see it, the change in strategy could be anchored in the theoretical proposal for a "networked society", described by Castells (2003). Insofar as Nation States

form networks, (in which they act as subsidiary and legitimising nodes of a new superstructure that they do not really control), the interactions among them should reveal how their nature has changed. Castells, in turn, states that networks must be fought with other networks operating from within and from outside the system. Here, social movements, trade unions, and Development NGOs could organise to co-ordinate their actions, incorporating new strategies and tools in the struggle.¹⁵ To the extent that power lies with us, we must defend the idea of unions protecting workers against exploitation (Castells, 2003).

Could we think of GEs as forming a kind of global network, the shutdown of which would have an impact similar to the shutdown of factories in Nation States in the 19th and 20th centuries? Instead of calling on millions of people to join a General Strike in a given country, one could instead carefully co-ordinate a long strike of key workers. These key workers might number only a few thousand (or even a few hundred) in GEs such as Apple, Inditex, and McDonald's. Clearly, lots of questions need to be answered first. Yet from a 'communication' standpoint, it would be much easier to convince a small group of key workers than the population at large (notwithstanding the latter's growing disenchantment with the system).

On the one hand, such a strategy requires international co-ordination. On the other hand, the strike mobilisation message needs to be personalised for each recipient. 19th Century French revolutionary trade unionism already "conceived and fostered the idea of a revolutionary General Strike, suspending all work at the same time on an international scale" (Pérez López, 2015: 216). The difference is that in the 21st Century, it is international structures that decide the fate of millions of people around the

world — something that was much less true in the 19th Century. However, unlike the old French idea of a strike, there would be no need to stop everyone from working — just a core of key workers would be enough. It is "easy to imagine [...] that economic globalisation can also have a globalising impact on trade unions' organisation and workers' struggles" (Santos Azuela, 2015: 477).¹⁶

Webster (2015) confirms that the soaring number of protests around the world have played a key role in identifying weaknesses in the new domination structure. For example, workers on grape farms in North-Eastern Brazil have managed to maintain high wages and permanent employment by exploiting the pressure exerted by European distributors on farm owners. Johannes (2016: 302 *et seq.*) has highlighted the success of repeated, long strikes by miners in South Africa. The success stems from much the same reasons as for the strikes in Brazil. Many other examples could be cited (Selwyn, 2012). Might it be possible to extend this strategy to goals that are global in nature and scope?

Should the communication strategies linked with 'net-strikes' prove successful, one could launch public awareness campaigns. This would help roll back the influence of Neo-Liberalism. The two strategies are not mutually exclusive. One could thus seek ways of challenging power through the media, incorporating the goals of net-strikes in the official discourse, or by fostering alternative media and forums (Hardy, 2014). In this respect, one of the main concepts worth repackaging and explaining to the general public is that of 'justifiable damage' since a new interpretative framework is needed if we are to tackle GE abuses.

Net-Strikes

Every State, by virtue of its membership of the ILO, must comply with the organisation's binding principles

15 Martell (2015: 234-235) has put forward an interesting synthesis of this strategy: "Each struggle is unique given that it has its own features. That is why one needs to study each case first [...] but there are also many common features with other struggles so it is worth drawing up a vision of the whole based on previous knowledge".

16 The 2011 Athens Congress of European Trades Unions (CES) began consideration of co-ordinated union action against European monetary policies (Baylos Grau, 2014: 15). At the time of writing, little progress seems to have been made in this direction.

on strikes and other worker rights. This international regulatory framework, though weakened by many local laws (Fernández Martínez, 2009: 19), could serve as an umbrella for unions calling net-strikes. This would most certainly require a redefinition of unions in those countries where their activity is already highly regulated. It would also mean redefining kindred entities in those nations where unions are currently forbidden, prosecuted, and even punished.

Most people would agree that revolutions should be peaceful (that is to say, ones that do not goad The State into resorting to violence).¹⁷ Yet one should never submit to an unjust government or system on utilitarian grounds. Sometimes a group or an individual must do what is fair, no matter what the cost (Thoreau, 2017). While a strike should be the last resort when negotiations have failed (Espinosa Meza and Chible Villadangos, 2015: 67), certain forms of violence should be allowed to safeguard the right to strike (Ruay Sáez, 2017).

Here, one should note that we define net-strikes as work stoppages carried out by between a few hundred and a few thousand key workers chosen for their strategic roles in a GE's overall operating structure. Unions and other staff associations would wage a communication campaign before these workers went on strike and would also give them any legal, financial, and social support they needed. The stoppages should be continued until lawful damage had been inflicted on the firm. Such damage ought to be both quantifiable and foreseeable, forcing the GE to change corporate policies hurting workers and/or the environment.

Over the last few years, sundry groups have carried out work stoppages and strike actions that bear upon our definition of a 'net-strike'. However, they all lack a truly global dimension — a feature we consider vital. None of the stoppages/strikes exhibit all the aspects of a net-strike — a caveat that should be borne in mind in considering the examples given below.

¹⁷ Thoreau (2017) speaks of the unleashing of State violence.

- Many international entities were involved in stoppages at McDonald's UK burger chain in 2017. The strike not only sought wage rises for the multinational's workers in Britain, it also took account of McDonald's indirect economic impacts abroad.¹⁸ This example clearly shows the organisational potential of sundry entities working at the international scale when the strike aims are well defined.
- The strike at 19 nuclear power stations in France in 2016 forced the Macron government to negotiate a general plan for the whole of the nation's energy industry.¹⁹ One can imagine a strike of this kind at the European level in which the costs of an industrial dispute were borne by multinational power companies. The value of the example lies in the strike's scope for paralysing a strategic sector and thus inflicting huge illicit damage on other sectors of the economy.
- Stoppages by Spain's dockworkers in 2017 brought the country's ports and trade to a standstill,²⁰ even though only 7,500 people work in the sector. One can just imagine the impact of a similar, co-ordinated strike across Europe lasting for two weeks. As in the foregoing example, the power of a small group of people to wreak havoc would be even greater if wielded at the global scale.
- In early 2018, some 800 workers at Amazon's logistics centres in Spain held a strike against

¹⁸ Wilkinson, A. (August 22, 2017). "La lucha por un salario justo en McDonald's se hace internacional." ["The struggle for a fair wage at McDonald's goes international"] *elDiario.es*. Source: <http://www.eldiario.es>

¹⁹ Yáñez, C. (May 25, 2016). "Las 19 centrales nucleares se suman a la oleada de protestas en Francia." ["19 Nuclear power stations join France's wave of protest"] *El País*. Source: <http://www.elpais.es>

²⁰ Agencia EFE. (February 14, 2017). "Los estibadores mantienen los paros tras una nueva reunión sin acuerdo." ["Dockworkers' strike continues after no agreement in latest talks"] *elDiario.es*. Source: <http://www.eldiario.es>

the new collective agreement.²¹ Imagine the impact of such a co-ordinated strike throughout Europe, involving just a few thousand workers and lasting more than two days.

- The feminist strike on the 8th of March 2018 marked International Women's Day, and it was held in 23 nations. In addition to the strike's runaway success in countries such as Spain,²² one should also note the plethora of associations and movements co-ordinating the strike internationally. The values and rights stressed by the strikers were global ones, showing that there are universal problems that need tackling.

Given this perspective and the issues, the mission must be to improve international communication and co-ordination. This not only requires a change in strategy but also a new mindset. Here, one should realise that in a globalised world, the whole economy is interconnected. Accordingly, the actions of workers in one country have a much wider impact on society. That is why we can no longer stay blinkered by the fictitious limits of Nation-States when it comes to planning strikes. Yet we continue to identify concepts such as wealth, economy, prosperity, and *job insecurity* with Nation States even though power has shifted from them to a new Capitalist framework (Arrizabaló, 2016: 9-10). Quite simply, the structures of today's corporate matrix dwarf those of even the biggest Nation-States. In a turbo-charged Capitalist global economy, strikes too need to operate on the same scale.

21 Agencia EFE. (March 12, 2018). "Los trabajadores convocan dos días de huelga en el mayor centro logístico de Amazon en España." ["Workers call a two-day strike at Amazon's biggest logistic centre in Spain"] *elDiario.es*. Source: <http://www.eldiario.es>

22 Newspaper editorial (March 8, 2018). "La prensa internacional se hace eco de la huelga feminista 'histórica' y 'sin precedentes' en España" ["The Foreign Press reports the 'historic, unprecedented' feminist strike in Spain"] *La Vanguardia*. Source: <http://www.lavanguardia.com>.

CONCLUSIONS

The historical arena for labour disputes featured players that now hold positions differing greatly from those they held in yesterday's world. These players are: The State; companies; political parties; trade unions; the working class. A firm grasp of the changes is key to redefining the role of strikes in the 21st Century. The State retains only a fraction of its former coercive power. Meanwhile, the power of large global companies and the investment funds on which States depend now reach far beyond national borders.

Political parties and trade unions have been racked by a crisis of legitimacy and representativeness for decades. This is because they have failed to adapt to the demands of a world that has altered out of all recognition from the one in which they were founded. Meanwhile, the working class has become less well-defined and has been hard hit by; (1) changes in the labour market itself and; (2) the influence of Neo-Liberal ideology, which has ridden roughshod over workers. Of these two factors, the second carries more weight. This ideology imbues all discourses and is reinforced through corporate propaganda, which stresses exclusive values such as individualism, competition, and self-interest.

It is no secret that "multinational corporations now wield more influence than four fifths of Mankind and are only controlled by their shareholders" (Fernández Martínez, 2009: 43). At some point corporations will wholly undermine States' ability to act. From the communication standpoint, the situation requires strategic refocusing so as to: (1) correctly identify and reveal the real holders of power in the 21st Century; (2) build the net-strike concept in its most global sense; (3) recognise and take advantage of the system's structural weaknesses; (4) reverse the trend towards the isolation of the individual fostered by current media and digital communication practices.

So far, we have argued that all these changes call for a root-and-branch reflection on what trade unions are and the purpose they serve (Brinkmann *et al.*, 2008). The same is true of other organisational structures (Lucerga, 2013) and the new demands for waging

the social struggle. The challenges posed by today's globalisation require better understanding of the framework in which people's economic and social activities take place. A global context where everything is interconnected also demands global actions.

The net-strike concept is one that gives priority to efficiency criteria in drawing up communication

campaigns for supporting a strike or a stoppage. Labour mobilisation in the 21st Century should force the powerful to ditch their destructive economic policies and to bear the full cost of their 'slash and burn' version of globalisation (Dierckxsens, 2009). That said, efforts to achieve these aims in the medium to long term do not preclude resort to traditional strikes and stoppages.

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