

Strike Activity in the 21st Century: Implications of the Recent Global Upsurge

Call for Papers for the 6th International Association on Strikes and Social Conflicts
Conference to be held in Cape Town, South Africa 5th-7th February 2024

<https://workersoftheworld.net/>

While global capitalism has remained in the grip of a series of multi-dimensional and intertwined crises (including ongoing economic malaise, legacy of Covid, escalating impact of climate change, intensification of wars in different parts of the world such as Ukraine and Africa and geopolitical crisis between Russia, China and the West, and the mounting debt crisis in the Global South), the past 18 months or so has also seen a welcome resurgence of strike action and social conflicts in many different countries around the world, representing a new, different and exciting period.

With the onset of the global financial crisis at the beginning of the 21st century there had already been a comeback of strikes and labour struggles in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, as well as a series of strikes against austerity in Western Europe. While the level of workers' resistance was generally not sustained for long, there were elements of the global crisis that continued to create widespread anger and radicalisation, with an increasing political generalisation about the system of capitalism and the problems it creates, particularly among young people shaped by social movements such as Black Lives Matter, #MeToo and climate protests.

And more recently there has been a new upsurge of angry and defiant strike movements at varying levels of intensity and momentum in numerous countries, including France, Britain, Greece, Portugal, Belgium, United States, Canada, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and China, with workers rediscovering their power when they take collective action.

In France, Macron's decision to increase the pension age sparked a huge movement and created a political crisis; amid two mass strikes around 3.5 million joined demonstrations –

the largest numbers seen since the 1968 revolt. In Europe more generally rising inflation and the cost-of-living crisis has been the stimulus - underpinned by growing anger over the impact of neoliberal austerity measures, work intensification and burn-out and other grievances - for a significant uptick in strike activity, in Britain also on a scale not seen for a generation. And in the United States, not only has the level of strike action rocketed, but wildcat action, the emergence of a new independent Amazon Labour Union and its spectacular victory in securing union recognition has sparked off strikes inside the company in other countries, including Germany, Turkey and elsewhere globally.

The revival of such strike activity has contributed to an undermining of the long predominant view that such action was no longer feasible due to widespread structural changes in the composition of the working class towards 'precarious', insecure and fragmented work contexts that make trade unionism and collective action near impossible.

Notwithstanding such developments considerable weaknesses have also become evident. These include the continuing way in which the existing bureaucratic structures of trade union and labour/socialist party organisations have often acted as constraints on the strike momentum, with few disputes resulting in outright victories for workers in many countries. And despite a surge of union membership in some disputes, this has generally not arrested the overall continuing reduction of union membership levels and density inside the working-class movement. Only a small fraction of young workers are members of unions, and union presence tends to remain primarily located in the public sector, with membership levels in new areas of the economy extremely low. At the same time, workplace union organisation has remained weak and generally lacking in confidence to act independently of official union channels.

In the light of such developments, we invite contributions to the 6th International Association of Strikes and Social Conflicts Conference in February 2014 that explore the nature, dynamics, trajectory, limits and potential, and implications of such strikes. As well as both *empirical* studies and/or *analytical* interpretations, we would also invite papers not merely on *contemporary* developments, but also *comparative* and *historical* studies that reflect on recent developments in the light of different struggles in the same or other countries and/or time periods.

Potential (but not exclusive) related topics are:

- The different sectors and varied occupational composition of strikers, involving traditional industrial workers and public services, as well as new areas of employment such as platform work, retail, logistics (including Amazon)
- Participation and prominence of women strikers, and of migrant and ethnic minority workers
- Strike tactics, organisation and conduct (such as intermittent days of action versus indefinite strikes, mass picketing, strike committees, rank-and-file networks)
- Role of national trade unions in initiating and constraining action
- The role of the labour, socialist and social-democratic parties (often at best irrelevant to the strikes and sometimes openly antagonistic)
- Extent of development of grassroots independent forms of workers' organisation inside existing unions
- Involvement of newer independent radical union-led strikes
- Links between trade unions and broader social movements
- Nature of counter-mobilisation by employers, government and local and state authorities, and degree of authoritarian repression of working-class protests

Please note we would also encourage proposed conference papers on any other general aspect of strike activity in specific countries in/across the 20th and 21st centuries.

Conference abstracts of between 200-500 words should be sent by the deadline of **Friday 10 November 2023** to: iassc.conference2024@gmail.com

Papers presented at the conference will be considered for publication in the Association's journal *Workers of the World*.

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No Conference Fees

The conference fee (including all light refreshments and buffet lunches for the duration of the conference) will be met by the organisers.

Travel and Accommodation

But conference participants will be expected to cover their own travel and accommodation costs.

Travel from Cape Town International airport

The best way to travel from the airport to the hotel is via Uber. This should cost around R200/10 USD/9 Euro (one-way).

Conference venue

The conference will be held at the [Fountains Hotel](#) in the CBD in Cape Town. We would prefer participants to book accommodation at this hotel. A special rate has been negotiated @ R1540/80\$/76 Euro per night. There are plenty of alternative options for accommodation for those who want to [stay elsewhere](#).

Cultural Programme

- * A conference dinner is planned at the [Bo-Kaap Kombuis](#) for the 5th February. Fee @R0.
- * A group tour to the [Slave Lodge](#) is on the 6th February. Entrance fee @R60/3USD/3 Euro
- * An evening trip to [Table Mountain](#) on the 6th February. Fee @R360/18USD/17 Euro return trip.
- * There will be a photo exhibition of the struggle against apartheid organised by [South African History Online](#).
- * There will be a book stall organised by the South African, left-wing publisher, [Jacana Media](#).

We are looking forward to meeting and engaging with you!