The emergence of the social strike -
A new opportunity for labour?

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Abstract
In recent years a new emergent form of collective action – the social strike – has been discussed in social movement networks. So far, the concept of social strike has only surfaced briefly in previous research and this article aims to deepen the understanding of the concept and why it is emerging in our historical moment. In order to do this the article looks at a social movement network called Transnational Social Strike Platform (TSS). In the analysis both movement texts produced by TSS was used as well as ethnographic material collected at an assembly meeting in London. According to my analysis it is hard to define the social strike as a distinct form of collective action. Instead, the emergence of the concept of social strike should be located at the historical impasse of late capitalism. I suggest that the concept of social strike offers an imaginary solution to the disappearance of the working class as a political subject and reflects the eclipse of organised labour. The social strike uses the symbolic dimensions of the strike as a symbol of resistance but detaches the strike from its material base in waged labour. In this process, the strike becomes a multivocal symbol that can be invoked by actors in order to give symbolic support and discursive legitimisation to their struggles. As the symbolic dimensions of the strike gets increasingly detached from its material anchor in waged labour the value of using the strike as a symbol of resistance may erode as it no longer can deliver the concrete material effects of collective work stoppage that historically has given the strike its pivotal role in labour struggles.

Keywords: social strike; strike; labour unrest; labour movement; social movements; anti-austerity protests; historical materialism.

Word count: 12386
Introduction

In recent years a new emergent form of collective action – the social strike – has been discussed in social movement networks. The social strike is presented as a strategy to get out of the political deadlock of the anti-austerity movement but also a possible way to break the trend of the declining rate of strikes throughout the advanced capitalist countries. There have been some brief descriptions of the social strike within previous research but no analysis of the social strike that moves beyond a surface level has been carried out. The aim of this article is to analyse the concept of social strike in order to provide a better understanding of why it is emerging in our historical moment.

Such an analysis will need to view the social strike in the light of the historical trajectory of the strike. The underlying theoretical foundations of the article is grounded in historical materialism and the Marxist tradition. From this perspective the strike is seen as an expression of the materially determined social relations that structures the labour process in capitalist societies, carrying an inherent tendency for conflict between workers and management (Atzeni 2014; Hyman 1989). To analyse the social strike in relation to the traditional definition of the strike is not only motivated on theoretical grounds, but springs from within the discourse of the social strike itself, as it is the traditional strike that its proponents themselves use to define the social strike.

In the article I will use empirical material derived from a social movement network called Transnational Social Strike Platform (TSS). TSS is the only actor on an international level explicitly working with the social strike. This singles them out as the most interesting contemporary manifestation of the social strike.

Three research questions will inform the analysis:

1) How is the social strike defined in relation to the traditional workplace strike in the empirical material?

2) How does the dialogical process look like in which the concept of social strike emerges?

3) What kind of function does the concept of social strike provide in the discourse of the movement network?

The article can hopefully contribute to give a better understanding of the concept social strike on both a theoretical and empirical level. It may also be of interest for all of us who are worried about the future for organised labour in an age of acquiescence.

The first part of the article will start out with a short account of the wave of protests that erupted after the economic crises of 2008 and how this wave has been interpreted in previous research. After this I will give a historical overview of the strike and how it has been defined within the labour movement and among Marxian scholars. The first part will end with a summary of previous research explicitly carried out on the social strike.

In the second part the empirical data used for the analysis will be presented. I will describe TSS and how the empirical material was collected as well as the method of analysis. In this part I will also discuss the ethical consideration guiding the research and introduce the theoretical perspective used for analysing the discourse of the social strike.

In the third part the results of the analysis will be presented. It starts off with a section where I will introduce the concept of social strike as it is used by TSS. This is followed with two sections that broadens the scope and dwells deeper into the subject. It ends with a section that aims to give a theoretical reflection of the social strike and how it relates to our contemporary historical moment. The article ends with a fourth part, where the conclusions from the analysis will be summarised and discussed.
I. Background & previous research

In this first part I will situate the strike in the age of austerity and how the anti-austerity protests have been interpreted in previous research. This short introduction will be followed with some analytical perspectives on the strike and how the history of the strike is connected to the development of the labour movement. I will end this first part of the article with a summary of what previous research has had to say about the social strike.

The economic crises of 2008 - A new wave of social unrest

In the aftermath of the economic crises of 2008 the world economy went into a turmoil resulting in major social unrest around the world (della Porta 2015). In the crisis ridden parts of Western Europe large scale protests were directed against the austerity measures implemented as a response to the financial collapse. As Gallas and Nowak notes (2014), strikes spiked during this period and were mainly political, defensive ones - directed against the state. Even though they mobilised large number of participants they brought forward very few substantial concessions (ibid.: 308). The crisis of 2008 has been described as a twin crises – both financial and democratic – where the economic downturn brought forward a crisis of legitimacy for the representative democratic system and its institutions (della Porta 2017; Flesher Fominaya 2017).

The strikes against austerity have largely been limited episodes, so called one-day warning strikes (Gallas & Nowas 2014). Gallas and Nowas traces this trend to the declining power of unions and the lack of ability to get political leverage in order to influence governmental policies. The ability of unions to put pressure on governments through strike action have been limited due to the gradual diminishing power of organised labour throughout the neoliberal era. This lack of power forces the unions to engage in “symbolic political strikes” - dressed up in the radical costume of the general strike - in order to both maximise turnout and to cover up their structural weakness (ibid.: 307).

The protests against austerity have also had an impact on the field of research on social movements. As some authors have noted, perspectives informed by the political economy of capitalism have almost disappeared within the field of social movement research (Hetland & Goodwin 2014). The global crises of 2008 has brought this lacuna into the light and an ambition to integrate perspectives of political economy into social movement research has been pursued (Cox & Gunvald 2014; della Porta 2015). Quantitative analysis of the social base of the protests against austerity have pointed out that these were mainly carried out by “a plural alliance of citizens whose existence is made less and less secure in neoliberalism and, particularity, in its crisis” (della Porta 2015: 65). This analysis shows that the protests mainly included those citizens most seriously affected by the crises: young adults, senior citizens and blue-collar workers.

In the mobilisations against austerity some have argued that movements have changed their repertoire of collective action. The most salient expression of this has been the so called “movement of the squares” - deriving their name from the wide spread tactic to occupy symbolically loaded public spaces (Flesher Fominaya 2014). Even though this can hardly be seen as a novel practice per se, these movements aspired to engage in what are sometimes referred to as prefigurative politics,

1 Of course, any such sweeping and vague generalisation need to be qualified and analysed further. The quantitative data used in this particular study collapses a wide range of protests without considering their qualitative differences and how these relate to specific demands or social interests (della Porta 2015; see Peterson, Wahlström & Wennerhag 2015 for a quantitative analysis of the participation in anti-austerity protest in Europe taking qualitative aspects into greater consideration).
where movement practices should reflect and create new forms of social relations in line with the future visions of society pursued by the movement.

**Labour and the withering away of the strike**

The frequency of strike action has varied considerably across space and time since it first emerged on the historical scene in the 18th century. As Charles Tilly noted, our contemporary repertoire of collective action was consolidated with “the development of industrial capitalism and the growth of centralized national states” (1983: 476). The strike grew out of the reorganisation of work under capitalism, as new property relation based on waged labour became the dominant form of exploiting labour (Thompson 1967).

The strike has historically been considered to be one of the clearest manifestation of workers joint action (Hyman 1989). In the historical trajectory of labour unrest, the strike has been essential for workers to aggregate power in order to resist the commodification of labour and to pursue social change (Kelly 1998; Silver 2003). The International Labour Association (ILO) defines a strike as “a temporary work stoppage effected by one or more groups of workers with a view to enforcing or resisting demands or expressing grievances, or supporting other workers in their demands or grievances” (ILO 1993).

On an analytical level the strike can be labelled as economic or political (Linden 2008: 184). The economic strike is directed toward one or several employers, whereas the political strike is directed toward a third party - an extra-workplace institution, usually the state. Within the labour movement and the socialist left, the nature of the strike has always been a contested issue, but it has always been seen as an integral part of organised labour in its pursuit of either reformist or revolutionary social change.

Since the last peak of labour militancy in the late 1960s and early 1970s there has been a general decline - especially in the core capitalist countries - in strike activity (Velden 2007). The decline of labour militancy and the disappearance of the strike has been seen as an expression of a general crisis for organised labour as well as the radical left (Aronowitz 2014; Silver 2003:1-8). The debate about the “withering away of the strike” is a recurrent one and was initially started more than half a decade ago by Hartman & Ross (1960). At that time the decline in strike activity was considered to be evidence of the new consensus between labour and capital - institutionalised in a system of collective bargaining between unions and employers - usually seen as the basic foundation of the Fordist model of production (Harvey 1990). As it turned out this consensus was conjunctural as the eruption of social unrest in the late 1960s clearly manifested.

Today the situation is different. In the wake of the neoliberal transformation and the withdrawal of the welfare state, a radical marketisation of capitalist societies have undermined the position of organised labour (Bieler et al. 2008). This marketisation is closely related to the process of an

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2 The strike is limited, for analytical reasons, to describe those collective actions carried out by workers – selling their capacity to perform labour - and not to social phenomenon like “the refusal by tenants to pay rents or students to attend lectures” that “are called strikes only by analogy” (Hyman 1989: 17).

3 The literature on the subject is too voluminous to be covered here. Within different currents of the socialist movement the strike came to have different strategic importance in the process of transforming society. The debate was especially intense in the pre-WWI period, both within the social democratic movement as well as between the two dominating strands in socialist thought: Marxism and anarchosyndicalism (for a brief overview see Sassoon 1996: ch.1).

4 There are several methodological problems when quantifying and comparing strike activity over time and across nations but strikes are on the decline according to several indicators (Velden 2007: 24-37).
increasingly globalised world market, enabled by innovations in technology - especially in transportation and communication systems - altering the temporal and spatial boundaries of capital accumulation (Atzeni 2014). Massive changes in production, exchange and distribution have pushed organised labour into a position of retreat with a general decline in workplace bargaining power (Schmalz & Weinmann 2016). The density in trade union membership is steadily decreasing in the advanced capitalist countries and as their capacities are weakened, they are forced to accept concessions or to fight for increasingly narrow sectorial interests (Hyman 2001).

Some have argued that the economic strike has given way to new forms of labour conflict, where workers increasingly sort to adopt new methods to resist employer despotism (Godard 2011). It is reasonable to assume that even if these instances of resistances do exist they have not taken the collective character of the strike. If they would, we should have noticed that by now. The strategic importance of the strike has always been its capacity to use the structural location of workers in production to potentially halt the production process (Silver 2003). As strikes becomes increasingly rare, or transforms into “symbolic political protests”, the crucial strategic question arises for the labour movement: are there any alternatives to the strike?

**The emergence of the social strike**

In recent years there has been a growing interest within social movement networks to adopt a new form of collective action – the social strike. The term social strike emerged in several different national contexts after the “movement of the squares” ebbed out in 2012. The most feasible explanation why this occurred is that the idea of the social strike went through a process of diffusion within and between social movement networks across national contexts. So far, research on the social strike is very limited due to its novel use in contemporary movement practices.

The most detailed exploration of the social strike has been conducted by Massimiliano Andretta (2017) in an overview of the recent development of the anti-austerity protests in Italy. The social strike is described as a possible innovative strategy to build new coalitions between different social groups. The analysis of the social strike is mainly descriptive and defined through interviews with movement participants. What follows from the interviews is that the social strike aims to overcome the limits of the traditional strike in order to create a wider social mobilisation outside the workplace, and in doing so, constructing a new social coalition and identity (ibid.: 218ff).

Markos Vogiatzoglou (2015) mentions the social strike briefly in an account when he compares new labour unionism and protests against precarity in Italy and Greece. Vogiatzoglou writes:

“[t]he most recent efforts in Italy are focused on the concept of ‘social strike’ [sciopero sociale], a co-ordinated set of diversified actions against not only the workplace precarization but also the one expanding towards the everyday life of the flexible worker. The ‘social strike’ should not be confused with the traditional industrial strike (although abstention from work is part of the action set), as it incorporates a much wider protest...”

5 The classification of a strike as a social strike is not something new within the labour movement, e.g Rudolf Rocker mentions the social strike in his text about anarchosyndicalism from 1938 (Rocker 1989: 128-130). Rocker’s defines the social strike quite differently than what its proponents do today. The social strike, in Rocker’s definition, is when workers refuses to do work that is harmful to the community and the public interest; the social strike “seeks to force the employers a responsibility to the public” and “primarily it has in view the protection of the consumers, of whom the workers themselves constitute the great majority” (ibid.: 128). The “newness” of the social strike should not then be taken at face value but need to be put into a historical context.

6 In Canada the group CLASSE called for a social strike during the student protests in 2012 (Sorochan 2012); José Vidal described the general strike in Spain 2012 as a social strike and a new emerging form of protest (Vidal 2013); in Italy a openly proclaimed social strike was held on the 14th of November 2014 (Andretta 2017).
repertoire – symbolic blockades, interventions in institutional events, e-campaigns, and so on. Furthermore, potential participants also include students, the self-employed, and the unemployed.” (ibid.: 281-282)

Even though Vogiatzoglou gives a more detailed definition of the social strike, compared to Andretta, it turns out rather nebulous. The two dimensions supposedly separating it from the traditional strike - the wider protest repertoire and the potential participants – are both not new dimensions, in any qualitative sense, when taking the history of the strike into consideration. Even though the strike emanates from the sphere of labour, it does not rule out that workers combine withdrawal of labour with a wider protest repertoire, something that is evident when looking at the history of strike action. Strikes have also commonly enjoyed support and the active engagement from wider groups in society than the mere workers directly involved in withdrawing their labour. In a strict sense of course, the workers are the main social agents of the strike but other groups in society have frequently participated and joined in with workers in picket lines, demonstrations, blockades, public campaigns, and so on.7

To conclude, the emergence of the social strike within social movement discourse remains an unexplored area and the few analyses provided so far have failed to give any real analytic content to the concept. In the next section I will describe the empirical material used in this study.

II. Empirical data, methodology and theoretical perspectives

TSS emerged out of the anti-austerity movement in Europe and the first assembly was held in Frankfurt on 19th of March 2015 during the Blockupy protests against austerity. TSS explicitly tries to develop and use social strike as a specific form of collective action. The aim of the network is to build a transnational movement in Europe that can enable conjoined protests across national borders in the form of the social strike. TSS consists of a loose network of groups and organisations around Europe with the ambition to build an enabling network structure,8 where groups and organisations can meet up to discuss both theoretical and practical experiences in relation to the social strike as well as to enable transnationally coordinated actions. One of the main initiatives of TSS is to organise assemblies in different cities around Europe where this exchange process can happen. At these assemblies TSS invites organisations and trade unions outside the network to participate in the discussions. The fact that TSS connects a wide range of actors on a national level linked to the social strike makes these assemblies suitable places to collect empirical material as it reflects the emergent nature of the concept social strike and gives a plurality of different perspectives on the social strike in the empirical material. To my knowledge, TSS is the only actor explicitly working with social strike on a transnational level and at this level their assemblies are the main and only available meeting point for actors to discuss the social strike.

The primary interest of the research is to capture the social interaction taking place between different actors involved in the process of developing the concept of the social strike. In order to capture processes of social interaction, observations are preferred to interviews. If the aim of the research would have been to get the intentions of individual actors, interviews would have been

7 The historical account of the strike provides ample evidence that both dimensions singled out by Vogiatzoglou are not novel, quite the opposite, they are both an integral part of its history (see Brecher 1973; Velden 2007; Silver 2003).

8 According to the TSS homepage there are around twenty groups and organisations in the platform from several different countries in Europe (TSS nd’). These are non-party organisations from an autonomous left milieu. Some of them are grassroots trade unions while others are more activist orientated focused on questions like migration, housing, austerity and precarity.
This article will rely on two empirical sources: movement texts produced by TSS and ethnographic material collected at an assembly meeting organised by TSS in February 2017 in London. The shorter texts published by TSS are primarily produced with the intention to communicate a movement narrative rather than to engage with theoretical issues regarding the social strike. The assemblies on the other hand are forums for dialogue between different actors with the ambition to engage in theoretical and long-term strategic issues. Using both these empirical sources will make it possible to answer the research questions formulated above. In order to capture the emergent nature of the concept social strike and the dialogical process in which this happens the assembly will provide important insights. The movement texts one the other hand provides the material manifestations of the discourse and how it gets crystallised in written language. Further, these two empirical material will be compared and put in relation to one another. This will be a valuable tool in the analysis as both congruent and dissonant themes can emerge out of the process.

Ethical considerations
Prior to the assembly in London, I contacted TSS and asked for permission to attend the assembly in London. The assembly was an open event and anyone was allowed to attend it. The Swedish Research Council’s (2002) ethical guidelines for research in the social sciences declares that research need to inform all participants about the intent of the study and they all need to give an informed consent if they are to be included or not. The central concern of the researcher should be to not compromise the well-being of any participant.

As the assembly was a public event, anyone was welcomed to participate. It can therefore be assumed everyone was aware of that they spoke in a public arena. Many of the participants were spokespersons or members of organisations and spoke in their name. All persons are referred to in the text without names or identity specific characteristics as this is not assumed to be relevant for the analysis. The subject at hand are not a personal matter but a political concern - orientated towards the public sphere - and the integrity and well-being of all participants are thus deemed to be protected.

Empirical material and method of analysis
In order to provide an overview of the empirical material used, a short description of it will follow below. The assembly in London was held on a weekend between the 10th and 12th of February. Around 160 people and 40 organisations from nine different European countries attended the meeting. Two main topics were on the agenda for the meeting, both linked to protests in the upcoming months: the worldwide women’s strike on the 8th of March and the migrant strike on the 20th of February. Besides these two events, several other topics were dealt with focused on long-term strategic and organizational issues.

On Friday evening, a plenary debate was held on the topic: “How do we strike today? Building power from the margins”. Several spokespersons from various organisations held shorter presentations of their work. These were followed with an open discussion with the audience.

On Saturday, the day started with an open debate with the headline: “Welcome to Brexit Europe –
The End of the Holding pattern”. During the day four workshops were held in smaller groups with the topics: “Social Strike - Striking across the wage”; “Logistics Strike – How to fight your boss when your boss is a machine, a software or a chain? Algorithmic management, the ‘Gig Economy’ and logistical strikes”; “Right Populism, Left Nationalism – Migrants, wage disparities and institutional racism”; and “March 8th – Towards the global Women’s strike”. As the workshops overlapped I only attend the first two as they related most closely to the emergent nature of the social strike and its relation to the traditional strike. Later on, I could listen to the “March 8”-workshop through the recordings made by the British organiser. The day ended with a plenary debate about the upcoming migrant strike under the headline: “1 Day Without Us – Experiences from US, Italy and UK”. Saturday was the main focal point of the assembly and lasted for approximate ten hours.

On Sunday, reports from last days workshops and debates were summarised and discussed, followed by a discussion dealing with the network and future activities. These discussions were scheduled for four hours.

I attended all of the three days but left a bit earlier on Sunday. Throughout the assembly field notes were taken down during the sessions. These field notes have later on been developed further and extended as I have had the possibility to listen to some of the recordings from the assembly. Even though participant observation allows the researcher to get “firsthand” data of interactions in the social world (Balsiger & Lambelet 2014), the naive empiricism of the neutral observer must be discarded as a fiction: the researcher always acts as a medium of interpretation on all levels in the research process (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009). To acknowledge the unbridgeable chasm that exists between the participant and the observer is a necessary element in all kind of research but it becomes even more acute when conducting participatory observations (Burawoy 2009).

The participatory character carried out in the research were on the non-interactive pole (O’Reilly 2009). The continuum between engagement and passive observation is naturally a sliding scale rather than absolutes but during the discussions and workshops I did not engage in any interactions. As mentioned above, the aim of the research is focused on the interaction between actors at the assembly and the choice to not engage in discussions and workshops sprung naturally from this consideration.

The texts used in the analysis are from the TSS homepage. These texts are shorter ones and consists mainly of reports from meetings, analysis of current events and information about the social strike. The texts are of a limited number due to the brief existence of the movement.10 I have read all of the published material by TSS but only those texts with the most strategic relevance is referred to in the analysis. In several texts the same themes and phrases resurface repeatedly and I have chosen to include the most illustrative example.

Social movement texts can be analysed as historically situated symbolic acts, interacting and intervening in the social world. Social movement texts are to a high extent determined by their relation to the outside world as they aim to engage people in collective action (Thörn 1997). Håkan Thörn identifies two contextual dimensions, that both need to be related to the textual meaning derived from the intersection of discursive fields as well as the wider historical social context (ibid.: 174). Further, an analysis of social movement texts should include two parts: an analysis of the relevant conceptual relations within the texts and the meanings that are being created in the

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10 There are only around twenty posts on the heading “Action/Strikes/Statements”, where the bulk of the produced texts are collected.
interaction between the text and its contexts.

A hermeneutic approach has been pursued when analysing the empirical material, founded on the interpretative horizon of the dialectic relation between the particular and the whole (Alvesson & Sköldberg 2009). The research process has been informed by an abductive and iterative approach (O’Reilly 2009). In this process a shifting focus between the different empirical material, as well as between the theoretical and empirical level, have made the process into a matter of constant renegotiating, where notes and smaller excerpts slowly have evolved into a more coherent text. This process spawned certain themes that later on were crystallised and informed the final analysis with the aim to move from a descriptive stage to a level of analysis and interpretation (Wolcott 1994).

**Dialogism and social movement discourse**

In this article I will draw upon a dialogical perspective, focusing on the contextual embeddedness of discourse in social interaction. A dialogical perspective fits well with the Marxist outlook of this article as well as with both the research aim and empirical material. A dialogical perspective can be integrated with a Marxian perspective as it recognises the historical dimensions of social life and the material boundaries this puts on human action while at the same time avoiding any naïve materialism. In relation to the research aim and empirical material, the perspective centres our attention on the interaction between actors and how these interactions reflects an ongoing dialogical process. The dialogical perspective avoids the sometime static view informing the influential frame alignment perspective. While frame analysis recognises the cultural and symbolic processes necessary for sustained collective action it tends to see these processes as instrumental rather than an integrated part of the process itself.

The dialogical perspective identifies discourse as mainly language in use, as a social praxis, deriving its meaning from its social character as an interactive process between people in specific historical contexts (Bakhtin 1984: 181-185). Language also imposes itself on its users as semantic layers of meaning derived from its historical dimension, where the past is invoked through the utterance of the speaker and “many words stubbornly resist, other remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them” (Bakhtin 1981: 294). Discourses are not closed and finalised systems but chains of utterances, an ongoing stream of “living dialogical threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance” (ibid.: 276). Discourses are multivocal, open for multiple meanings, getting their particular meaning(s) according to the contextual situatedness in both the socio-material and cultural conditions in specific historical conjunctures. Language is not an individual phenomenon but a collective one, and it cannot be reduced to neither the level of discursive immanence, informing structuralism in its various guises, nor transcendence, but is simultaneously both “in and of the world” (Lecercle 2009: 70). This multivocality of language arises not a as a secondary effect but constitutes the very fabric of lived experience and the meanings that arises out of this process.

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11 The dialogical perspective was developed mainly during the 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Union by a group of scholars called the Bakhtin circle, deriving their name from the Mikhail Bakhtin (for an overview see Brandist 2002). The sometimes opaque nature of his texts have opened up for several different interpretations, e.g. Julia Kristeva (1980) thought his oeuvre to be structuralist whereas other scholars used it within a Marxist tradition. I will lean on the latter (see e.g. Eagleton 2007; Lecercle 2009; Williams 1977. For a critical overview of the relation between the Bakhtin circle and Marxist theory see Alpatov 2000 and Brandist 2002: ch.3).

12 The initial formulation of the frame alignment perspective was made by Snow et al. 1986 (see Snow et al. 2014 for a discussion over its theoretical development).
The dialogical dimension should not lead to a normative direction implying consensus and cooperation but opens up for both conflicts and disagreements. The multivocality of signs\footnote{Vološinov makes a different use of the concept of sign than the more familiar one used by Ferdinand de Saussure and his famous differentiation between langue and parole (see Vološinov 1986: 9-15; Williams 1977: 38-41).} does not imply that they are arbitrary, empty signifiers. The multivocality arises from the different historical and social contexts in which they are produced and how they relate to lived experience - signs are “multiaccentual”, linked to their social origin (Vološinov 1986: 22f). According to Vološinov signs gets increasingly “uniaccentual” when dominant classes tries to impose their meaning of signs onto the whole of the community in order to pursue their vested interests in the continuation of the social order. Even though this may very well be an important dimension, it seems a bit too one-sided. I would like to expand the notion in two ways. First, there is no need to restrict the dimensions of uniaccentuality to reflect mere class relations but it can be expanded to include other social relations and contexts. Secondly, it seems to be too mechanical, emphasising the uniaccentuality imposed from above, paying little attention to the same processes from below. I will use it in a more dynamic way as an element of a dialectic process where signs always vacillate between becoming multiaccentual and uniaccentual, depending on the specific contexts. What multiaccentuality do highlight is that contention within a community often becomes a struggle over the meaning of shared signs.

III. Results and analysis

In the first section of the analysis I will introduce the concept social strike as it is presented in the movement texts produced by TSS. As these texts do not explicitly try to define the social strike in any rigorous way this reconstruction is mediated through my own interpretations. The empirical material from the assembly will be introduced later on as the analysis proceeds. With this in mind, the first section does not provide an exhaustive presentation of the concept social strike but an initial springboard for further analysis.

**What is a social strike?**

According to TSS the strike becomes “social as far as it recognizes the need to connect struggles concerning wage and working conditions, welfare rights and freedom of movement, by attacking exploitation in all its forms”; and when “it is no longer confined to either a work category, the wage, a workplace, a sector or indeed a nation” (TSS nd\textsuperscript{b}). The social strike has, according to TSS, two interrelated dimensions separating itself from other strikes: 1) it simultaneously addresses multiple forms of struggles or grievances and recognizes that these are interrelated; 2) this convergence of struggles should reflect its social base and it should not be confined, but still linked, to the sphere of production.

One peculiarity when identifying the primary actors of the social strike is its non-exclusionary character: “[t]he strike is a weapon that everyone has to be able to hold and use throughout society” and “there must be no exclusion from the strike movement: this is the basis of our understanding of solidarity and social strike” (TSS nd\textsuperscript{a}). The actors carrying out the social strike should not be confined to the production sphere alone but also include “those who are constantly changing jobs, the migrants who risk their residence permit, the students and the unemployed.” (TSS nd\textsuperscript{a}).

The collective actors within a movement are always defined in relation to the actions ascribed to them (Thörn 1997: 182). In the case of social strike this would seem to be fairly straight forward as
the strike would delineate the repertoire of action. But the social strike is hard to define solely through the aspect labour as it aims to integrate multiple forms of struggles. The social strike is frequently described as being an immanent part of, or a response to, a more general process, reflecting “rapid transformations in the economic, social and political field” (TSS nd⁸). The social strike is presented as a reaction to a neoliberal transformation of society. This transformation has caused a shift in the spatial configuration of the economy where the “increasing mobility of labour and the transnational organization of production make each space, city, country, workplace inhabited by transnational dynamics” (TSS nd⁹). The spatial shift has been joined with a fragmentation of the labour market and a condition of “mass precarization” is spreading throughout society (TSS nd⁹). This transnational process has weakened the nationally incapsulated labour movements and a social strike movement, transcending national borders, is a way to meet up with these changes as it reflects a “process [being] able to combine the expression of dissent and insubordination also of those who are excluded from traditional organizations” (TSS nd⁹).

Another dimension of social strike is that, according to TSS, a lot of contemporary protests have significant convergences with the social strike even though they are not pursuing it as an explicit strategy. Two examples of this are the International Women’s Strike (IWS nd) on the 8th of March in 2017 and the movement “Ni Una Menos” (NUM nd) in Argentina. Other significant protests singled out as either predecessors or examples of social strikes are the 2006 May Day protests in US against new immigration policies (TSS nd⁹), the migrant marches in 2010 in Italy (TSS nd⁹), and the “Black Monday” protests in Poland held in October 2016 against a new anti-abortion legislation¹⁴. TSS argues that the convergence between protests can also be seen in the anti-austerity protests. These protests were, according to TSS, connected as they forged together a wide range of questions in an heterogenous social base directed against austerity measures and the neoliberal management of the crises (TSS nd⁹, nd⁹). TSS identifies a recurrent pattern in all of these protests and the social strike anticipates and grows spontaneously out of this development.

The most striking feature and inherent ambiguity is the dual nature of the concept social strike as it is used to refer both to a specific form of collective action and to a process. These dimensions blend into one another and the boundaries between them are never explicitly defined.

**Striking outside the workplace – The role of labour in the social strike**

As the concept of social strike is used by TSS it does not break with the centrality of labour in its discourse but it redefines the concept of labour. The statement, or rather postulate, about the strike as “a weapon that everyone has to be able to hold and use throughout society” is hard to understand without this modification.

At the heart of the redefinition of labour lies the view that the reproduction of society is dependent on human labour in general, not only in the monetised part of the economy. The link to waged labour is not broken, and the aim of the social strike is to bridge the divide between the workplace and the wider social sphere.¹⁵ In the discourse of the social strike, the convergence of struggles between the workplace and society appears to be born out of necessity, but the detailed nature of the

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¹⁴ This protest was in turn inspired by the Icelandic Women’s Strike in 1975 (Karlsson 2000: 353ff). The protest in Iceland was never called a strike but “a day off” as many employers approved that their female employees were absent from work.

¹⁵ Even though the term is not used by TSS there are some clear similarities with this analysis and the concept of “the social factory” as it was developed within the Autonomia movement (see Steve Wright 2002 for a theoretical overview of the Autonomia movement).
convergence is to a large extent muted.

In the discussions at the assembly a pattern emerged as the subjects up for discussion were divided precisely at the point of convergence between the workplace and society, between labour and non-labour related issues. When the discussions did not deal directly with empirical examples of conflicts at the workplace, labour was either used as a distant reference category or the links between them were largely absent. The role of labour had a multivocal character in the discourse of the social strike and occupied different points of reference depending on the issue at hand.

In the most theoretically developed elaboration of the social strike at the assembly it was described as a tactic for a “politics of the commons”. According to the speaker, the social strike is based on the “recognition of the central role of labour power - that could be waged or unwaged, but labour nonetheless - which is obviously the process of which capital valorises itself”. When comparing a social strike to a workplace strike the speaker drew direct analogies, both were described as a protracted struggle between two antagonists trying to hold out longer than their counterpart in order to pursue their interests, in the case the of a social strike to extend the commons. The major rift, the speaker argued, is that the primary agents of the social strike is not the historical figure of the male industrial worker but mainly women and migrants due to structural changes. What followed in the workshop were several presentations from different groups and organisations describing their experiences working with tactics linked in one way or the other to social strike.

What connected these experiences was that they had very few direct links to either labour struggles or the conventional strike: rent strikes, campaigns against renovictions and the creating of autonomous social centres. Two exceptions were the protests in France against Loi Travail and strikes among Deliveroo workers in the UK. The mass protests in France did have clear links to labour as they were directed against new repressive labour laws. The speaker pointed out three important dimensions of the protests in France: they were endorsed by the major trade unions, focused on large demonstrations, and involved the practice of occupying public spaces. At the workshop no discussions emerged to what extent the protests in France actually converged with the social strike as it is defined by TSS, even though several of its defining characteristic seems to be missing: they enjoyed support from the major trade unions, focused only on the regular labour market, were confined to a national context and did not converge different struggle but quite the opposite, mobilised on a single issue.

The same ambiguous role of labour were reproduced throughout the assembly, evident when comparing the different topics for the workshops. The workshop discussing the logistical strike...
focused only on workplace based struggles mainly in relation to the emergence of the “gig-economy” and the restrains this development puts on contemporary labour organising. People involved in the Deliveroo strike, mentioned above, talked about their experiences about organizing in grassroots unions. Instead of perceiving the strike as the most efficient way to advance workers’ rights, its limitations were stressed by the workers. One person saw the strike as only one of several tactics as their contemporary working conditions did not allow any effective coordinated strike actions as unionisation was low and the lack of strike funds would not allow any long-term strike activity. The same person seemed uncertain about the transnational strike - “I really do not understand the concept” - questioning the possibility to organise transnational strikes when even local ones were hard to carry out at the present moment.

On the other end, the workshop concerning the upcoming women’s strike discussed issues quite different from the logistical strike. On the topic were gendered based oppression and the ongoing trend in different countries in Europe to restrict abortion rights. The protests in Poland last year were a major influence for many groups in current mobilisations. The role of labour seemed to have a rather peculiar role in the protests in Poland as many employers, according to the presentation at the assembly, supported the protests and let their employees take a paid day off during the one-day protests. This did not cause any discussion at the presentation, but on Sunday one person raised some doubts if not legal absence from work risked to dilute the whole concept of strike and acknowledged that a shared definition of the social strike seems to be missing. The multivocal discourse of labour in the social strike leads to another related theme, the aspect of social change.

“One day of action” - Moving beyond the symbolic

There is one issue that recurrently comes to the surface in the discussions about social strike: how to become something else than a singular event, reduced to “one day of action”. The fear of being reduced to a singular event is frequently expressed as an aspiration to move beyond the symbolic - the symbolic protest is perceived as an ephemeral event without the capacity to push for long-term social change – or as one person said at the assembly: “the social strike needs to be transformed into a material force”. According to TSS their aim is not “to be a coalition coming together for a contingent purpose or a big event, or another sort of network” but to “develop and strengthen an infrastructure which … [deals] with the problem of raising our organization capacities on the transnational level” (TSS nd). TSS identify three specific “fields of struggle”: wages, welfare and mobility. The three areas are linked to several provisional demands: an European minimum wage; an equal and guaranteed welfare benefits across Europe and a basic income; and freedom of mobility (TSS nd). What kind of infrastructure and organisational capacities they are speaking of, and how these relate to social change, where however not defined in any detail. This indeterminacy came at the forefront at the assembly and I will illustrate this with some observations.

In order to overcome the limitations of “one day of action” some people at the assembly articulated that the social strike movement should aim to build “counter-power” through the creation of autonomous, non-state institutions in order to sustain itself in a protracted struggle. This view was mainly advanced by proponents of the “politics of the commons”. Far from everyone spoke in these terms but many expressed the problem with the long-term strategic aims for the movement.

22 The two unions represented in the discussion were International Workers of the World and Independent Workers Union of Britain.
A majority of the protests presented at the assembly did all share a commonality in their decentralised network structure, mobilising around an upcoming event. The person presenting the upcoming migrant strike said they communicated and mobilised through social media channels, like Twitter and Facebook, and that the upcoming protest preceded any organisational forms. A similar situation was described by the person presenting the Polish protests, but the decentralised ambitions went further as the person stressed the importance of the absence of any unified formation of demands or aims. This trajectory of the protest later on, at a workshop, caused one of the few heated disputes at the assembly, as another organiser, speaking for several organisations over a streamed link from Poland, claimed the protests were co-opted by affiliated forces of the Liberal Party, trying to use the discontent with the new conservative government to pursue their own agenda. The dispute was averted by the person from TSS moderating the workshop and it did not cause any prolonged discussion.

This interaction, I think, illuminates an ongoing struggle over the unaccentuality of symbols, how interpretations differ between actors and how these actors engage in dialogic interaction to establish or contest meaning. The fact that the contention at the workshop did not cause any discussions gives further weight to this argument, as the protests in Poland is an important symbol for many groups in the current wave of mobilisation and is often invoked by TSS. Challenging the established trajectory of the event could endanger its function as a unifying symbol.

The need to transcend the symbolic leads to the question of how the social strike movement should relate to existing institutions. When speaking of the strike the labour movement was the most frequent reference point in the discussions. Several of the groups at the assembly spoke about the need to work with trade unions and one organiser from the US said that the “strike is not an endgame” and can only be one aspect in the process to build sustained campaigns. People speaking for the TSS were less inclined to talk in these terms, while others took a more sceptic view and raised critique or serious doubts about working with established trade unions.

The only discussions at the assembly with representatives from larger trade unions happened on Friday, as the plenary debate was held at Unite the Unions facilities.23 A union official from Unite spoke about their work with organising people in workplaces in the service sector with low levels of unionisation. This was not a strategy based on strike action but a long-term process to build, in a coalition with different activist groups, a union presence in workplaces with poor working conditions. The presentation did stand out at the plenary debate as it seemed to be out of context in relation to social strike. It also created some tensions as someone in the audience proclaimed the limitations of “pale, stale unionism” and how they mainly are interested in their own narrow interests, ignoring wider social issues. The official from Unite responded to the critique with some affection, stating his twenty-five year engagement in union activities, arguing that social movements often depend on resources supplied by the unions and they need not to contradict one another but can work together.

I think one tangible aspect leading up these frequent discussions about the limitations of symbolic action is the fact that almost all of the examples of a social strike are precisely one-off events. The two upcoming protests discussed at the assembly were no exceptions, both were one day strikes without any clear institutional base.

At the assembly TSS often presented the social strike as a way to “break with the present”, “an

23 Unite the Union is the largest industrial union in the UK organising 1.42 million workers (http://www.unitetheunion.org).
upheaval from everyday life” or “a moment of rupture”. The symbolic dimensions of these phrases are saturated with connotations to the singular, the event. What TSS aims to challenge is the “neoliberal order” that imposes itself on all aspects of life, and as one person from the network said: “we want our lives back”. However the main adversary, the neoliberal order, is very seldom defined in any concrete way and has strong multivocal dimensions to it, functioning as a converging symbol for unification rather than as an analytic concept. One notable dimension of this indeterminacy is that contrary to the ambition of the social strike to converge struggles, the division between different protests (migrant, labour, women) are reproduced in the very structure of the assembly, as workshops are divided along these lines.

As I have shown in this section, the symbolic dimensions of the social strike are manifest. This is also recognised within the movement and expresses itself as an ambition to “move beyond the symbolic” and the singular event. To transcend the symbolic the need to build organisational and institutional infrastructures are singled out by several actors as crucial elements in such an endeavour. In the discourse of the social strike an apparent ambiguity can be located at this juncture between the symbolic event and the materiality of institutions as the social strike often is invoked to embrace the event, as a possibility of a break or rupture. How are we to understand this ambivalence? In the concluding part of this article I will analyse the symbolic dimensions of the social strike from a theoretical point of view in order to better understand the emergence of the social strike.

**The strike and its symbolic dimensions**

As the previous sections shows, the social strike is not a phenomenon you can easily pin-down into a well-defined analytical category. Viewed from a dialogical perspective the multivocality of its discourse illuminates how different actors ascribe their meaning onto a shared symbol – the strike as a symbol of resistance. But the strike is not an empty symbol, quite the opposite. It bears the mark of the past; an inherited historical landscape forcefully imposes itself onto the present.

When the strike is used as a symbol of resistance it gets increasingly detached from its material foundations in the socio-economic structure of capitalism. In the discourse of the social strike the links to waged labour are explicitly used as a defining character yet how waged and unwaged labour relate to one another in the empirical manifestation is never defined. The distinction gets even more blurred when collective actions which share no affinity to the labour process under capitalism gets incorporated into the concept of strike action, like “rent strikes” or “strikes” carried out by unemployed and students as these only relate to the strike through analogy (Hyman 1989). In the discourse of the social strike everyone in society should be able to strike, independently of their social position. However, if waged labour no longer has a pivotal role in capitalist societies why is it important to attach the social strike discursively to the workplace strike? If every act of collective insubordination can be labelled as a strike then what is new with the social strike except labelling old phenomenon with a new name?

From a materialist point of view the strike is not analytically defined through its symbolic and discursive dimensions but bound to definite social relations in production. The social strike still invokes labour discursively for legitimising the label as a strike but when it moves closer to the empirical world it tends to lose its material anchorage. This becomes salient when comparing

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24 The ambiguity of the term neoliberalism is tangible within academic research as well, just a quick glance at the plethora of different uses will affirm this (for an overview, see Boas & Gans-Morse 2009 and Peck 2013).
different phenomenon put under the umbrella of social strike. When the term is used to describe workplace conflicts – like in the case of Deliveroo workers – the label as “social” is superfluous as it is hard to see any qualitative dimensions involved separating it from an economic strike. When the term is used on non-labour issues - as in the protests in Poland - the label as strike gets increasingly detached from its material basis and is mainly invoked for symbolic support and discursive legitimisation. The ambivalent role of labour cuts right through the discourse of the social strike, expressing itself as a contradiction between the theoretical and empirical level.

Even though this contradiction at some instances came to the surface during the assembly the tendency was to suppress the multiaccentuality of labour and to evade questions that would risk to destabilise the dominant narrative. On a theoretical level the social strike can absorb all kind of struggles within its framework whereas its empirical expressions seem to lack many of its determining characteristics. This gap imposes itself as an obstacle, but the lack of empirical manifestations of the social strike does not refute the relevance of the social strike, quite the opposite, it only reinforces the necessity of the social strike. The social strike attaches itself to the symbolic dimensions of the strike and the radical tradition of organised labour in order to use this historical legacy to provide a symbol for mobilisation. The efficacy of the strike as a symbol still relies on the viability of this legacy and in a time where organised labour is in a state of deep-seated retreat, the symbolic value of invoking the strike may turn out be fragile in the long run.

Perhaps the concept of social strike offers an imaginary solution (to borrow a concept of Fredric Jameson 2002).

The social strike aims to overcome a situation of defeat offering a formal solution to an unresolvable contradiction. It reflects the long-term eclipse of the labour movement and the disappearance of an emancipatory horizon in late capitalism (Fischer 2009). The social strike becomes a symbolic act trying to resolve an impasse, but instead of solving it, reproducing it on a magnified level. As the dramatic decline of strikes in the capitalist core simultaneously reflects the disappearance of the working class as a viable political subject, the social strike reflects a longer disillusionment with the prospects of social transformation lead by organised labour. The political subject of the strike is lost and in its place a void appears. The impossibility to fill this void gets manifested in the social strike as the strike now can be used by everyone in society independently of their relation to production. On a discursive level the social strike is still unable to fully detach itself from the material anchor to waged labour as this would risk to compromise its value as a symbol. As the symbolic dimensions of the strike gets increasingly detached from its material base the long-term value of such a symbol would depend on its ability to aid mobilisation and resonate throughout society. The great risk of course is that the symbol erodes when it no longer can deliver the concrete material effects of collective work stoppage that historically has given the strike its pivotal role in labour struggles.

IV. Conclusions and discussion

It is hard to define the social strike as a distinct form of collective action and my analysis situates the emergence of the concept social strike in the historical impasse of late capitalism. The first research question focused on how the social strike is defined in relation to the traditional workplace strike. From the analysis it is possible to conclude that the social strike uses the symbolic dimensions of the strike and its historical legacy of labour resistance but tends to detach the strike
from its material anchor in waged labour. Even if the social strike still attaches itself discursively to
the sphere of production on a theoretical level, its empirical manifestations lacks many of those
features it aims to actually bring about. As my analysis shows, many of the empirical examples
described as social strikes are located outside the sphere of production and do not involve the
withdrawal of labour. The label as strike is mainly invoked for symbolic support and discursive
legitimisation. It is therefore hard to actually locate the social strike unambiguously to the category
of labour conflict.

The second research question revolved around what the dialogical process looks like in which the
concept of the social strike emerges. In this process, the strike became a multivocal symbol as
different actors projected their specific content onto a increasingly multiaccentual symbol. The
ambiguous nature of the social strike created some obvious tensions in some of the discussions.
This came most clearly to the surface when people openly acknowledged they either did not
understand the concept of social strike or that the network lacked a shared definition. It was also
possible to identify a certain tendency to strive for uniaccentuality on a narrative level and to silence
any discussions that risked to destabilise the symbolic value of certain important protests. This
inherent instability in the discourse of the social strike is a reflection of its symbolic use of the
strike.

In order to answer the third research question - on what function the concept of the social strike
provides in the discourse of the movement network - it is necessary to locate the emergence of the
concept social strike in a longer historical process where the labour movement and the socialist left
slowly have eroded and where it is hard to find any viable alternative to the reign of capitalism and
free market ideology. In this historical moment of defeat, I think the social strike can be seen to
provide an imaginary solution to the disappearance of the working class as a political subject. The
social strike can be situated in the long-term eclipse of a unified labour movement and in the
continuous and endless debates regarding the viability of turning the working class into a cohesive
political subject. In the discourse of the social strike it is clear that the social strike aims to bridge
the fragmentation and restructuring of capitalism under the neoliberal era and as the social strike
redefines both the content and form of the strike, now every group in society can dress up their
collective actions as strikes.

I think there is an immanent risk built into this strategy and it seems to be guided by a hollow
optimism, as if the disappearance of strikes could be solved by changing the meaning of words. I
think there is little to gain through this operation and it seems to offer only a potential Pyrrhic
victory. From a Marxian point of view the decoupling from waged labour is highly questionable as
the pivotal role of waged labour under capitalism is a systemic feature and the importance of strikes
grows out of this centrality. To decouple the strike from waged labour implies that this systemic
feature of capitalism is no longer at the centre of the reproduction process of capitalism. This is a
very dubious assumption in my view as the global reach of capital is greater than ever before in
history - where almost all countries of the world are incorporated into the orbit of capital
accumulation. The emergence of the concept social strike should be seen as a symptom of the grave
times organised labour finds itself in and instead of offering a new opportunity for labour, the
concept of the social strike reflects a dispersed and impoverished left.

The underlying core of the social strike is the drive to converge struggles - an ambition that has

26 The debate has resurfaced several times during the 20th century. The postmodern turn starting in the 1980s was
guided by a profound pessimism about the prospect of working class agency (Anderson 1998).
informed the left for a long time - a tendency reinforced manifold in the fragmented social fabric of late capitalism and the decline of class politics. In a sense the idea of the social strike can be placed in a longer narrative of left wing discourse where new catchwords emerge and become a part of the political jargon for a while before they silently disappear and get replaced by new ones.27 As my analysis of the social strike shows the “newness” needs to be put into a historical perspective and perhaps what is new is not that it did not happen before but that it takes place in a new historical context (Gall 2014).28

All of us who sympathise with the historical struggle of the labour movement and who consider the agency of workers as the primary social force in society with the capacity to push for social change, need to confront the troubled times we are in but should not confuse analysis with wishful thinking. In my view, the foreseeable future does not look bright for either the broader socialist left or the labour movement and without the prospect of building a coalition between working people at the point of production the road will be steadily downhill from here. We need to recognise that even if it is not possible to go back into an idealised past of left unity - which never existed in the first place - it would be highly regrettable if the theoretical and practical insights provided by the historical legacy of labour - in both its moments of victory and defeat - were lost. To lose track of the basic coordinates of capitalism will turn any attempt for a revival of the labour movement and the socialist left into a futile endeavour.

As the social strike is about to emerge it is hard to know if and in what ways it will consolidate within social movement discourse and practice. Future research would need to look into greater detail on the empirical level of the social strike and to what extent it will be an effective symbol/practice. Of course, there are some limitations to my analysis. Research always boils down to the necessity to make certain choices on both a theoretical and methodological level. I have aimed to be transparent in these choices and recognise the possibility that another path may have yielded a divergent focus in the analysis and in the end, perhaps a different outcome.

27 Two examples of recent ones are terms like the “multitude” and “precariat”.
28 As Joe Burns writes, in his reflection about labour struggles in the U.S., “[t]he more you study labor history, the more you discover that tactics that appear to be new are in fact just old tactics wrapped up in new packaging” (Burns 2011: 126).
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