

# Göteborg Papers in Economic History

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No. 26. February 2020

ISSN: 1653-1000

Labour market conflicts in Scandinavia, c. 1900–1938:  
The scientific need to separate strikes and lockouts

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# Labour market conflicts in Scandinavia, c. 1900–1938: The scientific need to separate strikes and lockouts\*

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**Abstract:** Research on labour markets conflicts has come a long way. Today we know that conflicts vary over business cycles and with the design of labour market institutions; they tend to cluster around wars and return in longer waves; certain branches are affected by conflicts more than others, and conflicts in the last couple of decades have been feminised and tertiarised.

Yet we could do better. With few exceptions quantitative studies are about *conflicts*, that is, strikes and lockouts in amalgamation. Analytically separating strikes and lockouts has the potential of shedding new light on several debates of historical and theoretical importance. While the distinction between the two types of conflicts has general implications, in this paper I make specific references to the three Scandinavian countries, namely Denmark, Norway and Sweden.

Employers and employees struggle over influence and division of income. Occasionally the two parties use, or threaten to use, their respective tools: the lockout and the strike. The day the scientific community decides to treat employers and employees as a single entity, we should also do the same with lockouts and strikes. But not before.

**JEL:** J50 J51 J52

**Keywords:** Lockouts, strikes, labour market conflicts, cross-country comparisons, strike methodology, Scandinavia.

**ISSN:** 1653-1000 *online version*

**ISSN:** 1653-1019 *print version*

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\* Part of the project *Databas över skandinaviska strejker och lockouter, ca 1900–1938* [Database on Scandinavian strikes and lockouts, c.1900–1938], financially supported by Stiftelsen Anna Ahrenbergs Fond för vetenskapliga m.fl. ändamål. In related, forthcoming papers I discuss material and methods, and present empirical findings. I am grateful to Tobias Karlsson for his critical comments.

## 1. Setting the scene

Quantitatively oriented research on labour market conflicts has a long history and spans several academic disciplines: economics, history, economic history, work science and sociology (Rist 1907; Hansen 1921; Ashenfelter & Jonson 1969; Korpi & Shalev 1979; Franzosi 1989, 1995; Silver 1995; van der Velden 2000; Vandaele 2016). It has given us insights on the importance of labour market institutions for conflict levels, and the movement of conflicts over the business cycle. We know outbreaks of conflicts are international phenomena that cluster around war and appear to return in longer waves, that certain occupations and branches are affected by conflict more often than others, and that conflicts in the last couple of decades have been feminised and tertiarised. In addition, qualitative research has linked variations in conflict patterns with the emergence of different welfare regimes (Swenson 2002; 2009).

I follow the common procedure to define labour market conflicts (or disputes) as strikes and lockouts.<sup>1</sup> And crucially, quantitative research is almost invariably based on data that amalgamates strikes and lockouts (van der Velden 2007; Hamark 2014). In other words, research is neither about strikes nor lockouts – it's about conflicts.<sup>2</sup>

I believe research would improve if it were about strikes and lockouts. Analytically separating the two types of conflicts has the potential of elucidating several debates of historical and theoretical importance.

The present paper belongs to a project called *Database on Scandinavian strikes and lockouts, c.1900–1938*, financially supported by Stiftelsen Anna Ahrenbergs Fond för vetenskapliga m.fl. ändamål. As indicated by the project title my focus is empirical. I will present aggregated year-by-year data on strikes and lockouts respectively and for each country –

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes conflicts (or disputes) are used as shorthand also for blockades, boycotts, go-slows etc. The International Labour Organization (1993, p. 2) uses the following definitions (emphases in original): 'A *strike* is 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.'

'A *lockout* is a total or partial temporary closure of one or more places of employment, or the hindering of the normal work activities of employees, by one or more employers with a view to enforcing or resisting demands or expressing grievances, or supporting other employers in their demands or grievances.'

<sup>2</sup> Most researchers nonetheless designate their studies as 'strike studies', a habit which does not improve scientific clarity.

Denmark, Norway and Sweden. Strike and lockout activity is captured by three different measurements: frequency, involvement and volume.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, a database on individual lockouts in each country will be created. There are some variations across countries and over time, but generally the observations include variables such as number of employees involved, start and end date, location, whether the parties belong to a union/association or not, and the (immediate) reason for the dispute. The database can be used to study lockout activity over the business cycle (yearly data are not suitable for that), and to investigate lockout activity according to industrial branch or even sub-branch.<sup>4</sup>

The Scandinavian project aligns with a much bigger one: the project of building a global database on labour market conflicts since 1500, at the prestigious International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam (van der Velden 2017).

The remainder of this paper is arranged as follows: After discussing the fact that research has been and still is focused on conflicts, I introduce the theoretical case for separating conflicts. A brief note on earlier research is followed by the concrete, historical case for separating conflicts.

## **2. Why conflicts?**

The disinterest in strike and lockout research proper is based partly on empirical considerations, partly on what may be called political and philosophical considerations.

The most obvious reason for the amalgamation is that researchers mainly rely on statistics from the UN agency International Labour Organization (ILO), in charge of collecting national statistics on labour market conflicts. The ILO does not distinguish between strikes and lockouts, which reflects member states lack of ability or willingness to report other than aggregated conflict statistics (van der Velden 2006, p. 342).

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<sup>3</sup> Frequency = number of conflicts; involvement = number of workers involved in conflicts; volume = number of days not worked during conflicts.

These three are the most common measurements of conflict activity. Frequency is, however, less suitable for cross-country comparisons (Edwards 1983, pp. 210–211; Wallace & O’Sullivan 2006, p. 275; Lyddon 2007, pp. 28–29).

<sup>4</sup> Preferably the database on individual conflicts would include also strikes. That would however require a much larger budget, since the frequency of strikes is substantially higher than the frequency of lockouts.

Also, in practice it can sometimes be hard to unambiguously classify a conflict as either a strike or a lockout. For instance, imagine that an employer decides to get rid of unionised employees (which arguably can be seen as hindering normal work activities<sup>5</sup>), and a group of employees react by putting down their tools. In such cases employers are likely to report a lockout, employees a strike.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, as pointed out by Florence Peterson (1938, p. 3), ‘a strike might develop into a lock-out or vice versa’. Some statistical bureaus indeed have seen practical problems, illustrated, for instance, by the fact that the United Kingdom abandoned distinguishing lockouts from strikes in 1895, as did the USA in 1921 (Lyddon 2007, p. 25).<sup>7</sup> In the Scandinavian countries on the other hand, strikes and lockouts have always been separated in the official statistics (with exceptions for a few shorter time periods). Even so there are practical problems also in Scandinavia. They will be dealt with in a forthcoming paper.

Complicated, yes. Social science is riven by similar complications. For instance, unemployment is often decomposed into structural, cyclical and frictional unemployment. Analytically useful, still it is challenging to establish even approximately how many people belong to a particular group. Yet few scholars demand the abolishment of decomposing.

I agree with Sjaak van der Velden (2007, p. 15) who admits ‘practical difficulties in distinguishing some lockouts and strikes’, but nevertheless concludes that ‘rescuing the lockout from aggregate figures of industrial disputes is still an important scientific duty’.

The third reason for the lack of strike and lockout studies proper is mainly non-empirical. It can be traced back to a piece by the late nineteenth century scholar Fred Hall (1898).<sup>8</sup> Hall’s text has both etymological and historiographical value. He showed, for instance, that the word ‘lockout’ originally was used exclusively to denote what we today would call sympathy lockout (Hall 1898, pp. 17–18).<sup>9</sup> Also, he demonstrated that the

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<sup>5</sup> See note 1 for the ILO-definition of a lockout.

<sup>6</sup> Cases like this crop up in the Swedish archive for work stoppages (National Archives). Also from the official publications, it is clear that employers and employees sometimes judge differently (though no background information is given in the official publications; see Kommerskollegium; Socialstyrelsen.)

<sup>7</sup> van der Velden (2006, p. 342) suggests a complementary explanation, besides practical considerations: ‘The goal of government statisticians is not to analyse class conflicts a such, but to look at the economic results of these conflicts on the one hand and measure the failure of social dialogue on the other. For both purposes, “total days not worked per 1,000 employees” will suffice.’ While he may well be correct regarding the goal of official statistics, I find ‘days not work’ unsuitable to capture the economic results of conflicts (Hamark 2014, p. 40; see also Knowles 1966, p. 60 and Perrone 1983, pp. 236–237).

<sup>8</sup> This paragraph follows van der Velden (2007, pp. 14–15).

<sup>9</sup> Hall (1898, p. 16) explained: ‘A sympathetic lockout occurs when an employer discharges men against whom he has no grievances, in order thus to enforce the settlement of some other dispute.’

sympathy lockout predates the sympathy strike (Hall 1898, p. 16), a phenomenon which will be addressed in a later paper dealing with Scandinavian conflicts concretely. Crucial for the present context, Hall claimed that strikes and lockouts *essentially were the same thing*. The only difference was which side took the initiative. Hall thought the distinction was not merely pointless but also harmful – to labour.

Most conflicts are strikes. And if this fact would show up in official statistics, workers would be blamed for industrial disorder.<sup>10</sup>

Later on, in 1926, the ILO followed in Hall's footsteps, stating that the discrimination between strikes and lockouts is 'based on the notion of responsibility, which is an inadequate basis for statistical definitions' (International Labour Office 1926, pp. 13–14). Since then a score of scholars have repeated the basic argument regarding the uselessness or even the harmfulness of separating strikes and lockouts, albeit with varied nuances.

Peterson argued that the distinction between a strike and a lockout rests on 'the notion of responsibility or moral obligation, [...] concepts which are impossible to define for statistical purposes' (Peterson 1938, p. 3). K.G.J.C. Knowles noted that strikes may be provoked by employers and lockouts by workers, and concluded (by quoting the ILO declaration from 1926) that 'the question from which side the declaration is finally made is rather immaterial' (Knowles 1952, p. 299). He added, the distinction between strikes and lockouts provides 'no indication of where the "war guilt" lies' (Knowles 1952, p. 300). Paul Edwards reminded us that we cannot use conflict statistics to judge which side is to blame, concluding the distinction was of 'little analytical significance' (Edwards 1981, p. 288). A more recent example of an IR-scholar denying the value of making a distinction between the two types of conflicts is Dave Lyddon (2007, p.25), leaning against Hall and the ILO of 1926.<sup>11</sup>

In summary: even if strikes and lockouts were always unambiguously distinguishable and separate statistics available, we should study amalgamated conflicts nonetheless.

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<sup>10</sup> There was a twist to Hall's reasoning: While it was pointless to separate 'simple' disputes (disputes taking place at a single workplace) into strikes and lockouts, the same was not true for a sympathetic disputes, taking place at a multitude of workplaces. In the latter case, it was highly useful to make the distinction (Hall 1898, pp. 26–28). The logic that a single cat and a single dog can be the same thing but many cats and many dogs cannot, has not gained hold.

<sup>11</sup> The fact that Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly did not bother to disentangle lockouts from strikes in their classic *Strikes in France* (1974) – despite the fact that their main statistical source allowed it, is probably (they themselves did not comment on it) based on the Hall/ILO notion.

Otherwise we step into a swamp of unscientific moralising. Which also, Hall claimed, is a detour likely to hurt labour.

The distinction between strikes and lockouts, Knowles asserted, provides no indication of where the 'war guilt' lies. As we have seen, others made similar remarks. I agree. Strike and lockout data do not tell us *who's to blame*, neither in the nineteenth century nor today.

Knowles was also correct when pointing out that a lockout may be provoked by workers, a point nicely illustrating that statistics have to be put in context. In order to understand the social relations at hand, we have to study actual concrete conflicts, as well as their messy backgrounds. Yet I find Knowles' and others' argument odd from a scientific standpoint.

Iraq invaded Iran in 1980. Is this fact irrelevant? Or worse, is it harmful – since someone may interpret the statement as if Iraq was the only part to be blamed for the terrible war fought between 1980 and 1988? An adequate account of the Iran–Iraq conflict may include the UK/US overthrow of Prime Minister Mosaddegh in 1953 and the subsequent installation of the Shah, the Iran revolution of 1979, the oil reserves of the Middle East, the sectarian split in Iraq, and so on. Nothing in the statement 'Iraq invaded Iran' prohibits us from digging deeper into the root causes of the war.

As we have seen Peterson argued against the separation because it would have misguided (moralising) implications. Yet, then she immediately retreated from her principled position, claiming that:

Were strikes and lock outs of approximately like frequency, the theoretical distinction between them might necessitate an attempt to distinguish them in tabulation despite all the difficulties involved. But because of the relatively strong position which the employer usually has in the bargaining relationship, he very seldom needs to resort to a lock-out. (Peterson 1938, p. 4)

If anything, this is a strong argument in favour of making the distinction between strikes and lockouts. The quote tell us that (1) there is a theoretical difference, but (2) since lockouts are so few, the theoretical difference does not matter. While the logic of (2) is not clear to me, indeed lockouts are few in relation to strikes for exactly the reason Peterson mentioned: the strong position of employers in bargaining relationships. Now, replace 'frequency' with 'involvement' or 'volume' and we will immediately find that lockouts are far from marginal. For instance, in Denmark 1920–1929, 65 per cent of all workers

involved in conflicts were locked out.<sup>12</sup> Since there is no a priori reason to favour frequency over involvement or volume, Peterson's pragmatism is uncalled for.

I'm not sure which is the least constructive: to interpret the distinction between strikes and lockouts as *who's to blame*, or to avoid making the distinction, because others might interpret it in such terms.

### 3. The case for strikes and lockouts

Even though the ILO is still unable to present anything but amalgamated conflicts, the organisation has changed its mind since the 1920s – it has for a long time emphasised the importance of distinguishing between strikes and lockouts. And for good reasons.

The influence of the business cycle on strikes has been discussed for over a century (Rist 1907; Hansen 1921; Rees 1952; Ashenfelter and Jonson 1969; Franzosi 1995). With tight labour markets and high capacity utilisation, employees' chances of winning a strike is larger than with slack markets and low utilisation. Therefore, strikes are usually more frequent during economic expansions.<sup>13</sup> 'Strike' studies include also lockouts (a peculiar feature addressed in the next section). This fact does not, however, invalid the conclusion regarding the cyclical behavior of strikes. The literature uses *frequency* of conflicts as independent variable.<sup>14</sup> And since the number of lockouts generally is small in relation to strikes, from a practical viewpoint it does not matter if we study conflicts or strikes proper.

Yet the amalgamation of strikes and lockouts limits the business cycle literature. In periods of economic contraction, employers have a greater chance to fight off strikes and to launch successful lockouts. The lockouts preceding the 1909 Swedish general strike are illuminating in this respect (Schiller 1967; Hamark & Thörnqvist 2013). Lockout activity is generally higher in recessions, a trait that obviously cannot be established or analysed if lockouts are mixed with strikes.

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<sup>12</sup> My unpublished database.

<sup>13</sup> For a long time results were inconclusive. But when researchers began to use monthly instead of annual conflict data – much more suitable to track business cycle movements – it could be shown that the frequency of conflicts is pro-cyclical (Rees 1952, p. 372).

<sup>14</sup> The business cycle is primarily a phenomenon studied by economists. And as pointed out by Franzosi (1989, p. 358): 'Economists have mainly studied the number of strikes' (whereas 'sociologists [have studied] the number of strikers, and political scientists the volume of strikes').

Strikes have gendered dimensions (Thörnqvist & Fransson 2015). It seems plausible that lockouts do as well. Before the Second World War men worked in industries with much higher union density than women. This points in the direction that men were targeted by lockouts more often than women (also when taking into account the fact that the majority of wage earners were men). On the other hand, men were seen as family bread-winners. Given this ideological notion, it was probably conceived as a less damaging act – and hence easier – to lock out women. It indicates that lockouts were disproportionately directed towards female-dominated industries. Theoretically, then, it is not clear what the relationship between lockouts and gender looks like; it is a matter of empirical investigation.

There are important asymmetries between strikes and lockouts (see e.g. Lundh 2010, p. 128). Generally, a strike aims to hurt the employer financially. Ideally only a few people in key positions are called to strike, as a cost-efficient way of causing losses to the firm. The lockout on the other hand is most effective large-scale. By locking out union members *en masse*, ideally employers achieve a quick bloodletting of union strike funds, thereby forcing a favourable deal at the bargaining table. The largest (in relative terms) European labour market conflict in the nineteenth century followed this line: In 1899 the Danish Employers' Association answered the unions' decentralised strike strategy (*omgangskræen*) with massive lockouts – leading to the famous *September Agreement* (Schiller 1967, pp. 11–12).

Another asymmetry stems from the fact that in the sphere of production, managerial prerogative prevails (with varying degrees of retrenchment). Employees wishing to change current work conditions have little formal saying. Going on strike is one option to put pressure on the employer. If the employer wants to change current conditions, however, s/he could lean against managerial prerogatives. There is seldom need to resort to industrial action (Peterson 1938, p. 4).

In the Scandinavian countries the right to take sympathy or secondary actions is extensive (Fahlbeck 2006). The right applies to both employers and employees. As past and current debates on sympathy action reveal: while most academics are coolish, *practical* men and women find it highly useful to distinguish between strikes and lockouts.

Since the 1990s, Swedish employers' associations have been arguing that secondary action taken by unions regularly violate the principle of proportionality (Almega 2016; Svenskt Näringsliv 2016, see also Börjesson & Gustafsson 2016). To stop misuse the labour law should be sharpened. The recent decades of resistance against secondary action is not based on moral principles but on the calculation that nowadays the unions benefit more. Times are changing. At the beginning of the last century the chairman of the Swedish Employers' Association (SAF), Hjalmar von Sydow, explained that without the legal right to take secondary action, the employer associations might as well cease to exist (Casparsson 1951, p. 230). Then it was the employers who, by means of massive sympathy actions, forced favorable settlements regarding, above all, managerial prerogatives.

Again: practical men and women get the difference between a strike and a lockout.

The development in Norway illustrates the same point. In the beginning of the twentieth century the Norwegian Trade Union Confederation took several initiatives regarding labour disputes legislation. But as the labour movement grew stronger, it came to oppose almost all legislation – until 1935 when the Labour Party seized parliamentary power (Galenson 1949, pp. 97–98).

Finally, the most principled argument for distinguishing between the two types of conflicts is that strikes and lockouts are tools in the hands of people with partially opposing interests. Employers and employees struggle over influence and division of income. Occasionally the two parties use, or threaten to use, their respective tools: the lockout and the strike. The day the scientific community decides to treat employers and employees as a single entity, we should also do the same with lockouts and strikes. But not before.

#### **4. A brief note on earlier research**

Even delimiting the study object to pre-Second World War time, quantitative research on labour market conflicts is massive. It would take too much space and effort to give it justice, and besides, others have already done that job excellently (Franzosi 1989). Instead I have chosen to discuss – in the next section – research which I believe could be substantially improved. Here I will confine myself to a few remarks on research that has distinguished between strikes and lockouts.

To my best knowledge, lockouts proper have been studied quantitatively in only two countries for the period up to the Second World War: the Netherlands (van der Velden 2000) and Sweden (Hamark 2018), though Flemming Mikkelsen (1992) also presents lockout data for the three Scandinavian countries. In the collection of databases attached to the Global Hub Labour Conflicts-project in Amsterdam, I have found one that separates strikes and lockout, for Germany, 1900–1932 (van der Velden 2018). At present, there exists no quantitative cross-country study of lockouts. And actually, no quantitative cross-country study of strikes either – a surprising fact which will be discussed at the closing of the next section.

### **5. The way forward when looking backwards: disaggregated statistics**

Analytically separating strikes and lockouts has the potential to solve a number of historical and theoretical problems, where today's research faces difficulties to advance. The following examples are mostly connected to Scandinavia but implications are broader in scope. I am focusing on lockouts, the type of conflict often made invisible by the amalgamation.

Was the relative generosity and universalism of the Scandinavian welfare model an effect of pressure from the labour movement, against the will of employers? (Korpi 1983; Esping-Andersen 1990; Hicks 1999) In the literature the strength of labour is usually operationalised by (i) the electoral support for the left and (ii) union density.

In 1938 the Swedish *Saltsjöbaden agreement* was signed. Even though the literal content of the agreement was of limited substance, it was the first main accord between the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) and the SAF, and it has been heralded as paving the way for decades of labour market peace, of a consensus culture and of *the Swedish model*.

Unsurprisingly, researchers have put a lot of effort into investigating the background of the agreement. Considered from a power-relational perspective, was it negotiated based on the strength of workers or of employers?

Sociologist Walter Korpi (1983; 2006; Korpi & Shalev 1979) represents the internationally dominant view. The strength of the labour movement—manifested in uniquely fast-growing union organisation in the 1920s and Social Democratic governments

in the 1930s—pushed conflict levels down. According to Korpi the strike was no longer needed while employers did not dare to lockout.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, no other country could match Sweden's unionisation growth in the 1920s (Kjellberg 1983, p. 220). A conventional assumption is that the higher the union density, the stronger the side of labour (in some analyses unionisation *is* labour strength, see e.g. Rothstein 1992). Albeit intuitive, the assumption has been challenged by political scientist Peter Swenson (2002; 2009). In the 1920s, when Swedish employers recurrently used the lockout—also targeting non-organised labour—employees 'ran for cover' in the unions. Since statutes obliged unions to pay locked out members, union membership was equivalent of buying a lockout insurance. In Swenson's interpretation, therefore, the increasing union density was a token of *employer* strength. But, as Swenson (2002, p. 340) himself acknowledges, only comparative research could 'substantiate or refute this argument'.

Such comparative research should preferably be conducted along two dimensions, cross-industry and cross-country. The setting allows us to specify two hypotheses which could be tested with quantitative statistics on lockouts: (1) Union density increase most in industries with high lockout activity, and (2) Union density increase most in countries with high lockout activity.<sup>16</sup>

Swenson's *Capitalists against Markets* (2002) is a qualitative comparison between US and Swedish industrial relations. Swedish and American employers had a choice when facing growing labour organisation and militancy in the form of strikes: to replace strikers with other people, or to enlarge conflicts by means of massive lockouts. And employers choose very differently, Swenson (2002, p. 73) tells us: 'Lockouts were to Swedish developments what strikebreaking and blacklisting was to American ones.'

But without quantitative data on lockouts – and in this particular case also strikebreaking – conclusions could be tentative at best. In the Swedish-US case I believe Swenson is correct; for instance, a multitude of qualitative studies show the extensive use of strikebreakers, spies and armed guards or even paramilitary groups in the US labour market (see e.g. Tuttle 1969; Gitelman 1973; Norwood 2002; Smith 2003). Yet it would be comforting even in the Swedish-US case to have also quantitative, comparative data.

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<sup>15</sup> For an empirical critique of Korpi, see Hamark (2018).

<sup>16</sup> Whether the hypotheses should be expressed in levels or rates of change, assumptions regarding lag effects, and so on, will be discussed in a later paper.

I have merged the yet unpublished database on Scandinavian strikes and lockouts, 1900–1938, with the corresponding series for the Netherlands (van der Velden 2016). Two results are worth mentioning. First, Norway and Sweden had relatively high involvement in conflicts, Denmark and the Netherlands relatively low.<sup>17</sup> This is in line with earlier research (cf. Shorter & Tilly 1974; Korpi & Shalev 1979). Second, Denmark had the highest rate of lockouts of all four countries (and by inference very low strike activity), the Netherlands by far the lowest. The ratio of lockouts in Denmark to the Netherlands was substantial, 6:1.

Apparently employer strategy differed widely between the Netherlands and Denmark. The choice of strategy is however made invisible if we only study amalgamated conflicts.

Even if Dutch employers usually refrained from using the lockout, there were exceptions – and one in particular. Out of all lockout activity in the Netherlands during 160 years, 1840–2000, four years in the beginning of the 1920s accounted for 40 per cent (van der Velden 2006, pp. 252–253). Also, the Dutch lockouts were unequally distributed across industries, and massively so. From the 1890s until the Second World War the textile industry and in particular the textile region Twente was dominating to such an extent that the procedure of locking out was called the *Twente system* (van der Velden 2006, p. 346). Again, without statistics that disaggregates conflicts we have small possibility to discern events like these.

How could we explain the different choices made by employers in the USA and Sweden, or by employers in Denmark and the Netherlands? Swenson's (2002) US-Swedish comparison explicitly or implicitly generated a handful of valuable hypotheses, such as:

Lockout activity was higher where...

- the supply of labour was relatively scarce
- the state tended to be employer non-accommodating
- employer associations were strong in relation to individual companies
- employers faced unions with centralised strike funds
- employers faced reformist unions

Needless to say, none of the above can be tested without lockout data.

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<sup>17</sup> Involvement is standardized by national employment figures using Bairoch (1969).

Equally interesting is the *impact* of employer choice. We have already discussed the argument that lockouts forced union density upwards (i.e. made unions ‘strong’). Another argument put forward by Swenson (2002) is that lockouts fostered centralisation of the entire industrial relations system. If every small strike potentially can be met by a massive lockout, union leadership must discipline its members: without discipline union funds would be emptied quickly. This puts pressure to centralise the right to call a strike (for instance the abolishment of union ballots), as well as to increase the national board’s authority over local branches. In its turn, union centralisation gave impetus to further centralisation of collective bargaining and conflict resolving institutions.

The argument remains to be weighed against comparative lockout statistics. Not only historical accuracy is at stake; it touches upon a theoretical issue: the optimal level at which the interests of employers and employees should be negotiated. As argued by Frans Traxler (1995), employers are superior in individual exchange relations. Consequently employees seek to avoid individual exchange relations by means of unionisation. In more general terms: employers benefit from bargaining at a level as decentralised as possible, whereas employees prefer centralised bargaining. Yet, paradoxically, during our period of interest employers in some countries and industries choose centralised bargaining (Crouch 1993). A part of the solution to this contradiction might be – it remains to be tested in a comparative setting – employers’ selecting or rejecting the lockout.

Any lockout that extends beyond the individual workplace or company requires coordination. This raises the issue of collective action in industrial relations (Olson 1965; Offe and Wiesenthal 1980; Traxler 1995; Kelly 2012). Imagine an industry-wide lockout targeting high wages. If the lockout is successful, all employers in the industry benefit. At the same time, individual companies have strong incentives not to cooperate but rather to take a free ride, by continuing to produce and let the other companies carry the burden. Free riders, ‘lockout breakers’ in this case, jeopardise the collective effort of employers. Under what circumstances were employers and their associations able to overcome the problem of free riding?

In Sweden lockouts were generally indiscriminate: all workers within the affected branch were targeted, including ‘innocent’, non-unionised workers. The reason spells solidarity. It was considered unfair that firms with non-unionised work forces should be allowed to

continue production; all employers should carry the burden of the lockout (Swenson 2002, pp. 75–76). Interestingly, in Denmark lockouts mainly seem to have targeted unionised workers only (see e.g. Jensen & Olsen 1901, p. 120; Statistiske Meddelelser 1926, pp. 20–21). Is Denmark an example of a country where free riding existed but did not constitute a problem? As we saw above Danish employers had the greatest experience in using lockouts, and it seems unlikely that they executed them in an inferior way compared to their Swedish colleagues.

Finally. Classical, well-cited cross-country strike studies – such as Clark Kerr and Abraham Siegel (1954), Arthur Ross and Paul Hartman (1960), Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly (1974), and Walter Korpi and Michael Shalev (1979) – are in fact not strike studies, although presented so by both the authors themselves and by others. Roberto Franzosi's (1989) otherwise receptive review of a century of quantitative strike research typically does not address the fact that the 'strike' research really is about amalgamated conflicts.

And yet these studies shape our collective understanding of history. For instance, historian Klas Åmark (1989: 62) concludes that Sweden was the 'land of strikes' (*strejkländet framför andra*) from the 1890s to the mid-1930s (see also Korpi 2006, p. 188; Moene & Wallerstein 2006, p. 150; Johansson 2011). The conclusion might be correct, although there are reasons to believe it is not. But anyway, such a conclusion can be validly drawn from the empirical studies on 'strikes' only if lockout activity is negligible – which it was not. A future cross-country study that distinguishes between employers and employees may show that Sweden was not the 'land of strikes'; during the period Åmark refers to, lockouts and mixed conflicts<sup>18</sup> accounted for nearly half of total conflict volume.<sup>19</sup>

## 6. Summary

Quantitative studies on labour market conflicts are in most cases precisely that: studies on conflicts, that is, strikes and lockouts in amalgamation. The primary explanation is that researchers mainly rely on statistics from the ILO, which does not distinguish between strikes and lockouts. Also, in practice, it can sometimes be hard to unambiguously classify a conflict as either a strike or a lockout. The most intriguing explanation is that for well over

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<sup>18</sup> Refer to conflicts involving both a strike and a lockout or to situations where the parties perceive the character differently.

<sup>19</sup> My unpublished database.

a century, a score of distinguished scholars have argued we should not bother to discriminate between strikes and lockouts. If we do, we risk ending up in a moralising who's to blame-discussion which is meaningless at best, harmful at worst.

Yet I think we should try. The self-evident reason is that strikes are used by employees and lockouts by employers. As long as we treat employees and employers as different social categories, we should do the same with their respective tools.

Importantly, defining a particular conflict as a strike (lockout) does not tell us that employees (employers) are the 'accountable' side. For sure, figures on strikes and lockouts may be interpreted in such terms. But to my judgement the fear of statistics being misused, is a poor argument against the separation of conflicts. After all, statistics are always misused.

To study only strikes and lockouts lumped together is to limit research. Released from the limitation we could look at the old debate on strike propensity across countries with new eyes. The business cycle literature would advance if we dropped the amalgamation of strikes and lockouts, the same goes for a gender analysis of conflicts.

Lockouts ought to be studied in their own right. In comparison to strikes they are fewer and larger, features reflecting labour market relations. First, employers seldom need to resort to industrial action since they could lean against managerial prerogatives to change current conditions. Second, only large-scale lockouts can reach the goal of draining union funds.

Equipped with statistics on strikes and lockouts, researchers could engage in, and shed new light on, Scandinavian labour market history. The dominant position within academia is that the Saltsjöbaden agreement was negotiated based on the strength of workers. It seems plausible, since Swedish union participation rate had been climbing for two decades and was the highest in the world (on par with Denmark). Yet it has been argued that unionisation was in fact an effect of employer strength. In the 1920s, when Swedish employers recurrently used the lockout—also targeting non-organised labour—employees ran for cover in the unions. Union membership was equivalent of buying a lockout insurance, an insurance against the mighty employers.

The debate, however, can only be settled by comparative research, cross-country and cross-industry, on lockouts.

Qualitative studies suggest that employers had a choice when combatting unions and strikes, to use strikebreakers or to use lockouts. The choice made had an impact on the entire industrial relations system. Quantitative data offer opportunities to test a range of hypotheses on lockouts, such as 'lockout activity was higher when labour supply was scarce'. This means we are in a better position to understand the choices made by employers, in turn facilitating the understanding of the emergence of different labour market regimes.

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