

Lenin and Trotsky on the Quantitative Aspects of Strikes and Revolution

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Introduction

In most Western countries, the systematic collecting and publishing of strike data mainly by the police began sometime between 1870 and 1900 (Franzosi, 1982:2) and in Russia from 1895 (Lenin, [1913] 2004). In this period, there were widespread strikes, especially in large factories in Russia. Like his predecessors, Engels and Marx, Lenin saw in these strikes a “school of war” that eventually allows workers to see the true character of the bourgeois order. Lenin and Trotsky took a keen interest not only of the qualitative aspects of strike dynamics but also the quantitative aspects to examine the changing levels of consciousness, the organisational capacity of the working class and the overall temporal dynamics of the class struggle. They examined the close connection between the strike weapon and economic fluctuations and the detailed movement from the economic to the political strike in order to gauge the path to revolution. The main purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the neglected quantitative method used by Lenin in the literature and Trotsky’s integration of the quantitative aspects in explaining the qualitative dimensions of strikes and protest.

This article argues that strike data is crucial in understanding the ebb and flow of the labour movement over long periods, as short-term analysis tends to give way to intellectual fashions, undermining the role of workers as emancipatory subjects. Ross and Hartman’s (1960) “withering away” of strikes thesis soon withered considering the major strikes in the late 60’s

and early 70's and similarly, Castell's non-class identity movements have been questioned in light of the resurgence of global strikes at the beginning of the 21st century (Silver, 2003).

Lenin

In 1910, Lenin published the article, "Strike Statistics in Russia" where he set out his preliminary elaboration of official statistical data of which he intended but was unable to write a book of the history of the 1905 Russian Revolution. The government strike statistics, despite their shortcomings, contained "a wealth of valuable material collected in these publications that a complete study and thorough analysis of it will require a great deal of time" (Lenin, [1910] 2004). According to Lenin, his article was "a first approach to the Subject" in which he analyses the dynamics of the 1905-7 strike waves in Russia in comparison with the USA, Germany and France and concluded that the number of *strikers* in Russia "are unparalleled anywhere else in the world" (ibid). The significance of the data on the number of strikers was that "Russian workers were the first in the world to develop the strike struggle on a mass scale" (Lenin, [1912] 2004) in a country that was just passing through a bourgeois revolution and had a smaller amount of workers and industrial enterprises than advanced industrial countries. His main argument was that European countries had not yet experienced a great national crisis as that which occurred in Russia.

By reviewing strike data Lenin observed that there was several repeated strikes and the ratio of workers on strike and the number of workers employed, was much higher than in industrialised countries. Despite the decline in the number of strikes and the number of strikers in 1906, he observed that in some industries and districts the number of strikers increased. Of significance was the fact that in least industrially developed provinces there was a marked increase of the number of workers on strike, one year after the 1905 revolution. For Lenin, this was important in understanding historical processes as the more advanced workers struggle tend to act as a trigger for other workers and that this appeared to alternate when he examined the provincial dynamics of 1905-1907 (Lenin, [1910] 2004).

Going into more detail and breaking down the number of strikers per industrial district in 1905, Lenin was able to identify the advanced sections (vanguard) of the working class. St. Petersburg and Warsaw accounted for one third of all factory workers but accounted for two-thirds of the number

of strikes. While there was a general decline in strikers in 1906 as compared to 1907 in Warsaw, Moscow, Kiev and Volga areas, there was an increase in the number of strikers in St. Petersburg and Kharkov. The general decline in the number of *strikers* was an indication of a change in *political consciousness and levels of preparedness* to strike. However, this exhaustion of workers over one year (1906) was merely a period of recuperation before the upsurge in the number of strikers in 1907. This alternation in the number of strikers for Lenin was especially important as reformists regarded 1906 as a general retreat of the working class and were thus not able to see a longer historical trajectory of future upsurges.

This early work of Lenin also included an examination of cities and the different levels of strike participation between town and country, which assisted him in concluding that the vanguard of the working class is in the major cities. Quite contrary to the accusations of determinism of Lenin, his level of openness displayed in examining the strike data demonstrates his acute appreciation of social dynamics and the historical movement of the working class.

Lenin ([1912] 2004) further developed his understanding of this historical movement by paying close connection to the economic and political demands of strikers. The Ministry of Commerce in Russia, developed economic and political strike data, necessitated by reality of distinctive forms of the strike movement in the course of the 1905 revolution. In his, “Economic and Political Strikes” he set out the task of further, analysing the dynamic of the 1905-7 strikes. Lenin argues that while economic strikers (604,000) predominated over the political strikers in the first quarter (206,000) of 1905, by the last quarter it was the reverse as the number of economic strikers contracted (430,000) with the number of political strikers (847,000) almost double that of the economic strikers. This meant that at the beginning of the struggle workers focused on the economic and by the height of the struggle, it was the converse.

Unless these forms of strike are closely interlinked, a really wide mass movement – moreover, a movement of national significance-is impossible. V.I. Lenin (1912)

For Lenin, the economic basis establishes the broadest connection upon which the political strikes rest, each being a source of strength and alternating over time. In the early formation of the mass movement, it rests on the economic, raising consciousness before moving to a higher political

plane. With the political strike, a wide movement emerges, achieves great aims, and the working class appears as the vanguard leader. This farsightedness of Lenin, is corroborated by recent events in the 21st century. The Bolivian Revolution of 2003 (Djampour, 2009; Luxemburg, 2005) and the Arab Spring of 2010 (Zemni, Smet, and Bogaert, 2013) all combined the economic and political strike and other forms of protest to ensure a really wide mass movement.

Further, in an article later that same year, Lenin not only analysis the weakness of official strike statistics but develops a full quantitative analysis of the role of the metalworker's strike in the strike movement of 1912 in comparison with other countries and types of industries. He starts by looking at the aggregate number of economic strikers, which were 96,750 in 1911 and 211,595 in 1912. The estimates of political strikes as affecting 850,000 workers in 1912, 8,000 in 1911 and 4,000 in 1910. The political strikes were overtaking economic strikes signalling once more a rise in consciousness and Lenin sets his investigation to discover the timing of these strikes, the leading industries and the outcomes of strikes.

Lenin begins with a breakdown of the aggregate number of strikers, which was 211,595 as follows: metalworkers, 78,195; textile workers, 89,540; workers of all other branches of industry was 43,860. After weighting the number of workers per industry he argues that despite the far fewer number of metalworkers as compared to textile workers, the number of metalworker strikers indicate that their strike action was more *rigorous*. The *persistence* measure (days lost) indicates the extent to which workers were prepared to make sacrifices and challenge the pre-eminence of capitalism itself. Furthermore, the data shows that in terms of days lost in strike action the metalworkers conducted the most persistent struggle, followed by textiles and on average days lost for all workers in 1912 was double that of 1911. The data from 1895 on days lost to 1912 further shows that the persistent aspect of the strike struggle was increasing over time. Lenin also employed a more detailed, open assessment, and was interested in the shifts of strength and dynamics within regions and the various industries where he notes that textile workers overtook the metalworkers in strength by the last half of 1912.

Lenin ([1913] 2004) however does not conclude that for a strike to be successful it must be the most persistent strike, which rests upon the specific circumstances of the industry. Although the most successful strikes in the metal industry were those of long duration, those strikes that were most unsuccessful were those of longer duration in the textile industry. The

outcome depends on the strength of the “contestants” when more or less equal can lengthen the duration of the strikes.¹

Furthermore, the breakdown of a specific industry showing variations of the aggregate success rates of persistent strikes and high participation rates for towns and districts, led Lenin to conclude that, “the St. Petersburg metalworkers play the role of vanguard to the metalworkers of all Russia. And the metalworkers in general play the same role to the workers of the other branches of industry”. *However, what factors allowed for such a persistent strike struggle on the part of metalworkers?*

To understand the persistence of metalworkers Lenin argues that the metalworker’s strikes were closely connected to economic fluctuations, both in relation to the specific industry cycle and the business cycle:

There is no doubt that the relatively more favourable market conditions in 1912 facilitated the strike struggle of the metalworkers... (Lenin, [1912] 2004)

Of particular interest is that Lenin looked at the quantitative aspect of the business cycle in relation to strike dynamics. He was the first to provide a definition of offensive and defensive strikes which are crucial for understanding strike dynamics and which were absent from official statistics. He defined “offensive strikes (when the workers demand an improvement in their living and working conditions) and defensive strikes (when workers resist changes introduced by the capitalists worsening living and working conditions)”.² When assessing strikes in the Kingdom of Poland he argues, “the economic conditions for a strike movement in that district turned out most favourable for the workers” where “only 390 defeated as compared with 8,060 successful”. We can thus also safely assume that in Lenin noting the ‘favourable conditions’ that he located the offensive and defensive character of strikes within the fluctuations (boom and crisis) of the business cycle.

In Lenin’s pioneering development of strike statistics, he did not prioritise one measure over the other. He sought to use all of them in an

¹ In more contemporary literature this contestation is termed a “trial of strength” (Ross et al., 1960: 3-5; Hyman 1989:19-25).

² Interestingly this definition of Lenin on defensive and offensive strikes is very similar to neo-classical, pioneers (Griffin, 1939; Hansen, 1921).

effort to understand the overall changing consciousness of workers, the variations in strength of workers, the tactics employed within different regions and industries, the shifts in leading roles of workers in different industries and the connection between the economic and political strikes in the course of the first Russian revolution. Most importantly, Lenin argued that:

Strike statistics that are complete, accurate, intelligently processed and published in good time have tremendous importance, both theoretical and practical, for the workers. They provide valuable information that illuminates every step of the great road the working class is travelling towards its worldwide goals, and also the closer, current tasks of the struggle (Lenin, [1912] 2004).

As we can see, Lenin developed a keen interest in the quantitative aspects of strikes in order to provide a deeper grasp of the qualitative aspects of social reality in order to gauge the changing consciousness of the working class. By combing through strike data over long periods, Lenin observed the victories and defeats, the periods of ebb and flow of the workers movement, which assisted him in coming to the conclusion that the working class goes through distinct but interrelated phases of class struggle.

By 1913, Lenin carried out an 18-year study, “Strikes in Russia” from 1895-1912 where he extended his analysis to include four distinct periods of strikes. These periods were, pre-revolutionary (1895–1904), revolutionary (1903–07), counter-revolutionary (1908–10) and revival (1911–12). The revival period is four years before the Russian Revolution. There should be no doubt at this stage that Lenin skillfully applied amongst others the quantitative study of strikes, to “illuminate[s] every step of the great road” the proof of which was the timing and the tasks he set out for the seizure of power in Russia in 1917. We now turn to Trotsky, co-leader of the Russian revolution.

Trotsky

Trotsky was active in both the 1905 revolution where he was president of the Petrograd Soviet and under the political leadership of Lenin led the insurrection of October 1917. Leon Trotsky took up the task of writing the

History of the Russian Revolution, where he makes use of strike statistics³ and other historical works in his analysis of the revolutionary process, and argues that although

...the records are incomplete, scattered, accidental. But in light of the events themselves these fragments often permit a guess as to the direction and rhythm of the hidden process. For better or for worse, a revolutionary party bases its tactics upon a calculation of the changes of mass consciousness. The historic course of Bolshevism demonstrates that such a calculation, at least in its rough features, can be made... (Trotsky, [1930] 2008: xvii)

Trotsky following in the footsteps of Lenin used strike statistics to gauge the changing political consciousness of the working class in order to formulate the appropriate tactics during the revolutionary process. The role of consciousness was crucial to understanding the peculiarities of the Russian revolution, “since the enigma is the fact that a backward country was the first to place the proletariat in power” and the “consciousness of the masses are not unrelated and independent” of changing social structures (ibid, xvii). Central to understanding this peculiarity of Russia, Trotsky argues that it was the political circumstances created by a despotic state in which strikes were forbidden by law that created the conditions for underground circles, street demonstrations with police and troops - a ‘school of war’ which was combined by rapidly developing capitalism. Through the combination of the huge concentration of workers in colossal enterprises, intensive state repression, a young and impulsive proletariat brought about the political strike which became the fundamental method of class struggle in Russia (ibid, 26). It was thus the specific relations of both objective and subjective conditions that Trotsky like his predecessors tied both structure, consciousness and agency to the dynamic of economic and political change.

³ Trotsky used extensive strike data for his analysis but chose not to “burden the text with figures” (Trotsky, [1930] 1932:26).

Figure 1: Number in Thousands participating in political strikes

Year	
1903	87*
1904	25*
1905	1,843
1906	651
1907	540
1908	93
1909	8
1910	4
1911	8
1912	550
1913	502
1914 (first half)	1,059
1915	156
1916	310
1917 (January-February)	575

* The figures for 1903 and 1904 refer to all strikes, the economic undoubtedly predominating

Source: Trotsky ([1930] 1932)

In order to understand the change in consciousness, Trotsky places emphasis on the data on political strikes (figure 1) which stretches from 1903-1917 which for him illuminates, “a curve – the only one of its kind – of the political temperature of a nation carrying in its womb a great revolution” (ibid, 26). Trotsky observed that worker consciousness undergoes change due to a consistent struggle over time, and political strike data is a central indicator of such change. He argues that by looking solely at political strikes, the data itself reveals 1905 as a year of revolution. There were 1,8 million political strikers in 1905 compared to 87000 in 1903 and 25000 in 1904. The economic and politic strikes in 1905 combined to some 2, 8 million and was 115 times more than the previous year.

Trotsky, in agreement with Lenin, argues that despite the ebb shown in strikes statistics after 1905, these years still belong to the revolution. Here we see that Trotsky also tied strikes to the rhythm of the business cycle, which produce in part the ebbs (defensive) and flow (offensive) of strike movements. The ebb displays the period of counterrevolution which coincided with an industrial crisis in which “national convulsions find their reflection in these simple numbers” the effects of which are that, “great defeats discourage people for a long time” (ibid, 27-28).

Further, concerning the relationship between strikes and the fluctuations of the business cycle, Trotsky like Lenin, argues that workers need a respite from economic strife in order to renew their struggles and concludes that, the “industrial boom of 1910 lifted the workers to their feet

and gave a new impulse to their energy” (ibid, 27). With the boom, the political strike statistics (1912-1914) again begin to show a pattern similar to that of 1905-7 but in an opposite order, from a lower to a higher amount of political strikers. The underlying economic impulse now sets the struggle on a higher plane and “a new revolutionary offensive begins” (ibid). Finally, a new cycle of political strikes opens in February 1917 that eventually culminates into an insurrection and seizure of power.

Most importantly, Trotsky viewed strike movements as long-run movements and thus an ebb in the level of political strikers formed a continuum of class struggle in the process of revolution. This is unlike reformists who view the ebb as a defeat and opt exclusively for reforms and not revolution. Trotsky also extended his analysis of strikes, class struggle and revolution beyond the fluctuations of the business cycle. He developed a long-term view of capitalist expansion and contraction – the theory of long waves of capitalist development.

Trotsky’s speech (1921) at the Third International Third Congress, “The World Economic Crisis and the New Tasks of the Communist International”, took place in the context of global crisis where capitalism’s imminent collapse was being expected argued contrary:

Capitalist equilibrium is an extremely complex phenomenon. Capitalism produces this equilibrium, disrupts it, and restores it anew in order to disrupt it anew, concurrently extending the limits of its domination. In the economic sphere, these constant disruptions and restorations of the equilibrium take the shape of crises and booms. In the sphere of inter-class relations, the disruption of equilibrium assumes the form of [strikes], lockouts, revolutionary struggle. In the sphere of inter-state relations, the disruption of equilibrium means war or – in a weaker form – tariff war, economic war, or blockade. Capitalism thus possesses a dynamic equilibrium, one which is always in the process of either disruption or restoration. But at the same time this equilibrium has a great power of resistance, the best proof of which is the fact that the capitalist world has not toppled to this day” (Trotsky 1921). *My emphasis.*

Trotsky was arguing against a mechanical materialism of Kautsky, whose views had dominated the Second International and was still widespread in the Third International. For Kautsky, capitalism’s degrading

tendencies of economic crisis would lead workers to strike and automatically seek revolutionary social change. In other words, the material structures alone guarantee that the working class will become socialist and revolution was inevitable (G. Friedman 2009). Trotsky thus sought to recover the dialectic between social structure and consciousness and examine the counter tendencies, the “great power of resistance” of capitalism, which tended to restore equilibrium. He further argued that,

Many comrades say that if an improvement takes place in this epoch, it would be fatal for our revolution. No, under no circumstances. In general, there is no automatic dependence of the proletarian revolutionary movement upon a crisis. There is only a dialectical interaction. It is essential to understand this...At that time many of us defended the viewpoint that the Russian revolutionary movement could be regenerated only by a favorable economic conjuncture. And that is what took place. In 1910, 1911 and 1912, there was an improvement in our economic situation and a favorable conjuncture which acted to reassemble the demoralized and devitalized workers who had lost their courage. They realized again how important they were in production; and they passed over to an offensive, first in the economic field and later in the political field as well. On the eve of the war the working class had become so consolidated, thanks to this period of prosperity, that it was able to pass to a direct assault. And should we today, in the period of the greatest exhaustion of the working class resulting from the crisis and the continual struggle, fail to gain victory, which is possible, then a change in the conjuncture and a rise in living standards would not have a harmful effect upon the revolution, but would be on the contrary highly propitious. Such a change could prove harmful only in the event that the favorable conjuncture marked the beginning of a long epoch of prosperity (Trotsky, 1921).

Trotsky argued that a boom in the business cycle provided the “breathing spell during which it [the working class] could undertake to reorganize its ranks” which was born out of the direct experience of strike waves in Russia (*my addition*). Trotsky further muscles in evidence for his argument, by demonstrating that the French revolution of 1848 took place in favourable circumstances where offensive strikes took place at the beginning of a “long epoch of prosperity” and this factor explained the “half-way” character of the revolution.

The economic fluctuations of the conjuncture at the time were proceeding along an ascending curve (expansionary wave) in which crisis were relatively short-lived, and “that this is the most important aspect of the whole question...it was precisely this period that ended with revolution”.

Trotsky was the first to make this distinction of the dynamic of capitalist equilibrium and disequilibrium in the form of booms and crisis in the short term (business cycles) and over long periods (long waves) with the dynamic interaction of the class struggle. Trotsky’s theoretical achievement in his historical analysis of strike dynamics and turning points both at the level of business cycles and long waves were prophetic. The general economic crisis after 1920-21 did not automatically lead to revolution but instead “capitalism’s great power of resistance” resulted in the golden age of capitalism (1945-70) in the post-war II period.

Conclusion

Lenin and Trotsky conducted serious and recurrent studies of strike data, and the relationship between strikes and the economic fluctuations of the industrial cycle, business cycle and long waves. They did not promote one form of strike action over the other or one section of workers over the other but saw in them a dynamic process of interaction between social structure and a growing class-consciousness. They were thus interested in the long-run details of strike *outcomes* and developing strike data indicators that illuminate the curve of the class struggle, which assisted them in preparing the working class not for reform but revolution.

In the 21st century, the working class has risen powerfully once more to challenge the preeminence of economic forces over human beings (Silver, 2003, 2014; Pons-Vignon and Nkosi, 2015; Smith, 2016; van der Velden et. al., 2007; Balashova et. al., 2017). A renewed interest in the quantitative aspects of strikes should be able to assist us as to the direction the working class is taking.

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