Workers and War-Making Through Space and Time: A Relational Approach

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ABSTRACT

In the late twentieth century, scholars converged around a consensus that participation in war-making empowered workers in the West, as they leveraged their strategic positions into widespread gains. Yet after decades of neoliberal restructuring of both production and warfare, there is growing evidence that this relationship has changed, especially in the United States. While recent work on these transformations has thus amended the outdated scholarly consensus, there is a danger in overstating the extent to which the workers making war today are powerless. This article draws on new datasets and historical research into labour conflict in the US military's global supply chains to complicate the story of universal (dis)empowerment by taking both temporal and spatial dynamics seriously. On the one hand, taking time seriously means acknowledging the transformations that have seemingly refuted the twentieth-century consensus on the relationship between workers and war. On the other hand, taking space seriously means noting how, as these transformations proceeded, they had uneven effects across the geographies of war-making. More than simply identifying variation in space and time, this article articulates a relational approach through space and time, showing how disempowerment of workers making war in some spaces directly led to the empowerment of workers making war in others.

KEYWORDS

logistics, armaments, strikes, neoliberal restructuring, United States

Introduction

In the late twentieth century, historical social scientists endeavoured to disentangle the relationship between war and workers' power in the West. While periods of wartime tended to result in enhanced state repression of workers' movements, this limitation on *associational* power seemed to be outweighed by the strengthening of workers' *structural* power[1]—during wartime, demand rose, labour markets tightened, revolutionary situations opened, and states became vulnerable to social disorder. This was especially clear in the mobilisation for the World Wars, when workers across the West became critical cogs in a war machine. Through the threat of work stoppages, they leveraged their important positions into widespread gains both at and beyond the point of production—expanding unions, raising wages, limiting management control, growing the welfare state, and expanding citizenship rights. In the US, after the wars, a permanently mobilised military-industrial complex came to characterise the economy.

[1] Associational power refers to workers' strength resulting from collective organization (for example, in unions or parties) while structural power refers to workers' strength resulting from their position in the economic system (see Wright, 2000; Silver, 2003).

Labour was a key partner in the establishment of the Cold War national security state, and a consensus was reached among workers, firms, and successive governments to stimulate economic growth and employment through "military Keynesianism." It was in this context—in the wake of two world wars that saw dramatic structural empowerment of industrial workers and amidst a Cold War mobilisation that saw their influence peak—that a widespread understanding in the literature emerged: war meant an increase in workers' disruptive power.[2]

Yet by the early twenty-first century, this premise flew in the face of a mounting body of evidence. Indeed, over the course of the late twentieth century, wartime challenges stemming from inefficient supply chains and disruptive labour unrest led officials and firms to reorganise the way war was supplied. This restructuring took off after Vietnam—intertwined with the neoliberal changes in the world economy more broadly (Cowen, 2014; Payne, 2023). The US military and its industrial base reorganised armaments production, privatised logistics services, embraced flexibilization and just-in-time networks, and 'offshored' the workforce. By the 1990s, labour costs were lowered, work stoppages declined, and a new form of flexible warfare was on the horizon. These transformations meant that, in the expansive and endless wars of the twenty-first century, workers being empowered by their participation in war-making was no longer an obvious conclusion.

Recent scholarship has thus embraced a temporally dynamic understanding of the relationship between war and workers' power—recognising that the changing organisation of the way war is made must be considered. The empowering relationship between war and workers—that yielded military-Keynesianism, the warfare-welfare state, and the national security social compact—may have existed in the mid-twentieth century era of mass mobilization, but by the era of the US 'forever wars' in the twenty-first century, it seems to have come to an end (e.g. Payne, 2020, 2023; Silver, 2015; MacLeavy and Peoples, 2009; Brenes, 2023; Goldberg, 2025).

Approaches that take these transformations over time seriously are important contributions that belie the ahistoricism of popular discourse about the relationship between war and workers' power. Indeed, while no scholars would ever claim that the organisation of manufacturing in the US is the same today as it was in the 1940s, politicians and pundits nevertheless talk about the US armaments industry, for example, as if it were still the great arsenal of democracy, and speak of military procurement as if it were a panacea yielding good jobs and economic growth.[3]

Nevertheless, there is a danger in overstating the disempowerment of workers that the transformation of war-making has wrought. There has been a tendency in studies of neoliberal globalization more broadly to emphasise a seemingly universal disempowerment of labour without examining how restructuring has progressed in contradictory and unevenly developed ways. Some labour scholars have pushed back against this pessimism by taking spatial and sectoral differentiation into account in the study of change over time. For example, Beverly Silver's (2003) work has shown that, rather than a "race to the bottom" of disempowerment among the world's workers, globalization and neoliberal restructuring merely shifted waves of labour empowerment through time, space, and

[2] For variations of this argument in the late twentieth century, see: (Lichtenstein, 1982; Koistinen, 1973; Tilly, 1990; Brody, 1980; Dubofksy, 1983; Markoff, 1996).

[3] For one recent example, we saw the Biden administration spin military aid for Ukraine as a jobs bill. Biden himself leaned into the parallelism with mid-twentieth century arrangements, hailing Javelin missile producers in Alabama as the new "arsenal of democracy" (Biden, 2022).

industry. What's more, among historians of labour and war-making, a growing body of work on the imperial dimensions of war work has blossomed in recent years, challenging the Western-centric models of the literature in the late twentieth century (Bender and Lipman, 2015; Friedman, 2017; Fink and Greene, 2016; Nagaraja, 2025).

In this article, I investigate the temporal and spatial dynamics of the relationship between workers' power and US war-making, drawing on patterns derived from a new dataset on labour conflict in the US military's global supply chains, as well as from data compiled from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics and the US Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service. I explore this relationship globally and historically, in an approach that draws from Global Commodity Chains (GCC) scholars, who trace international networks of production and exchange (e.g. Gereffi, 1994; Korzeniewicz and Martin, 1994; Bair, 2005), and world-systems methodologists, who trace relational processes through time and space (e.g. Hopkins, 1982a, 1982b; Silver, 1995). For US war-making, such a perspective means not just a wider geographical and temporal lens, but also a wider sectoral one. Just as a GCC analysis of workers in the apparel industry would require an examination of textile producers, marketing agencies, and retail stores alike, a full understanding of the relationship between workers and war-making requires an examination of the arms industry, to be sure, but also of the myriad other forms of labour that make US wars around the world—from stevedoring to base services.

I argue that, by taking both temporal and spatial dynamics seriously, we can achieve a more comprehensive—and relational—approach to the study of the relationship between war-making and workers' power. Taking *time* seriously requires an acknowledgement that the organisation of war-making has transformed over the past half century in a way that challenges the twentieth century consensus on the relationship between workers and war. Yet, at the same time, taking *space* seriously requires an examination of how, as these transformations proceeded, they had uneven effects across the geographies of war-making.[4] But more than simply identifying variations *in* time and space, I find relations unfolding *through* time and space: the disempowerment of the workers making war in some spaces directly led to the empowerment of workers making war in others. This occurred both within US borders as the military-industrial base restructured, and across borders as this restructuring leaned on the globalization of supply chains and a logistics revolution. This relational approach provides a more clear-eyed view of the relationship between war and workers' power, rejecting both ahistorical optimism and race-to-the-bottom pessimism.

The Neoliberal Restructuring of Armaments Production

During the world wars, industrial workers engaged in a series of wartime strikes, leveraging their importance to the war effort in their struggles. The arrangements that emerged out of these waves of unrest—in which firms and states agreed to union recognition, full employment, and basic welfare provisioning in exchange for relative labour peace—set the basis for a new social compact and a nexus

[4] These transformations were themselves often spatial ones. In this sense, military-industrial elites "used" space in various ways to respond to conflicts, contradictions, and crises—what Harvey (2001) and Silver (2003) theorize as "spatial fixes." How they did so is beyond the scope of this short intervention, however (for more, see Payne, forthcoming). Here, the contribution is a far narrower, methodological one. Rather than exploring how social actors use space and time in their conflicts, this paper is a call for scholars to take relations through space and time more seriously in their analyses.

between warfare and welfare (see Dubofsky and McCartin, 2017).[5] Yet, after holding sway for a generation, these arrangements began to unravel with the neoliberal project in the late-1960s/early-1970s, as production left its traditional centres for cheaper locales, financialization transformed the organisation of capitalist firms, Fordism was replaced with just-in-time production, and austerity wreaked havoc on welfare systems.

In this same period, the organisation of the US military transformed. The post-Vietnam shift from a conscripted army to an all-volunteer force marked a shift from a "modern military" to a "post-modern military" (Moskos et al., 2000). By the 1990s, technological advances raised the spectre of a "revolution in military affairs" (Krepinevich, 1992). Many features of military reorganisation—such as the outsourcing of military activities to private contractors, the increasing centralisation of command (i.e., "jointness"), and the growing importance of flexible logistics—parallel the transformations of the industrial sphere, yielding discussion of a "post-Fordist" or a "just-in-time" military (Booth et al., 2001; King, 2006).

The transformation of warfare worked in tandem with the broader neoliberal project to restructure military supply chains. For one, firms themselves transformed their internal organisation as they embraced the logics of shareholder value and leaned into capital-intensive reorganisations of production (e.g. Muellerleile, 2009; Payne, 2023). A merger boom of military firms—promoted and facilitated by military officials aiming to centralise the defense-industrial base—was especially notable. As these firms consolidated their operations, many facilities were shuttered or combined (e.g. Urry 1995). In all, between 1980 and 1997, the armaments industry consolidated from over fifty major prime contractors to just five (Defense Science Board, 1997: 10).

Perhaps most substantially, both in the world economy writ large and in the military-industrial sphere, was the geographical relocation of production in what Harvey (2001) has called a "spatial fix." Ann Markusen and her colleagues trace the shift in military production from the industrial heartlands of the Midwest and Northeast towards the South and the Coasts. This shift created a "gunbelt" of defense-rich states around the perimeter of the country, stretching "from the state of Washington through California to the desert states of the Southwest, on through Texas and the Great Plains, across to Florida, and discontinuously up the East Coast to New England" (Markusen et al., 1991: 3). Major (2009: 349–51) later finds a "narrowing of the gunbelt" away from the Northeast and West Coasts towards the South and Southwest in the 1990s. This movement of armaments production was driven in no small part by firms' desire to escape powerful and expensive workers' unions. As Markusen and her colleagues (1991: 43) noted with apparent surprise, "many defense contractors have shown an unusual antipathy towards unions and heavily unionized cities and regions, not principally because of wage demands, but for fear of work stoppages and resistance to changing work rules in an industry where timely delivery is critical".

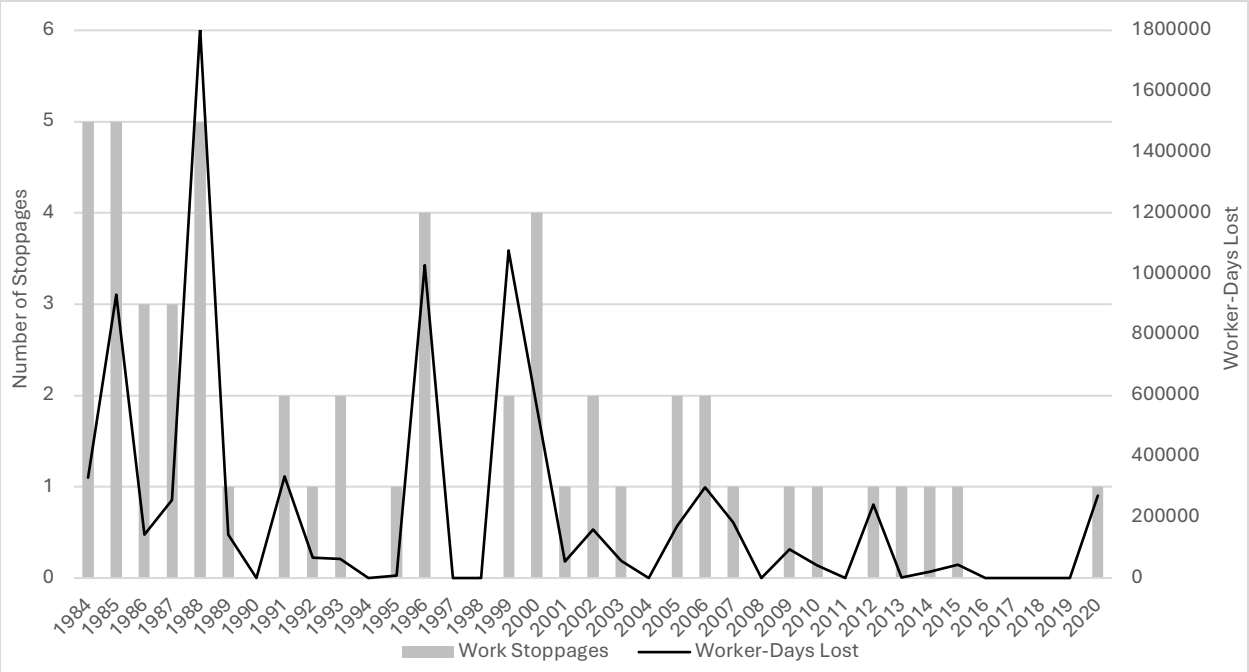
This was combined with a wave of international outsourcing. Despite concerns over security, armaments firms began to move some production out of the United States and into cheaper labour markets in the Global South, most notably in parts of Latin America and Asia—parallel with manufacturing industries in this period (e.g., Silver, 2003). The dramatic rise in international arms

[5] The existence of a privileged strata of workers in the imperial core who leveraged their state's belligerence into a "labor aristocracy" has been theorized by Engels and Lenin, among others, and served as the basis for studies of uneven development (see, for example, Hobsbawm 1970).

sales—as armaments firms searched for revenues beyond the US government in the post-Cold War period—contributed to this phenomenon. Many international arms sales included agreements that the purchasing country would also receive a share of the production work. Following the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, for example, aerospace firms began opening subsidiaries in Mexico to supply major components to US firms. These firms were part of a series of U.S. manufacturing relocations to towns on the Mexican side of the border, establishing *maquiladoras* with low wages and poor working conditions (Coffin, 2013; Gould, 2020).

The result of these transformations was the widespread undermining of industrial armaments workers in the US. In the aerospace industry, for example, the number of production workers declined from over 800,000 in 1968 to under 250,000 in the twenty-first century. Similarly, these workers' wages as a share of industry revenues dropped from over 70% in 1951, to 25% in 1968, to just 7% in 2004 (see Payne, 2023). We can also see evidence of this disempowerment in the dramatic decline of work stoppages by workers at armaments production firms, as shown in Figure 1.[6] From these data, we can thus see that the restructuring of the military-industrial base succeeded in reducing the cost and disruptiveness of manufacturing workers by the turn of the twenty-first century.

Figure 1: Work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers at armaments production firms, 1984 to 2020



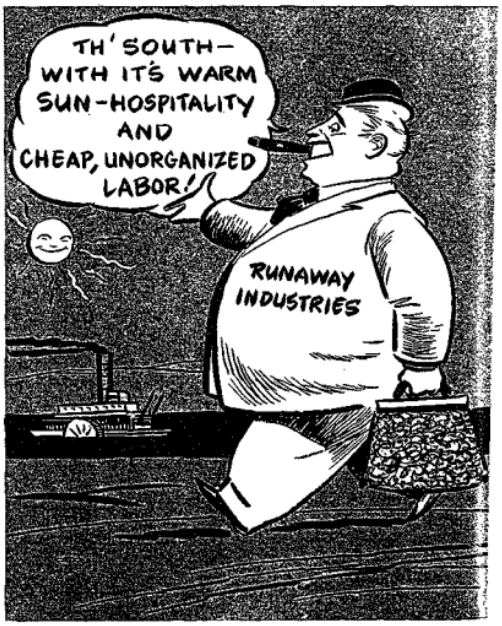
Source: Payne (2023)

[6] The presence or absence of labor-capital conflict is not, on its own, a measure of workers' structural power. Instead, in this article I use data on instances of labor-capital conflict as a guide to explore the transformation of labor relations across time and space. In this case, presence and absence of labor unrest mean different things in different moments based on this historical review: while the reduction in labor unrest over time is best understood as part of the story of workers' disempowerment, as we will see, the presence of labor unrest in new locales despite this overall reduction is best understood as part of a story of shifting loci of workers' empowerment.

The restructuring summarised above shows that the broader story of neoliberal transformation also applies (with important particularities) to military-industrial sectors, and thus belies the notion of a static relationship between war-making and workers' empowerment. Instead, the dominant trajectory of this relationship over time, at least in the US industrial heartlands, is the structural disempowerment of workers as neoliberalisation, globalization, and a post-Vietnam capital intensification of the military progressed. And while this temporally dynamic story has a great deal of explanatory power, it misses important variation—and workers' empowerment—lurking just beneath the surface.

The relocation of military-industrial production to the US South and West to avoid disruptive labour unrest was an obvious decision for firms: already in 1955, seventeen states in these regions had "right-to-work" laws making unionisation difficult, and local opposition to workers' unions remained strong despite the gains that industrial unions had made in the Northeast and Midwest (Dubofsky and McCartin, 2017: 332). The consequences of such relocation were clear to workers' unions from the start. Union officials criticised the moves as attempts to weaken their bargaining power, lambasting "runaway" firms for moving manufacturing jobs away from the heartlands and the "Southern reactionaries" who lured them with low wages and fewer labour protections.

Figure 2: Cartoon circulated by the International Association of Machinists



Source: Jenkins (1955). Reproduced with permission.

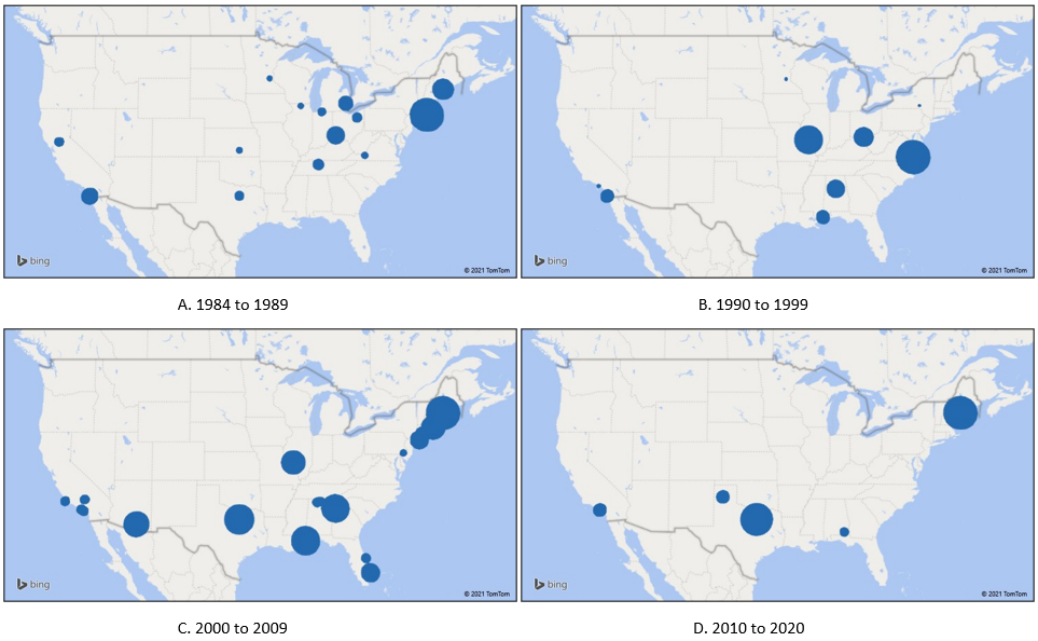
Yet focusing exclusively on the deindustrialisation of the heartlands misses the fact that, despite the hostile terrains of the US South and West, new workers' movements emerged wherever industrial production relocated. One illustrative example can be found at the major military supplier General Electric. As GE relocated its facilities, unionisation drives occurred at each new production site—and

national agreements with the unions meant that each newly unionised facility automatically came under the national contract. In 1969, in the face of new movements popping up across the country, GE proposed to end this provision and make moves towards scrapping national bargaining altogether (UE, n.d.). In response, in October 1969 the 13 unions representing GE's workforce banded together in a national strike—the first one since the post-war wave in 1946. Over 150,000 workers at 233 plants in 33 states—old and new centres of production—walked out. GE's attempts to break the strike were mostly failures, and the resulting agreement was favourable to the various workers' unions—the UE official history notes, "the most significant result of the strike lay not in the details of the settlement, but in the unity built" among workers across unions and facilities (UE, n.d.). Indeed, over the course of the following decade, GE workers fought repeatedly for improvements in their contracts, seeing significant gains. What's more, it was GE's new southern production facilities became the hotbeds of activism—the Louisville, Kentucky, plant, for example, saw massive strikes in 1972, 1974, 1976, and 1978.

Other firms faced similar patterns: in 1977, both Lockheed and Boeing saw massive strikes in their new production facilities in the West and South—for Lockheed, plants in California, Florida, Georgia, and South Carolina saw walkouts and, at Boeing, work stopped at facilities in Washington, Oregon, and Kansas. Both strikes pressed for improved job security in the face of recurrent layoffs, despite a period of relative prosperity for the firms (Lindsey, 1977; The New York Times, 1977). Another example can be found at Bell Helicopter. Originally located in Buffalo, NY, from the 1930s through the Second World War, Bell relocated to Fort Worth, Texas, in the 1950s (Fort Worth Star-Telegram, 2020). The Texas facilities saw a strike in 1969 that shuttered production for two weeks and won the workers large wage increases and other benefit improvements (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1971). More conflict occurred in 1987, when two unions walked out over Bell's contract proposals that didn't include annual raises (United Press International, 1987). A three-week strike resulted in improvements to the contract offer (The New York Times, 1987).

In short, as military-industrial production left the manufacturing heartlands, the epicentre of labour militancy tended to follow that relocation. New labour movements emerged in response to capital "arriving," as the same structural empowerment of workers that had propelled the heartlands to industrial militancy was recreated in the South and West. (This finding complements Silver (2003), who uncovered how the global relocation of the automobile industry in response to explosive labour unrest consistently resulted in the recreation of the same conflict-inducing arrangements in each new locale.) Figure 3 presents this shifting geography of labour unrest from the 1980s through the 2010s by mapping the magnitudes of work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers in the armaments industries (using the same data source as Figure 1 above). While in the 1980s we see a concentration of high-magnitude work stoppages in the Midwest and Northeast, the subsequent decades see a shift South and West.

Figure 3: Magnitude (worker-days lost) of work stoppages in armaments industries by state, 1984 to 2020[7]



Source: Author's compilation from U.S. Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (n.d.) and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.) data.

By the 1990s, 69% of the recorded strikes in the armaments industries were in the 'gunbelt' regions, and in the twenty-first century the strikes are concentrated in the South and West. For example, a 92-day strike at Boeing plants in California, Florida, and Alabama in 2005 over health premiums disrupted the company's Delta rocket program and delayed the launching of Boeing-made satellites (Fleischauer, 2005; Galvin, 2006). At a Raytheon missile facility in Arizona, the company offered a nine-per cent increase in wages; workers decided that it was not enough to offset the rising cost of healthcare. After deciding not to strike in prior contract disputes that resulted in a lacklustre deal for the workers, the union was ready to go on the offensive in 2006. Said one worker: "They're making a lot of money off us, and all we want is a little respect." Another said that recently "the company made big profits, and what they're showing with this contract is they don't want to give any of that profit to us" (Stauffer, 2006). After a 70-day strike, the workers won additional bonuses to offset healthcare costs (Arizona Daily Sun, 2007). In 2009, back at Bell Helicopter, Textron, in Fort Worth, workers went on strike over proposed increases to healthcare costs and the elimination of unionised custodial positions (Huber, 2009). Indeed, as shown elsewhere (Payne, 2020), the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan yielded workers' empowerment and corresponded with a wave of successful strikes.

In short, we can see that examining the relationship between workers' power and war-making through space and time belies a simple linear story: taking time seriously means acknowledging a long-term and widespread disempowerment of workers involved in US war-making as the organisation of

[7] Source: Author's compilation from U.S. Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (n.d.) and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.) data.

the military-industrial base transformed. Yet taking space seriously shows that this process was uneven, and new epicentres of workers' unrest emerged, leveraging the very same structural changes that were undermining structural power in the heartlands. This complicated story of relational empowerment/disempowerment, already on display in the traditionally examined core of military-industrial labour, is even more apparent when we extend our gaze to other sectors and geographies of US war-making—themselves shaped by these same transformations.

The Flexibilization of Global Military Supply Chains

As firms and the military restructured the way supplies for war were produced, the effects spilt out beyond US borders—and beyond the realm of industrial manufacturing. Indeed, as the organisation of production of goods for war transformed, so too did the organisation of circulation of goods for war. The military embraced the flexibilization of its global supply networks as a means of cutting costs, improving efficiency, and overcoming disruptive workers (especially in the ports), just as industrial elites had done in the factories. The military had been experimenting with flexibilization since World War II, though it was through contracting for the Korean War that these emergent "just-in-time" techniques began to be diffused throughout military supply chains in the Pacific (Cowen, 2014: 30–31; Chung, 2019), and it was in the wake of defeat in Vietnam that they reached new heights. These changes were bound up with the transformations at the point of production discussed above, as a more spatially diffuse, capital-intensive network of production arrangements became dominant.

Like the transformation at the point of production, this reorganisation of global military logistics work was driven in part by the unruliness of workers. One particularly illustrative example comes in a 1971 strike by dockworkers on the United States' West Coast. The strike lasted 130 days and shut down 56 ports. The strike not only brought shipping to a halt but also concerned officials over the potential for disruption during the height of the Vietnam War. To ease these concerns, and in an attempt to circumvent a Taft-Hartley injunction, the unions permitted "continuous movement of military and other vital cargoes" to support the war efforts (The Dispatcher, 1971). But port managers saw this military work as a way for workers to receive some income, thereby supporting the strike and prolonging the conflict. In an effort to break the strike, the employers' association announced that the loading of military cargo bound for Vietnam would not be permitted (Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 1971). Backlash from the Nixon administration was swift, and Congress began preparing legislation that would force arbitration (Seattle Post-Intelligencer, 1972). While the outcome of the strike was mixed—dockworkers won some job security in the face of technological change but ultimately did not receive the full increases in wages they had been demanding—the conflict was nevertheless a clear demonstration to Washington of how wartime exigencies provided dockworkers with structural bargaining power that, alongside their strong unions, allowed them to withstand pressures from both the employers and the Nixon administration during the strike.

It is thus not surprising that, in after-action reports from the Vietnam conflicts, military officials pointed to the costs and disruptiveness of such workers as the cause of supply chain inefficiencies. One report noted that project costs were "approximately two and half times greater than" expected, attributable to high wages for workers. Disruptions such as the port workers strike demonstrated that the military's problems stemmed from a lack of flexibility in all areas. The procurement procedures of

mass mobilisation were restrictive, and there was a general inability for officials to easily "change [course] in light of ongoing operations" (Dunn, 1972: 134).

Officials and firms thus searched for ways to lower costs, streamline supply chains, and prevent work stoppages. Over the course of the war, the military's embrace of the shipping container would prove especially critical in its pursuit of these ends. Indeed, by the end of the Vietnam War, the military had containerised nearly all of its cargo to and from Southeast Asia, and thus sparked the subsequent adoption of the container throughout its supply chains (Chung, 2019: 31), driving a worldwide "logistics revolution" (Levinson, 2006). The standardisation of steel boxes that could be used interchangeably and intermodally by ships, trucks, and trains not only reduced labour time—increasing productivity by a factor of at least ten (Bonacich and Wilson 2008, 52)—but also meant that skilled stevedores could be replaced by cheaper and unexperienced labor. Containerization thus "provided an opportunity to undermine the strength of organised labour, and so the conditions of work, and assert greater control over the flow of goods" (Cowen, 2014: 41).

What's more, the military redoubled its strategy of using private contractors to hire and oversee the manual labour involved in logistics work. To accomplish the rapid buildup of forces in Vietnam, the Pentagon turned to construction firms that had the know-how to build infrastructure in challenging environments. Some of these firms, like Brown & Root, were oil companies from Texas that had been making the shift from oil to services of this nature for several years, and were eager to demonstrate their usefulness (Beasley, 2019). Four large companies—Raymond International, Morrison-Kudsen, Brown & Root, and J.A. Jones—received the windfall of these military contracts, forming a consortium (RMK-BJR) and receiving a nearly $2 billion contract to build and operate bases and facilities.

These firms hired local and migrant workers who were cheaper and perceived to be more docile than their US counterparts. While these workers were no doubt less costly, they nevertheless proved to be just as unruly as US dockworkers—but the structure of the military meant that this unruliness was not especially disruptive to the war effort. A series of strikes by Vietnamese workers, clashes between Vietnamese labour unions, and violent competition between Vietnamese, Korean, and Filipino labour had caused a series of strikes by various workers throughout the late 1960s (Attewell, 2020; The New York Times, 1966; Wehrle, 2005). Yet the disruptiveness of labour actions by these workers was "blunted by the US military's decision to maintain a minimum level of 'essential port operations' by using soldiers as scabs" and turning to Korean and Filipino stevedores as potential replacements (Attewell 2020, 921). In 1968, for example, a strike by dockworkers unloading American military shipments did not affect war operations, as (as reported in the New York Times) "The military supplies were unloaded by United States troops" (Mohr, 1968).

In short, examining these strikes by dockworkers on the US West Coast and in South Vietnam side by side shows that the structure of the US military's global supply chains gave significant structural power to US workers while offering little to the workers in Vietnam. Chalking up the undisruptive nature of labour in the warzone to its contracted status, military officials redoubled their efforts in privatisation and outsourcing after the war, with the introduction of LOGCAP contracts in the 1980s and a boom in private military contractors starting in the 1990s, offering services from cargo transport to armed security (Beasley, 2019; Singer, 2008). The result was that, by the twenty-first century, nearly all of the military's logistical activities were outsourced to private contractors, rather than performed by military personnel. Outsourcing, privatisation, and deskilling all meant that the workers turned to for logistics labour were increasingly likely to be local or migrant workers, rather than US citizens

brought in from abroad. Indeed, while exact figures are lacking, there are estimates of over 100,000 contractors (not including subcontractors) in Iraq alone as of 2006. In 2008, a census of contractors found that 20% were US citizens, 38% were "third country nationals" (migrant workers), and 42% were "local nationals" (Iraqi labour) (Moore, 2019: 31).

The data show that this restructuring—replacing American workers with non-citizens, layering contractors, and embracing capital intensification—successfully reduced the disruptiveness of US logistics workers. Yet the opposite trend occurs with the contracted workforce: as the military grew more reliant on non-US workers, these workers increased their levels of unrest. These trends are presented in Table 1 and Figure 4 below. The US data in these figures is drawn from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service.[8] The figures draw on a new dataset on labour conflicts in the US military's global supply chains for the non-US data, which I compiled using a 'snowball' data collection to create a list of labour conflicts, presented in this article from 1983 through 2020.[9] As they are separate data sources, they are not directly comparable with each other, but by examining them side by side, we can compare change over time in each indicator. We can thus see that, over time, the number of work stoppages in the US logistics industries declines while the number in the military's non-US networks increases. Of course, the number of instances from both datasets is small, but these surface-level trends prove useful when combined with an historical analysis of these events to uncover the dynamics of workers' power.

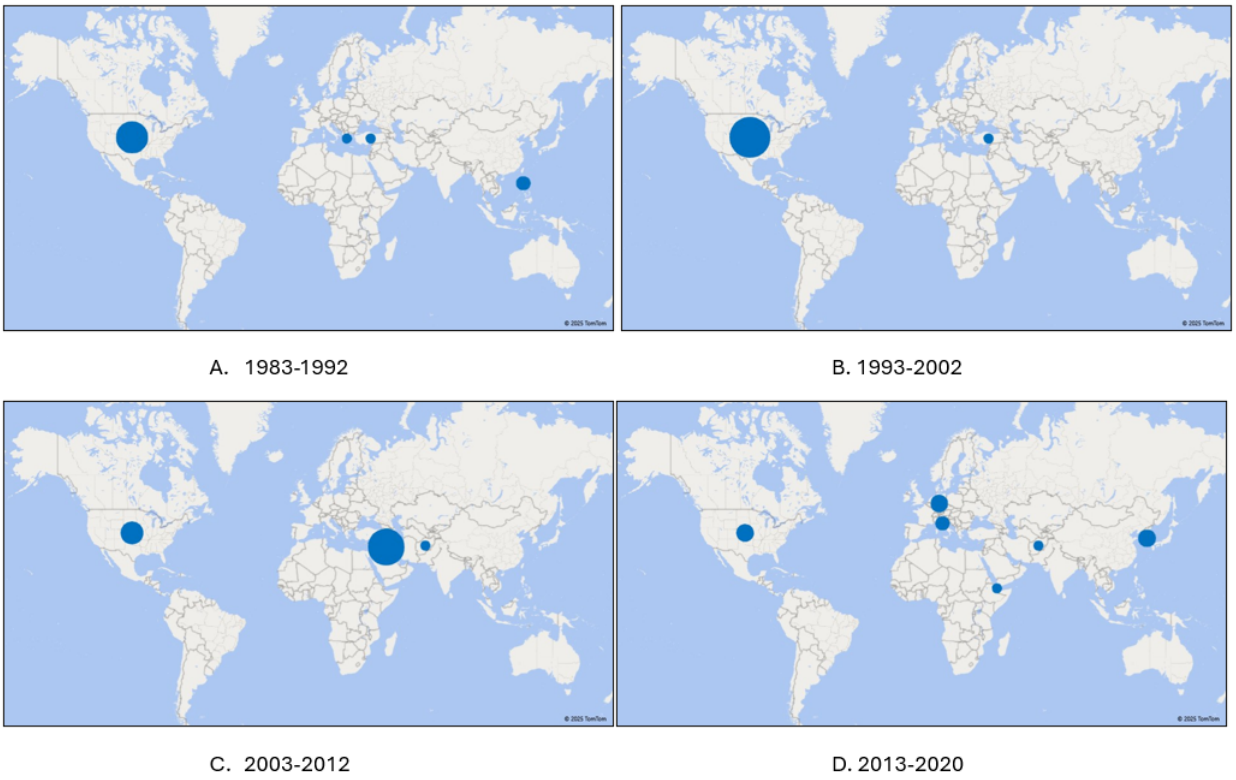
Table 1: Number of strikes in military supply chains

	US Logistics Networks (All Domestic) *Source: BLS and FMCS*	US Military Logistics Networks (Outside US) *Source: New Data by Author*
1983-1992	10	4
1993-2002	16	1
2003-2012	5	14
2013-2020	3	12

[8] The figures include all work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers classified as the following NAICS codes: Air (481), Rail (482), Water (483), and Truck (484) Transportation and Support Activities for Transportation (488).

[9] I began with the labor conflicts mentioned or recounted in existing literature on basing and military logistics to develop an initial list. Using Proquest's online database of newspaper archives, I developed a title search string of key words to capture articles with mentions of labor unrest and that signaled relevance to military logistics. This retrieved a total of 577 articles from 1950-2022 in the following newspapers: *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Stars and Stripes*. I then read all of these newspaper articles and manually coded them for relevance and content. Finally, using similar keyword searches, I reviewed documents in the US Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) online archive as well as the Digital National Security Archive. Labor unrest events were included if they are waged by workers directly employed by US military, workers contracted to work in US military facilities, or if US soldiers were forced to step in as scab workers to ensure continuation of military operations. In the interest of focusing on international networks, unrest events were excluded if they occurred within the United States.

Figure 4: Geographical distribution of strikes in military supply chains



Source: US data from U.S. Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (n.d.) and U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (n.d.) data. Non-US data from new dataset compiled by author (see footnote 9).

While strikes by logistics workers in the US have declined overall, there was one major labour conflict in the initial years of the Global War on Terror. In 2002, employers locked out ILWU workers on the West Coast, echoing the 1971-1972 strike amidst the Vietnam War. As containerization and other technological advancements swept through the industry, this meant that the size of the longshore workforce shrank, but the dockworkers' unions remained comparably strong and continued to operate at key strategic nodes (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008: 177). At the turn of the twenty-first century, with the prospect of Bush administration support, the shipping companies were eager to undermine these unions for good. In the negotiations at the end of the ILWU's contract, the management association demanded that all new jobs that technological advancement created would be non-unionised. In addition to threatening the workers' associational power, this demand meant that new jobs could be low-wage and, as a result of internet technologies, could be shipped overseas, resulting not just in a change for future workers but also in hundreds of layoffs (Bonacich and Wilson 2008, 195; Lafer 2004). As negotiations fell apart, the port association locked out the workers.

As in the 1971-1972 strike, the spectre of wartime exigencies hung over this labour dispute. The union again announced that workers would continue to load all military supplies during a work stoppage. But the Bush administration responded by declaring that the supply of *all* commercial goods was considered a national security interest (Bacon, 2003). Equating a loss of revenues with a "national

emergency," the Bush administration invoked the Taft-Hartley Act just ten days after the start of the lockout, forcing the ports to reopen. This was the first time in US history that the act was invoked to end an employer lockout—the result was that workers were forced to return entirely on company terms (Bonacich and Wilson, 2008: 195–96). At the same time, the Bush administration proposed a Port and Maritime Security Act that would levy charges of terrorism against anyone who participated in "disrupting" or "interfering" with maritime commerce: when the union requested clarification that this would not apply to labour disputes, the White House refused (Lafer, 2004: 339). The union was forced to capitulate to most of the companies' demands, allowing new technology to be introduced as replacement for union workers, in exchange for wage increases for remaining longshoremen (Lafer, 2004; Bonacich and Wilson, 2008: 197). In both 1971-2 and in 2002, a pro-business administration attempted to use war as an opportunity to crush worker power. In the earlier case, the war strengthened workers' position. In the latter case, after decades of flexibilization, outsourcing, and capital-intensification, the war had no such strengthening effect.

We see a starkly different trend over time when we turn our gaze beyond US shores. Restructuring may have disempowered US logistics workers, but in global supply chains it increased the number of chokepoints (Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness, 2018)—and placed (often poorly treated) local and migrant workers at them. As a result of the structure of these supply chains, when workers' unrest occurred, it was far more disruptive than the analogous work stoppages by labour in Vietnam. For example, as geographer Adam Moore has uncovered, in 2004, Filipino workers hired by the firm Serka (a subcontractor of KBR) engaged in strikes at four major US military bases in northern Iraq—Diamondback, Marez, Q-West, and Tal Afar. A variety of issues had been stoking discontent: wage theft, broken contractual promises, and a disparity in wages and conditions between Serka's Filipino and Turkish employees. Filipino workers at Marez, in Mosul, circulated a petition demanding a wage increase, then did not report to work the following day. Quickly, the military and KBR intervened on behalf of the workers, reportedly telling Serka: "Don't make this get any worse, fix it" (Moore 2019, 135–36). Salaries were promptly doubled for all Filipino workers at the base. News of the success spread to other bases across northern Iraq, and soon strikes began—all ending with major wage increases. The swiftness of the response by the military and prime contractor stemmed from the ease with which the Filipino Serka workers could disrupt operations. Unlike in earlier conflicts, replacing workers with conscripted soldier scabs was not an option: sanitation rules meant that only properly trained workers could perform these tasks, and there were no redundancies built into the base's operations. The restructuring of military logistics—ending the draft, outsourcing to contract labourers, embracing flexible supply chains—left it vulnerable to disruption.

An even more explosive example comes in May 2010 at Victory Base Complex in Baghdad. A labour camp run by Prime Projects International (PPI) faced a riot by over a thousand Indian and Nepalese subcontractors. At issue was a lack of food, which had become commonplace in the camp over the past year. When management refused to offer more rice to workers, they rampaged facilities using fists, stones, and wooden bats. The conflict spread through the camp, with as many as 1400 workers rioting. Weeks later, more riots broke out at other camps at Victory Base Complex—with workers of Gulf Catering Company pelting managers with stones, and others setting fire to their barracks. In response, the military police began to patrol the labour camps twice a day. The subcontracting arrangements ultimately allowed for KBR, the prime contractor, to push blame and embarrassment onto PPI, the subcontractor (Stillman, 2011).

In more recent years, labour unrest has continued across the US military's global presence: a 2013 strike by contract workers at Camp Lemmonier in Djibouti forced military personnel to "man the chow lines" in order to meet regulations (Vandiver, 2013). Strikes by local workers at bases in Korea, Germany, and Italy forced concessions by base managers (Rabiroff and Chang, 2012; Darnell, 2015; Wyland, 2018). In 2020, migrant workers at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan protested racial discrimination by their employer, Flour Corporation, over which workers were given raises and promotions in the face of a shrinking workforce, as workers left the base during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their actions ultimately disrupted "base services like catering, waste management, laundry, water supply and transportation" (Wellman, 2020).

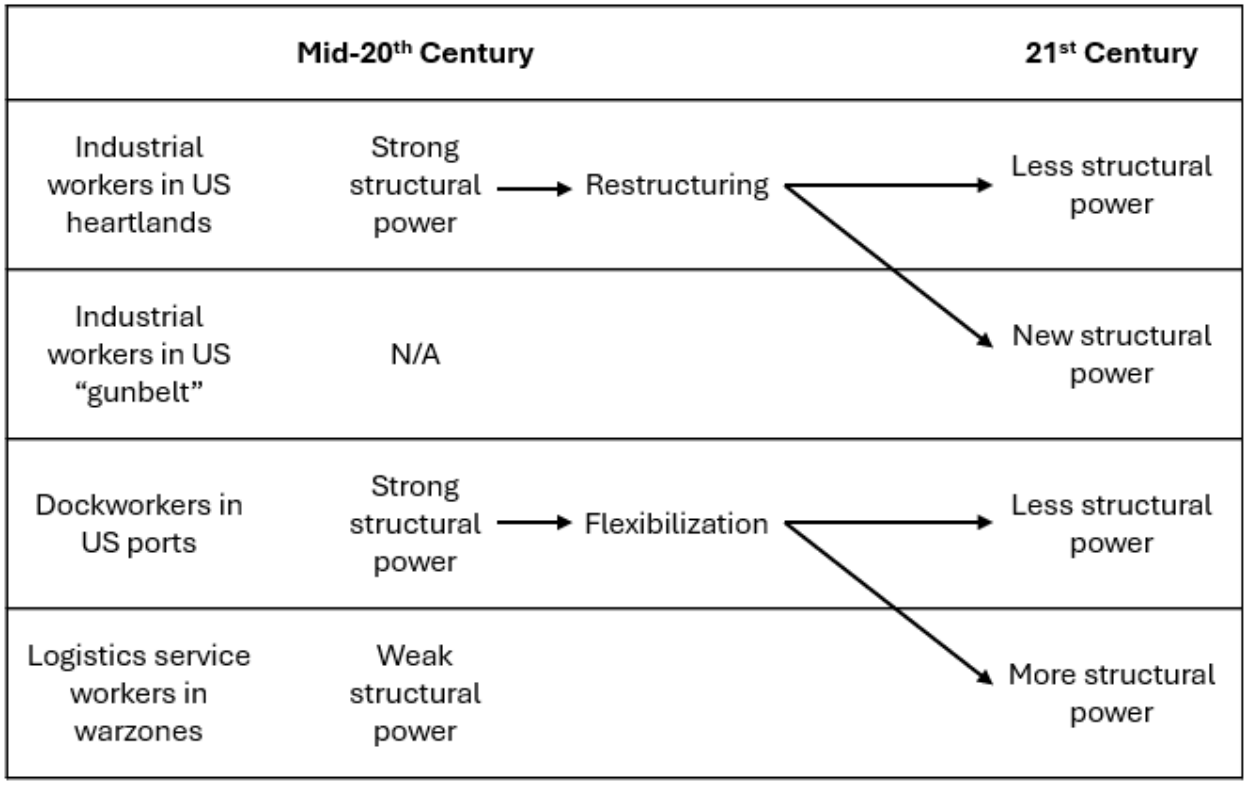
We can thus see that the erosion of the disruptive power of logistics labour over time that is evident from US shores is not as obvious for workers operating in the global chokepoints of the US military's supply chains. While flexibilization and restructuring may have eroded US dockworkers' structural power, the increasing reliance on subcontracted labour has meant new sources of power have emerged as they operate at the chokepoints of just-in-time war. While these workers face often-inhumane conditions and significant barriers to sustained organising, this brief review has shown that there are nevertheless major sources of disruptive power available. This complements the findings of other labour scholars, who point to a real but inchoate opportunity for labour disruption in flexible global supply chains (e.g. Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness, 2018; Moody, 2017).

A Relational Approach

This short article has traversed multiple decades, sectors, and locales to examine, in broad strokes, the relationship between US war-making and workers' power. It has shown that this relationship is neither static (temporally) nor uniform (spatially). But the point of this intervention is not only to say that variation exists nor that context is determinative, but rather that these dynamics must be examined relationally. In other words, it is not simply that war disempowers workers in some spaces or times while empowering others in different spaces or times, but rather that *the same arrangements which facilitate the disempowerment of some workers may in fact be empowering others*. Identifying this requires examining the relationship between workers and US war-making *as it unfolds through space and time*. The contours of this argument are summarised in Figure 5.[10]

[10] As with all such summary charts, Figure 5 oversimplifies the dynamics explored above. For one example, some industrial production already existed in the "gunbelt" regions in the mid-twentieth century. For another, the trajectory of industrial armaments manufacturing and of global military supply chains are thus not two separate stories but are interrelated ones. Nevertheless, the figure is a useful heuristic to help collate the multiple and overlapping trajectories recounted in this article.

Figure 5: War and Workers' Power Through Space and Time



If only change over time is taken into account, the dominant story of the relationship between workers and US war-making looks like one of universal disempowerment, as depicted in the first and third rows: US industrial workers in the heartlands and dockworkers at US ports were structurally empowered by war-making arrangements in the mid-twentieth century. The neoliberal industrial restructuring and supply chain flexibilization that emerged in response to workers' strength reduced this power by the twenty-first century. But the story changes if we incorporate different spaces (the second and fourth rows) into the frame. New epicentres of industrial workers' unrest emerged in the "gunbelt" in response to the very same structural changes that were undermining workers in the heartlands. And in global military supply chains, the same changes that blunted US-based dockworkers' power ultimately increased firms' and the military's reliance on a globally dispersed and mistreated workforce—who are operating at the chokepoints of war-making and have demonstrated greater capacity for disruption than their counterparts in, for example, Vietnam did.

The analysis presented here thus provides a more clear-eyed view of the relationship between war and workers' power than either the ahistorical optimism offered by those parroting the old military-Keynesian consensus or the race-to-the-bottom pessimism common in examinations of neoliberal change. While the workers making war in the twenty-first century may not be structurally powerful enough to lead the vanguard of the labour movement or serve as the cornerstone of a new social

compact (as they had in the mid-twentieth century), they are also not victims of linear disempowerment in the wake of military and economic restructuring. By identifying where and how war workers have disruptive power today, a relational approach that takes time and space seriously can be a boon to scholars and organisers alike.

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