Rethinking War and Workers' Power for the Twenty-First Century

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ABSTRACT

In the face of escalating social and geopolitical conflict around the world, the relationship between war and workers' movements is set to play an outsized role in shaping the twenty-first century. This special issue reevaluates the dominant understandings of this relationship, past and present. In this introductory article, we set the stage for this reevaluation and briefly articulate three broad conclusions that can be drawn when we cast our gaze across the articles in this issue: (i) war's effect on workers' power is neither universal nor unidimensional; (ii) changes in warfare and war-making have changed how war shapes workers' power; and (iii) many workers still have war-borne power today, even if it looks different than in the past.

KEYWORDS

War-making, sanctions, geopolitical conflict, internationalism, power resources

Introduction

It is undeniable that war causes death, destruction, suffering, repression, and social dislocations. Can it also empower workers? Historically, there was a sense that it could, at least under certain conditions. The reliance on working people to participate in war processes—which grew to new heights in the industrial era of mass mobilized warfare—provided them with leverage that they used in struggles with states and employers (Tilly, 1990; Silver, 2015). As governments required working people to produce weapons, serve as soldiers, pay taxes, and support the national cause, interactions between rulers and subjects—including labour struggles, revolts, and revolutions—mediated the formation of states ("war made the state and the state made war," as Tilly (1975:42) famously quipped), the expansion of civil and political rights (Kestnbaum, 2002; Lachmann, 2013; Mettler, 2005; Parker, 2009), the development of the welfare state (e.g., Skocpol, 1992; Skocpol, 1995; Grünewald, 2022; Knutsen and Rasmussen, 2018; Koehler-Derrick and Lee, 2023; Obinger, Petersen, and Starke, 2018; Schmitt and Shriwise, 2023), and reductions in inequality (Scheidel ,2017; Piketty, 2014). Mobilization for war thus provided at least some workers with political leverage, disruptive capacity, and discursive influence that they used to shape the direction of polities and institutions (e.g., Koistinen ,1973; Lichtenstein, 1982; Wehrle, 2003).

But there is a growing sense that this phenomenon of workers' war-borne empowerment was limited to (1) the working classes of the West, where a 'labour aristocracy' was in a privileged position

to reap rewards from their governments' global belligerence, and (2) the industrial era, when war-making meant labour-intensive mobilization.[1] With the wars of the twenty-first century, which are more likely to be capital-intensive and concentrated in the global South, the conclusions reached from studies of Western workers in the industrial era may no longer hold.

This relationship—between war and workers' power—deserves careful reappraisal. It is a core premise of this special issue that the interactions between geopolitical conflict and workers' movements are likely to be among the defining forces of the twenty-first century, and thus demand our sustained scholarly attention.

Was the industrial war-making of the modern era really as beneficial for working people as the existing literature tells us? Is the capital-intensive war-making of today really lacking any opportunities for workers' movements, as the widespread perception of neoliberal restructuring suggests? Are war-borne opportunities for movements limited to workers in the West? Is there any hope for working people to use the mounting war, conflict, and militarism around the world as leverage in their struggles with their states and employers? To the extent such leverage exists, is it doomed to national chauvinism and militarist politics?

The articles that follow explore these questions. They were developed in conversation with one another, through a series of workshops, meetings, and exchanges held over the past year. Each contribution has its own set of questions and concerns, but all started from the premise that an exploration of the relationship between war and workers' power can be extremely fruitful for making sense of the dynamics of social and geopolitical conflict today.

This special issue approaches "war" broadly to encompass not just military fighting but also the various forms of bellicose statecraft we see today, including comprehensive economic sanctions, interstate rivalries, military buildups, and arms transfers. The authors also examine war's relationship to "workers' power" broadly: in some cases, exploring the relationship between war and workers in specific industries involved in war-making, while in others exploring the effect of war on the working class as a whole. Many focus on workers' "power resources" (Schmalz, Ludwig, and Webster, 2018) directly, while others focus on the outcomes or trajectories of workers' struggles. We let each contribution define these core concepts for themselves, as necessitated by their particular inquiries.

In all articles, however, the authors' contributions help readers make better sense of our present moment of mounting social conflicts and rising interstate rivalries. What's more, though this special issue is first and foremost a work of social science scholarship, to the close reader, this collection of articles may also aid in the articulation of a working-class, anti-war, and internationalist politics attuned to twenty-first-century dynamics—rather than one stuck in the debates of the past.

The Articles in This Special Issue

The special issue begins with an intervention by Hanna Goldberg, who reassesses the dominant narrative of war-borne workers' power in the United States through a review of archival materials and

[1] On the importance of approaching the historical realities of wartime work in the global South, see, for example, Bender and Lipman (2015), Friedman (2017), Fink and Greene (2016), and Nagaraja (2025). On changes with the move away from labour-intensive mobilization for war, see, for example, Payne (2023) and Brenes (2023).

a close analysis of Taft-Hartley injunctions. Goldberg closely examines workers' movements in the US armaments industries over the Cold War decades, finding that state intervention, on the whole, curtailed efforts at collective bargaining. Workers' involvement in war-making, she argues, posed substantially more challenges to union organizing than is traditionally recognized in the literature.

Corey R. Payne's article continues this reassessment of the relationship between US war-making and workers' power, tracing the relationship through the neoliberal era and across national borders. He draws on new datasets on labour conflict in the US military's global supply chains to argue for a relational approach that takes both temporal and spatial dynamics seriously, showing how the weakening of workers' structural power in some sites of war production coincided with, and contributed to, structural leverage in others. Read together, Goldberg and Payne's contributions push back against explanations – historical and contemporary – of US wars as either a clear-cut blessing or curse for US labour.

George Briley, James Eastwood, Khem Rogaly, and Charlie Thomas shift our attention across the Atlantic, drawing on interviews with trade unionists and arms sector workers across the United Kingdom to provide a detailed account of the labour politics of the UK's military sector from the 1970s to the present, pushing back against simplistic narratives of workers' power erosion via deindustrialization. They argue that the overall trajectory for British military industry workers has been one of declining associational power at the hands of a management-state alliance of reorganized production and union partnerships. Nevertheless, the current conjuncture—with brittle and time-sensitive armaments supply chains, the politicization of arms exports, the expansion of the arms industry into the technology and education sectors, and the broader political reckoning over British support for Israel—has not only yielded enduring structural power for workers, but may also present conditions for renewed rank-and-file associational power.

Amid escalating US-led militarism and European rearmament, these first three contributions provide useful historical context for our present moment. This is a project that continues with the final two articles in the issue, which again shift our focus: this time to Iran, which has faced sustained economic pressure (in the form of sanctions) and, more recently, military assault by the US, Israel, and their allies.

Ida Nikou's article examines how "sanctions-driven value-chain rupture" interacted with local labour dynamics to recompose the power resources of workers in two cases in Iran: labour movements at a heavy-equipment manufacturer and across energy projects. Nikou shows how the sanctions regime eroded workers' marketplace power generally, but that divergences in the cases hinged on manufacturing activity, not strategic position alone–where production is already intermittent, workers have less power, yet where work is left running, workers can impose real, if temporary, costs on employers.

Zep Kalb also examines the effect of sanctions on Iranian workers' power resources, recasting the question on a national scale. Through an examination of original protest event data, administrative records, and government reports, he finds that, rather than simply eliminating or augmenting workers' power, sanctions ultimately reorganized and redistributed it among labour groups, shaping successive waves of labour unrest in the 2010s and 2020s.

Each of the articles in this special issue thus contributes to the reexamination of the relationship between war and workers' power: questioning old truisms, contributing new empirical research, and articulating important (and often underexamined) dimensions of a relationship that will play an

outsized role in shaping the coming decades. Moreover, taken together, this special issue is also 'more than the sum of its parts.' By casting our gaze across the articles that follow, we can identify at least three major conclusions.

Conclusion #1: War's effect on workers' power is neither universal nor unidimensional.

The articles in this issue demonstrate that the relationship between war and workers' power is not a binary one—in which a particular war or conflict either empowers working people or not. Instead, war's effects unfold along multiple dimensions and across uneven geographies, and it is these multiple relationships that must be identified and explored.

Payne, for example, explores the global dimensions of US war-making to show that the same mobilization arrangements that structurally empower workers in some spaces (e.g., inside the United States) disempower workers in others (e.g., in ports in Vietnam) and vice versa. Rather than the industrial wars of the twentieth century yielding universal empowerment for workers involved in making war, he finds that this empowerment was dependent upon arrangements that yielded different labour relations in different places.

Using the language of the power resources approach (Schmalz et al., 2018), we might say that while Payne focuses on the dynamic nature of these workers' *structural* empowerment—power derived from their position in the economic system (Silver, 2003; Wright, 2000)—Goldberg shifts our attention to how this structural empowerment was not necessarily translated into labour-strengthening *associational* or *institutional* arrangements for US-based (armaments production) industrial workers. In fact, Goldberg finds that state involvement in war production industries curtailed such sources of power and came, overall, at a great cost to labour's collective bargaining rights. Her article thus questions the dominant story of empowerment on the US home front during the Cold War—perhaps the ideal-typical version of this relationship—showing that this story of empowerment or disempowerment cannot be reduced to a single dimension.

This multidimensional thinking is also picked up in the other articles in this issue. For Briley (et. al.), arrangements in the British armaments industry have led to eroding associational power but continuing structural power. They argue that we need to assess the combinations of types of power resources holistically, as "arms workers' associational power [is] a precondition for exercising structural power" (Briley et al., 2026: 177)—examining one dimension would thus only tell us part of the story.

Kalb shows how economic sanctions on Iran, rather than leading to universal disempowerment of Iranian workers, rearticulates different dimensions of those workers' power resources (shifting the structural, institutional, and societal terrains of struggle)—a finding that echoes Nikou, who shows how, amidst the backdrop of sanctions, workers retained leverage in some sites but not others. The core determinant, for her, is the continuity of the labour process—whether sanctions left production idle or whether they meant employers or the state were relying on production to be continuous. In both contributions, the effect of economic warfare is thus variegated. More than simply arguing that the relationship between war and workers' power is context dependent, however, this collection of articles begins to map out tools to allow scholars to make sense of patterns. An implication of Nikou's and Payne's articles is that examining certain arrangements of the labour process can help explain

variation in the effect of war, conflict, or sanctions on workers' power. Likewise, an implication of Briley et al., Kalb, and Goldberg's articles is that even war-borne empowerment along one dimension (say, structurally) does not mean that the overall outcome is a powerful or successful workers' movement, if other dimensions of power (e.g., associational, institutional) are undermined by conflict or war-making arrangements.

In short, the special issue shows that thinking universally or unidimensionally about this relationship is necessarily limiting. What is required instead is a closer examination of the scales and dimensions of processes of war-borne (dis)empowerment, the timelines on which those processes unfold, and the kinds of worker groups involved in or impacted by them.

Conclusion #2: Changes in warfare and war-making have changed how war shapes workers' power

The first major conclusion of this special issue is that the broad relationships between war and workers' power are multidimensional and vary according to their contexts. Yet that does not mean that no patterns exist. Indeed, our second major conclusion is that there have been identifiable evolutionary changes over time. The relationship between war and workers' power has been broadly rearticulated as militaries have, especially in the West, abandoned mass mobilization methods of war, developing what Martin Shaw (2005) has called a "new Western way of war" that "transfers" risks away from Western soldiers through capital-intensive methods and private contractors, giving rise to the age of a "post-modern military" (Moskos, Williams, and Segal, 2000).

Moreover, the neoliberal restructuring of industrial production and the global logistics revolution mean that the historical relationship between wartime production and workers' empowerment may no longer be as salient as it once was (Cowen, 2014; Goldberg, 2025; Payne, 2023). In the US, this has been especially apparent as the geopolitical priorities of the US military have shifted (e.g., from ground wars in the Middle East to rivalry with China), thus changing its material needs from urgently needed, mass-produced wartime materials to small-batch, pie-in-the-sky tech with long development timelines—reducing labour's disruptive capacity (Payne, 2020). Meanwhile, the same neoliberal forces that have wreaked havoc on industrial unions have also eroded workers' associational power in the war industries (e.g., Barnes, 2026).

Understanding how these transformations have unfolded in multiple contexts is a key contribution of this special issue. Payne explores this transformation in the US, showing how the assault on industrial workers on the US home front has placed outsourced labour at critical chokepoints in global military logistics networks, changing the dynamics of the relationship by shifting the locus of structural empowerment. Briley and colleagues trace how these neoliberal transformations in war and production shape the industrial workforce in Britain, arguing that the overall trajectory has been one of disempowerment of workers' associational power at the hands of a management-state alliance bent on reorganizing production. Nevertheless, these reorganizations ultimately created the conditions for British armaments workers' continued structural empowerment—in a parallel to Payne's conclusions—and may open opportunities to renew their associational capacity via political linkages.

Patterned changes over time have not been limited to the West, of course. Some scholars argue that neoliberal globalization has brought about an era of "new wars" across the global South as market forces weakened state power around the world, creating the conditions for civil wars and insurgencies (e.g., Kaldor, 2012, Collier, 2010). Others point to the ways in which neoliberal plunder or a "new imperialism" shape both state capacity and the everyday lives of working people in countries that have experienced the brunt of Western wars and interventions (Harvey, 2003; Schwartz, 2008). Scholars of the Middle East have studied the impact of violent civil war on labour movements in countries like Iraq (Majed, 2020) and Syria (Daher, 2023). Still others note how many dangerous, low-paid jobs in America's empire are outsourced to a mobile and global class of 'third-country nationals', drawn from countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Philippines, Turkey, Bosnia, and Nepal (Coburn, 2018).

Indeed, such political-economic changes shape the background conditions for this issue's contributions on Iran. In Iran, the 1980–88 war with Iraq served as a catalyst for market reforms and austerity. Yet after the war, the Iranian government also enacted significant social legislation. Although state-linked labour actors were involved in drafting these bills, they were adopted at a time when Iranian workers, demoralized by one of the bloodiest and longest wars of the twentieth century, wielded far less structural or associational power than they did in the years immediately following the 1979 revolution (Kalb, 2022). Past dynamics thus shaped the terrain of later years. These historical legacies provided some labour groups in Iran with resources for worker claim-making in the more recent sanctions period, while constraining mobilizational power for other groups, as Kalb and Nikou show in complementary studies.

These articles also draw our attention to another key transformation in interstate conflict: the rise of comprehensive economic sanctions. Much contemporary warfare takes place in the 'cloud': in the form of cyberattacks, or through the securitization and weaponization of trade and financial infrastructures (Mallard and Sun, 2024). This type of warfare looks quite different from other types of military conflicts and mobilizations, and thus requires new sets of analytical, methodological, and theoretical tools to examine—ones that draw from what past explorations of the relationship between war and workers' power have uncovered, without being bogged down by their limitations in a rapidly changing geopolitical space. Scholars of economic sanctions, which mostly impact countries in the global (semi-)periphery, have tended to emphasize their harmful collateral effects, including on workers (Gordon, 2010; Jones, 2015; Perry and Peksen, 2024). Nikou and Kalb, in their examinations of Iranian worker power in the face of US-led sanctions, contribute to this important area of inquiry.

Across articles, then, a major conclusion is that transformations in warfare and production in the neoliberal era are important factors shaping the way workers' movements relate to war. These changes proceeded in an identifiable pattern that unfolded differently in different places, and must be traced along multiple dimensions and geographies. But perhaps most importantly, this trajectory allows us to arrive at the third major conclusion of this issue: despite these changes, war can still empower some workers today.

Conclusion #3: Many workers still have war-borne power today, even if it looks different than in the past

The articles demonstrate that these transformations and rearticulations have not completely eliminated war-borne workers' power, even if changes in warfare and in global political-economic arrangements have reshaped what that power looks like. Payne shows that, for US war-making, workers' empowerment is more likely to be found among the non-citizen labour at global logistics chokepoints than in factories on the home front. Kalb shows that economic warfare reorganized resources and opportunities within and across worker groups in Iran, rather than eliminating them *tout court*. Nikou shows how these sanctions interacted with existing production and employment structures to reshape conditions of work with some workers nevertheless able to "impose real costs", even as various factors limited the durability of gains. And Briley and colleagues show how neoliberal transformations not only increase the number of chokepoints in contemporary war-making, they may also ultimately open up a more favourable political environment for working class movements as discontent with expansive militarism and the politics it engenders grows.

In short, war can yield resources and opportunities for different worker groups in the twenty-first century. But what can this power achieve? As a whole, this special issue raises doubts that it can be leveraged by labour movements into the same kinds of narrow gains won by industrial workers in the West in the classic literature on the twentieth century.

In the United States, for example, the opportunity for war-borne empowerment meant that most labour unions historically aligned themselves with dominant foreign policy, as a means of promoting their narrow interests (Ahlquist and Levi, 2013), even if it ultimately resulted in institutional isolation or neoliberal pushback (Schuhrke, 2024). This often came at the expense of broader coalitions, for example with students and anti-war actors, the civil rights movement, and global justice campaigns more critical of US foreign policy. But this proved to be a mixed bargain, as Goldberg shows—entering into understandings with a militaristic state tended to be more limiting than beneficial. These belligerent social compacts between the 'labour aristocracy' and their states characterized the West in the modern era. Industrial workers became invested in war as it provided them with disruptive power and influence.

But the contributions of this issue point to the need to think beyond such compacts in order for workers to leverage the war-borne influence they have today. For example, Payne shows how the locus of workers' wartime empowerment has shifted away from US manufacturing labour (the core of the old compact) and toward non-citizen labour across the US military's global logistics networks. A nationalist compact between workers and domestic elites, modeled on twentieth century arrangements, would not be able to leverage these sources of workers' power (see also Bondy, 2026). Instead, labour internationalism is required.

Briley and his colleagues show something similar in the UK: growing opposition to international arms sales and British support for Israel, and the mounting influence of the military industries in the tech and education sectors have created a moment that may be ripe for a more anti-militarist labour movement. But to succeed, manufacturing workers would need to promote societal linkages and resist their incorporation into a militarist project.

This is not an unrealistic possibility. One can see the seeds of workers' internationalism sprouting all over the world, even as war and interstate conflict escalate: from Italian dockworkers threatening a strike in defense of an aid flotilla bound for Gaza to Mexican volunteers ignoring a US blockade and shipping aid to Cuba (Giordano, 2025; Hernandez, 2026). As Andrea Bottalico (2026) and Rafeef Ziadah (2026) argued in the last issue of this journal, the workers whose labour helps to produce and

supply the tools of war have a special responsibility and opportunity in this moment—even though "structural leverage does not automatically translate into political action," and therefore a broadly inclusive approach to any workers' movement against war is required (Ziadah, 2026: 110).

Whether such seeds of internationalism will grow or not is an open question—one that, though not at the center of our inquiries, this special issue nonetheless gives us some tools to think through. As E. H. Carr (1945: 20–21) put it, when World War I broke out, "The mass of workers knew instinctively on which side their bread was buttered" and the idea that "the worker had no fatherland… ignominiously collapsed." The promises of workers' internationalism were abandoned as the ruling classes convinced the mass of workers that their best bet for freedom and prosperity was on the side of national belligerence. Even a cursory analysis of the relationship between war and workers' power in and for the twenty-first century makes an analogous conclusion far from obvious. In our period of escalating conflicts around the world, understanding the prospects of, benefits for, and limits to either a series of nationalist, war-tied labour movements *or* an internationalist, anti-war movement takes on special importance.

The first step, we have argued, is an analysis of war that puts labour squarely in the foreground. The articles that follow do precisely that. It is our hope that this issue, rather than offering a 'last word' on this topic, instead serves as an early intervention in a new wave of scholarship rethinking the evolving relationship between war, labour movements, and workers' power for the twenty-first century.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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