Industrial Action in South Africa (2000–2020): Reading Strike Statistics Qualitatively

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses strike statistics over the last twenty years (2000–2020) in South Africa to have a concrete understanding of the state of labour (organised and unorganised). The article makes a new contribution by showing how one can use Lenin's quantitative method as a framework which I develop to assist in reading the qualitative aspects of worker mobilisation, an aspect which is markedly absent from contemporary analyses of labour. By utilising the quantitative method, the article shows whether the labour movement as an agent of social change is withering away, and who the leading sections (per industrial sector) of the labour movement are; it also indicates the qualitative shifts over time. The trends over the last twenty years indicate that there have been demonstrable qualitative shifts in strike dynamics in South Africa.

KEYWORDS

South Africa; strike statistics; industrial action; Lenin

Introduction

Despite the centrality of strikes in the role and formation of trade unions, the scholarly contribution by social scientists to empirical research on strikes is rather slim (Vandaele, 2011; Van der Velden, 2012; Nowak and Gallas, 2014; Bischoff, 2015; Blecher and Zipp, 2015; Pohl, 2018; Cottle, 2021). The quantitative analysis of strikes has largely been the domain of economists who are interested in strike frequencies and their impact on the economy, government labour departments monitoring industrial action and industrial relations consultancies advising business.

Quantitative studies of strikes have been used as evidence to advance competing theories such as business cycle, political exchange, mobilisation, institutional, product cycle and long wave theories (Franzozi, 1995: 12–13). I agree with Franzozi (1995: 12) who has arguably conducted the most extensive quantitative study of strikes; he states that "one of the most serious problems in the literature is the lack of integration between competing approaches" as each of the theories were narrow and unable to consider the multiplicity of processes that lie in the genesis of strikes. The preoccupation of strike theories has been to establish causation, and the quantitative approaches or choices of data have been developed and collated to support or dispute an established theory. However, this article does not seek to establish the causation of strikes in South Africa. I have already dealt with this issue elsewhere (Cottle, 2017, 2019) and will refer to this in the article where necessary.

This article makes a new contribution by showing how one can use Lenin's quantitative method as a framework (Cottle, 2021), which I develop to assist in reading the qualitative aspects of worker mobilisation, an aspect which is markedly absent from an analysis of labour conflicts.

Lenin's method is distinguished not by his use of aggregate strike data or ratios but by his qualitative interpretation of key strike indices such as number of strikes, strikers and days lost which subsequent works have limited to describing as levels of "strike intensity" and its various synonyms (Shorter and Tilly, 1974; Screpanti, 1987; Mandel, 1995; Silver, 2003). This article provides a framework on using strike data over a lengthy period (the trends) to illuminate qualitative changes in strike dynamics. The framework is useful as it assists in identifying strike wave years where qualitive changes have taken place, which can then be used for a more detailed qualitative analysis. In other words, the framework also highlights areas for further investigation. To demonstrate the approach of Lenin this article analyses strike statistics over the last two decades (2000–2020) in South Africa to assist in a concrete understanding of the state of labour (organised and unorganised). To qualify, by unorganised I mean workers who may have informal organisation but who are not unionised. By utilising the quantitative method, the analysis will show whether the labour movement as an agent of social change is withering away, who the leading sections (per industrial sector) of the labour movement are and the shifts over time. The trends over the last twenty years indicate that there have been demonstrable qualitative shifts in strike dynamics in South Africa. The shifts include marked increases in intensity of industrial action, the introduction of new tactics by trade unions, the entry of new layers of workers and industry into industrial action with new demands, new policies and increased levels of unity between permanent and contracted workers (casual, part-time, fixed-term contract, seasonal) with varying levels of precariousness. Finally, the article shows that strike action in South Africa must be located within a long-term perspective, within the ebbs and flows of class struggle, failing which short-term analysis will result in reaching mistaken conclusions.

The Quantitative and the Qualitative

Lenin (1910, 1912a, 1913) and Trotsky (1933: 26), using strike statistics in Russia, argue that a significant quantitative increase in strikes would signal qualitative changes in working-class consciousness. The initial distinction was between economic and political strikes, where the latter represented a higher level of consciousness and periods of mass mobilisation. Hobsbawm (2015: 127) argues that strike waves "mark qualitative as well as quantitative changes" and that a detailed study of strike waves would reveal qualitative changes in strike tactics, levels of coordination, new ideas and policies, and the extension of strikes and trade unionism to new industries. Screpanti (1987: 100) similarly argues that "any changes occurring in the 'qualitative' nature of class struggle ... should also manifest themselves in the intensity of strike waves". To measure qualitative notions such as "intensification of class struggle" (Mandel, 1995: 34), "explosions" (Hobsbawm, 2015: 127) and "high points of labour unrest" (Silver, 2003: 37), strike theorists identified measurement as a key problem. Shorter and Tilly (1974: 106–7) argue that "a 'strike wave' occurs when both the number of strikes and the number of strikers in a given year exceed the mean of the previous five years by more than 50 percent". However, Beittel (1995: 93), using Shorter and Tilly's measurement of a wave year, suggests that the number of working days lost as established by Bordogna and Provasi (1979) can also be used to identify strike waves. Considering these discrepancies in measuring strike waves, three key aggregate measures of strikes should be used to test the presence of strike waves. These are: the number of strikes (frequency, F), the number of strikers (size, S) and the number of days lost (D). There would be variations in the combinations of F, S and D depending on the specificity of the country under study.

However, a key limitation of Shorter and Tilly's measure of a strike wave year is that strike

waves may peak and remain at a similar level for years, and the years that follow may not qualify as a wave year because of the problem of moving averages (Franzozi, 1995: 261). In other words, a strike wave may last for three, five or even ten years but Shorter and Tilly's measure may not pick up those years as wave years. While the Shorter and Tilly measure is extremely useful in identifying a wave year, each year in the period of study should be carefully considered in the analysis of strikes, including those regarded as outliers. For Marxists each strike counts regardless of size or impact. This is because the initial spark that culminates in a wave year may occur in prior years and the strike wave is the combined effect of strikes in "static and expanding industries, technically inert and dynamic ones" (Hobsbawm, 2015: 145). For example, the year in which a general strike occurs is generally a product of culmination of grievances of prior years, and where either F, D or S peaks (or combinations thereof peak) then that year is also regarded as a strike wave year (Cottle, 2019: 38). The strength of using aggregate numbers for each year of a period under study is because each strike year counts in an analysis, marking ebbs and flows in the historical timeline of strikes. Shorter and Tilly's (1974) visualisation of changes in strike dynamics, a parallelogram which they term the "shape of strikes", is useful for comparing different periods of labour mobilisation but is unable to visually capture the dynamic fluctuations of strikes. The fluctuation of strikes, the ebbs and flows, are best captured visually in this study using line graphs. In so doing the peaks of strike waves graphically expressed in the line graph act as a guide which, like an exclamation, mark quantitative as well as qualitative changes. For Lenin, various combinations of the indices F, D and S are not limited to reflecting the qualitative notion of "strike intensity" but each index reflects a distinct qualitative change in the complexity of strike dynamics or the class struggle.

Lenin (1910) was the first to interpret strikes statistics to reveal the qualitative dimensions of strike action. Except for Trotsky (1933: 26), subsequent works have overlooked Lenin's method (Cottle, 2021). In his study of *Strike Statistics in Russia*, Lenin (1910) drew the conclusion that significant increases in the number of workers on strike (S) marked a change in *political consciousness and preparedness* of workers to strike. Strike waves denoted by (S) are of rare occurrence and mark the entry of workers on a mass scale, the outcome of which creates ruptures or generates significant political events. Well-known examples of these include May 1968, the Arab Spring and the 1973 Durban strikes in South Africa. On the other hand, Lenin (1912b), when studying the role of metalworkers in strike action in Russia, concluded that significant increases in days lost to production (D) indicates how *determined* workers are and the extent to which they are prepared to make sacrifices. The most determined or most persistent workers, Lenin concluded, constituted a vanguard of the workers' movement. Strike waves denoted by (D) will generally signify socio-economic protest, new levels of coordination and new tactics brought about by drawn-out power struggles between labour, capital and/or the state. Lenin, however, only viewed strike frequency (F) in relation to the prominence of economic or political strikes and their fluctuations over time to draw conclusions on the national consciousness of workers in Russia. In my view increases in strike frequency (F) also reflect an increase or decrease in the *organisational capacity to strike*. This becomes an increasing factor especially during strike waves where new layers of workers, especially unorganised workers, and workers from industries where strike action seldom occurs, are drawn into strike action. There are also new displays of unity among workers, and strike waves denoted by (F) also tend to generate new demands.

It is important to note that F, S and D operate at three interrelated levels: national and industry levels (macro), and the level where specific strikes take place (micro). The interpretation of strikes requires a level of flexibility as the specific contexts start to shift, and as strike waves tend to build on each, the qualitative dimensions between F, S and D can appear to become blurred. It is therefore important not to view F, S or D as operating completely separately but as a tendency, as

they are operate at different levels in every strike.

The three main indices of strike measurement (F, D and S) on the line graphs are useful in that they indicate qualitative changes, even if we are not familiar with the socio-economic context and the kinds of organisation or types of workers involved in strike activity. However, the aggregate measures of F, D and S are only the starting point of the analysis, and not a substitute for the use of more complex strike ratios which Lenin also used in his study of strikes. In this sense, the aggregate data is the starting point of the quantitative analysis. The point of interest is that Lenin's qualitative interpretation of quantitative indices (F, D and S) creates a framework to guide a more detailed qualitative analysis of strikes. Due to the limitations of a journal article, this article will focus on developing Lenin's quantitative framework by application to South Africa and will not attempt a detailed qualitative analysis, which should be regarded as a next stage for later works.

The strike data used in the study is from the *Annual Industrial Action Reports* published by South Africa's Department of Employment and Labour (DEL). The data compiled in these reports is comprehensive and extensive, and includes aggregate figures and ratios on strikes in various provinces and by industry. As an example of the comprehensiveness of these reports, the *Annual Industrial Action Report 2020* carried fifteen tables and fourteen figures on industrial action in South Africa. I have compiled selective strike data from these annual reports covering the period 2000 to 2020 in order to conduct a quantitative analysis of strike dynamics in South Africa.

South Africa's Economic and Social Context

A political revolution brought about the dismantling of apartheid South Africa in 1994. At the same time, this transformation restored capitalist profitability and promoted a neo-liberal dispensation. The social democratic Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which had been put forward by the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), was disbanded after two years and replaced with the neo-liberal Growth Employment and Redistribution Programme (GEAR). The labour movement – which is aligned to the African National Congress (ANC), the country's ruling party – had sought a social contract which in some cases represented direct challenges to the ruling party's policies. The battle around the changes to the labour process which began in the 1980s and the subsequent amendments to the Labour Relations Act of 1995 saw labour on the back foot as the changes legalised a two-tier labour market that divided the workforce between standard and non-standard forms of employment (Theron, Godfrey and Lewis, 2005: 1). Economic activity in both the public sector and private sector encouraged a proliferation of subcontracting and outsourcing which included the growth of labour-broking companies. This created both a crisis of representation of non-standard workers (Kenny and Webster, 1998: 221) and the general weakening of the workplace power of labour. Combined with the internationalisation of South African capitalism (Saul and Bond, 2014: 151), for the next fifteen years South Africa's real growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) averaged 4.3 per cent (SARB, 2017). In effect the advent of democracy in South Africa gave way to a long wave of capitalist expansion based upon a neo-liberal growth model. By 1997 COSATU's Commission on the Future of Trade Unions (the September Commission) concluded that the impact of labour market flexibility had brought about a dramatic differentiation and fragmentation of the organised labour movement (COSATU, 1997). The liberalisation of the South African economy had also brought about an increased capital intensity of production which, combined with an adaptation to global competition, led to radical technological changes in the workplace (Black, Craig and Dunne, 2017). Levels of unemployment rose concomitantly with rapid increases in capital intensity, from 16 per

cent in 1990 to 24 per cent in 1995 and 30 per cent by 2000 (Statistics South Africa, 2014). It would take a long while before strikes as a prominent feature of South African industrial relations would finally show signs of abating, but not for long. The number of strikes declined significantly between 2000 and 2004. These strikes were defensive and mostly concerned a struggle against retrenchments. The Department of Employment and Labour (2003: 2) attributed the decline in the number of strikes to the amendment of the Labour Relations Act in 1995, through which the "attendant improvement in dispute resolution procedures has led to a greater predictability around the bargaining process and a sustained reduction in the incidence of strike activity". In other words, the industrial relations system acted as a counter to strikes – but only for a short while. However, the Department's prognosis of "predictability" quickly fell apart as several strike waves unexpectedly broke out in 2005–2007, 2010, 2012 and 2014. However, as indicated above, Shorter and Tilly's (1974) measure of strike waves is a narrow measure of strike wave dynamics and, if strictly applied, the period between 2005 and 2014 saw six wave years. But strike wave fluctuations, marking ebbs and flows, form part of the overall motion of strikes and thus must be viewed in totality. It is in this sense that I refer to the 2005–2014 period as a ten-year wave. A detailed analysis of strike statistics provides a useful objective basis from which to identify changes in strike dynamics and new national trends in industrial action.

National Trends in Strike Action

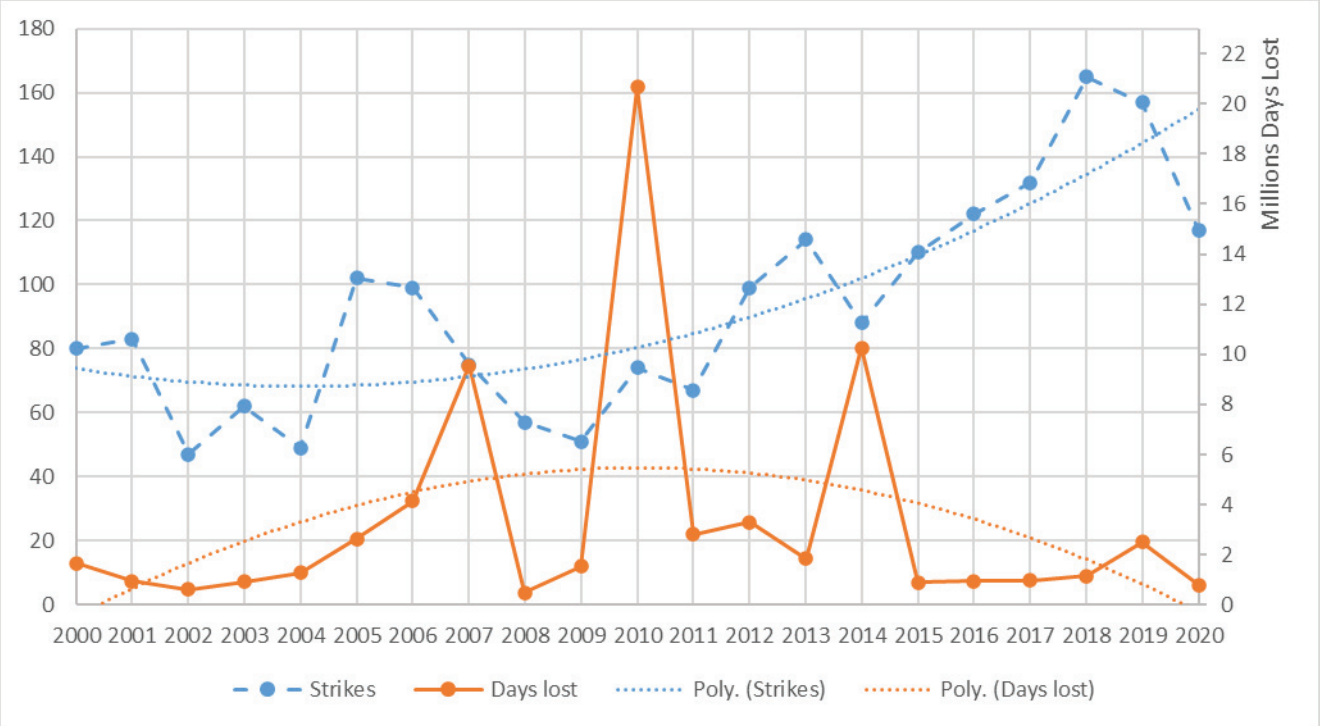
Figure 1 provides a visual expression of where past trends of strike action end and new trends begin. There is a downward trend from 2000 to 2004 after which one can observe a new peak in strikes in 2005. We can observe that although strike activity fluctuates (the ebb and flow) the trend is that the number of strikes doubled from 80 strikes in 2000 to 165 strikes in 2019 before abating to 117 strikes in 2020. By viewing strikes over the long term we can observe whether the trend line is curved downwards or upwards. We can call this the curve of the class struggle. From 2000 to 2020 the curve of the class struggle shows an upward trend, indicating an increase in the organisational capacity to strike.

However, if we look at the number of days lost and the number of strikers, the picture of the state of the class struggle alters. There were 1.7 million days lost in 2000 which increased to 9.5 million days lost in 2007 and reached its highest level in 2010 with 20.6 million days lost; it subsequently decreased to 10.2 million days lost in 2014 and to an all-time low of 0.7 million days lost in 2020. Although the decline in days lost in 2020 can be attributed to the hard lockdown South Africa experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, the trend in days lost after 2014 was on a downward trajectory. Unlike strike frequency, which shows an upward trend, the trend in days lost tells us that strike determination levels are below 2000 levels. The key reason for this difference between strike frequency and days lost is because days lost (strike determination) is dependent upon enormous financial sacrifices workers make during strike action. It is this determination level which tells us which sections of workers are willing to make the most sacrifices (financial, physical and psychological) and constitute the vanguard of the workers' movement, both organised and unorganised. After prolonged periods of sacrifice, workers become exhausted (Trotsky, 1921) and the strike determination level drops.

Like days lost, the number of strikers is also a more episodic variable and is dependent upon the changing consciousness of workers (see Figure 2). There are periods where workers display greater levels of militancy – that is, where they become confrontational, which may include incidents of strike violence. These periods where there was a general change in consciousness took

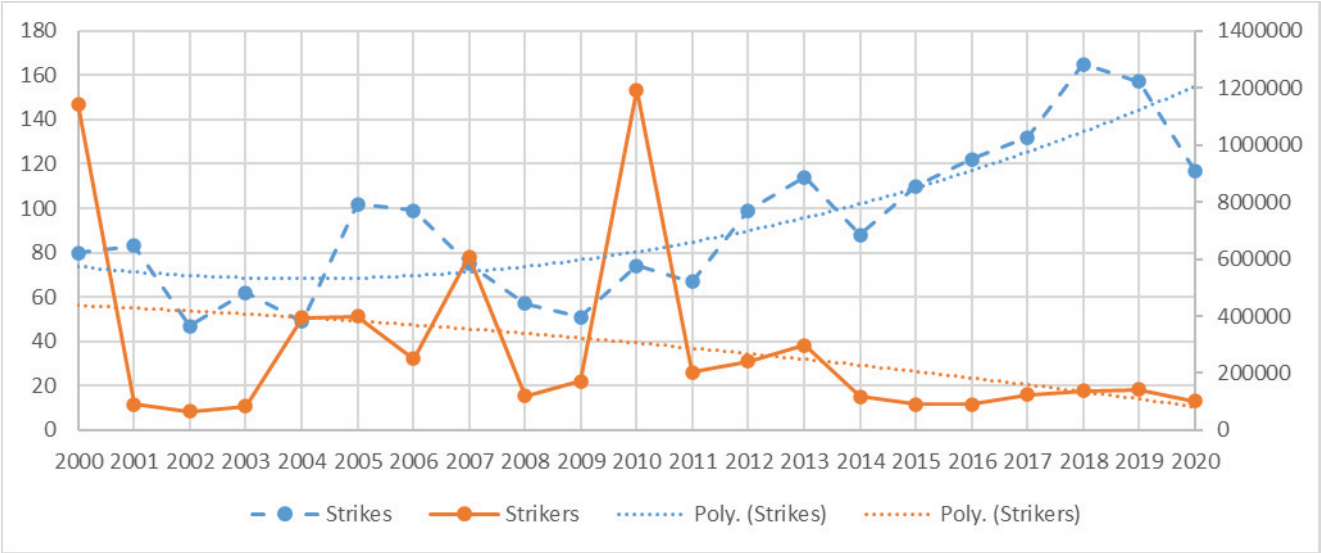
place around 2005 to 2014. The lower levels of worker participation since 2014 (compared to 2004–2013) in a context of increases in strike frequency tells us that most strikes are taking place in smaller industries where there is a smaller workforce. The recent trend in South Africa is one of a general retreat of the *mass of workers* participating in strike action. It is for this reason that we talk of the ebb and flow of the class struggle as workers cannot, due to financial, physical and psychological reasons, simply continue to struggle. Thus, while there is an increase in the number of strikes, at the same time fewer workers are involved in them. Overall, the peaks in strikes, days lost and the number of strikers tells us that these were significant periods of labour mobilisation or strike waves as they are commonly called. As strike waves mark qualitative and well as quantitative changes, strike statistics that are thorough are a useful tool in marking those years of significant qualitative changes in strike dynamics (more on this later).

As experience shows, in 2000–2004 the lower levels of worker participation and determination levels of workers in strikes indicated a period of a partial retreat, a period of recuperation for the working class to restore its energy before a new round of struggle is resumed (Trotsky, 1933: 27). To assess the combativity levels of different workers it is important to examine the extent to which strikes occur in the various industries.



Source: Author's own calculations based on strike data from Department of Employment and Labour's Annual Industrial Action Reports (2000–2020).
Note: Poly. = polynomial trendline

Figure 1: Strikes and days lost (2000–2020)



Source: Author's own calculations based on strike data from Department of Employment and Labour's Annual Industrial Action Reports (2000–2020).
Note: Poly. = polynomial trendline

Figure 2: Strikes and strikers (2000–2020)

Strike Trends at Industry Level

Between 2000 and 2020 just less than a third (32.7 per cent) of all strikes took place in community service (the public sector) with 637 strikes, followed by manufacturing which had 357 or 18.3 per cent and mining which had 238 or 12.2 per cent of all strikes (Table 1). The industry with the lowest strike frequency (36 or 1.8 per cent) is utilities (electricity, gas and water). Public sector workers are the leading section in terms of strike action in South Africa and in general have shown considerable increases in organisational capacity (F) to mobilise workers. Considering the strike rates over the period 2000–2020 we find that industries dominated by blue-collar workers make up approximately 63.4 per cent of all strike activity, while predominantly white-collar industries make up 36.6 per cent. A blue-collar job is typically some sort of manual or trade-related labour while a white-collar job is generally administrative and professional in nature. This is a significant finding as it disputes the narrative that blue-collar workers are no longer an important agent of change.

Table 1: Strikes per industrial sector (2000–2020)

Industrial Sector	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total	%
Agriculture, Hunting, Forestry and Fishing	15	6	1	5	5	6	5	3	2	2	1	3	5	5	6	5	9	7	5	6	7	**109**	**5,6%**
Mining and Quarrying	11	7	5	8	9	16	7	17	7	10	17	11	19	25	5	16	11	18	7	7	5	**238**	**12,2%**
Manufacturing	16	22	9	14	13	27	9	16	10	8	16	14	18	23	26	17	16	18	23	19	23	**357**	**18,3%**
Electricity, Gas and Water	3	1	1	3	1	2	1	1	0	1	2	2	3	1	2	1	5	1	2	3	0	**36**	**1,8%**
Construction	3	5	3	2	0	2	2	3	2	1	2	2	5	3	6	7	11	5	15	15	4	**98**	**5,0%**
Wholesale and Retail Trade and Restaurants and Hotels	6	2	11	8	4	11	7	4	4	4	9	12	6	9	2	8	6	9	21	17	5	**165**	**8,5%**
Transport, Storage and Communication	6	14	4	12	4	14	15	9	7	11	11	5	14	12	6	22	14	13	12	17	12	**234**	**12,0%**
Financing, Insurance, Real Estate and Business Services	3	0	0	1	2	3	5	3	5	4	4	3	1	2	30	0	3	3	3	0	1	**76**	**3,9%**
Community Services	17	26	13	9	11	21	48	19	20	10	12	15	28	34	5	34	47	58	77	73	60	**637**	**32,7%**
Total number of strikes per year	**80**	**83**	**47**	**62**	**49**	**102**	**99**	**75**	**57**	**51**	**74**	**67**	**99**	**114**	**88**	**110**	**122**	**132**	**165**	**157**	**117**	**1950**	**100,0%**

Source: Author's own calculations based on strike data from the Department of Employment and Labour's Annual Industrial Action Reports (2000-2020).

The determination levels (measured in days lost to production), which is the extent to which workers are willing to make sacrifices and their preparedness to strike (D), cannot simply be measured by the aggregate number of days lost per industry. If we take the period 2000–2020, then the public sector aggregate days lost amount to 34.8 million, mining to 19.2 million and manufacturing to 5.4 million. This makes the public sector the obvious leader in days lost to production. While the data tells us that most working days lost were in the public sector, various industries differ in size as they do not have the same number of workers employed. To make a comparison possible we must use the measure of the number of days lost per 1 000 workers per industry (Table 2).

In terms of this measure, between 2000 and 2020 the mining industry had an aggregate of 46 410 days lost per 1 000 workers, followed by the public sector with 13 913 days lost and transport with 5 102 days lost. Mineworkers are the most determined workers in the country – a vanguard; the Marikana Strike in 2012 and the historic five-month platinum strike in 2014 were clear demonstrations of power. The blue-collar mineworkers are followed by the white-collar public sector workers as the most determined workers in the country. Of interest is the fact that the strike determination levels of transport workers have overtaken those of manufacturing workers. Manufacturing workers were the most determined workers between 1990 and 1998, but were overtaken by the public sector by 1999.

Table 2: Time-loss ratio per industry per 1 000 employees (2000–2020)

Industry	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Agriculture	6	8	3	15	47	87	33	29	12	46	0	26	180	871	29	56	47	0	9	117	11	**1 632**
Mining	920	578	239	365	926	2 189	291	1 180	263	1 383	1 192	1 133	7 642	1 223	22 509	503	474	17	57	3 184	142	**46 410**
Manufacturing	142	459	47	82	63	185	174	395	38	184	225	462	109	193	267	23	44	21	129	76	98	**3 416**
Electricity	23	98	0	169	2	3	188	4	0	1	78	1	15	23	139	6	455	0	266	12	0	**1 483**
Construction	41	13	7	80	118	13	1	52	14	250	4	27	10	219	8	67	11	0	21	6	1	**960**
Wholesale, retail trade	65	0	10	69	2	126	425	6	5	9	134	16	5	150	12	23	6	0	54	77	1	**1 196**
Transport	359	556	14	55	212	930	297	45	45	343	829	31	166	135	27	273	311	44	360	53	18	**5 102**
Financial intermediation	0	0	0	0	32	9	1 091	8	8	6	9	1	1	229	2	0	16	0	1	0	0	**1 412**
Community services	789	84	386	5	204	171	473	3 533	70	82	7 045	504	36	6	20	48	61	4	84	153	156	**13 913**

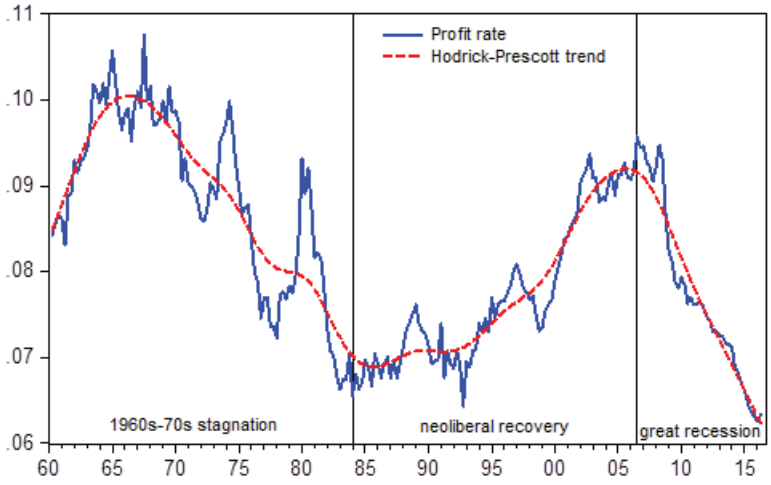
Source: Author's own calculations based on strike data from the Department of Employment and Labour's Annual Industrial Action Reports (2000–2020).

Qualitative Changes in Strike Dynamics

The use of quantitative data to identify qualitative changes in organisational capacity (F), preparedness to strike (S) and determination levels (D) of workers provides a useful framework when analysing strikes in conjunction with primary sources such as newspaper articles or secondary sources such as books and scholastic articles that analyse the strikes covered in the period of study. The framework also assists in identifying whether strike waves do mark qualitative changes such as the entry of new industries and new layers of workers, new tactics and new polices, a changing level of coordination including a change of the character of strikes from defensive to offensive strikes. Lenin (1912b) defined both offensive and defensive strikes: "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)".

Underpinning the upsurge in strike action since 2005 was the fact that the neo-liberal recovery in South Africa had deepened structural unemployment, and effective demand could only be sustained through expanding consumer debt. After a prolonged period of economic growth since

1990 the economy began to contract (Figure 3); GDP reached its peak in 2005 and with this came a declining rate of profit (Odhiambo, 2010: 208; Malikane, 2017: 13). The decline in the rate of profit forces capital to introduce changes to the labour process and generalised cost-cutting across industry, which intensifies workers' workplace grievances (Mandel, 1995: 30). It is in this period – 2000 to 2004 – when a decline in the rate of profit commences, where grievances become generalised and workers adopt a more radical approach to class struggle. It is in this context that the success of the industrial relations system was short-lived, with trade unions pushed to respond to member concerns. It is important to note that even within a period of a long wave of contraction the economy still fluctuates within business cycles.



Source: Malikane (2017)

Figure 3: Quarterly rate of profit in South Africa (1960 Q1 to 2016 Q2)

The 2005–2007 Strike Wave

As stated before, the period between 2000 and 2004 saw a decline in worker strike action; strikes were defensive, largely procedural and in compliance with the provisions of the Labour Relations Act (DEL, 2003, 2004, 2005). These latter strikes are referred to as procedural strikes. The strikes between 2005 and 2007, however, were distinct from those in previous years. In the context of an upswing in the business cycle, the strikes were largely offensive in character, with the strike waves engulfing all industries (except for construction), accompanied by increased levels of unprotected strikes. An unprotected strike is a strike that occurs without following the procedures outlined in the Labour Relations Act and can be wildcat or an organised industrial action undertaken by a trade union.

In 2004 the Department of Employment and Labour had expressed the view that, because of the conclusion of three-year collective bargaining agreements in various sectors, "one can expect only a lower level of industrial action in 2005". However, the number of strikes (F) doubled from 49 in 2004 to 102 in 2005 and the number of days lost (D) was 141 per cent higher than the previous five years. The view that quantitative increases in strikes also mark qualitative changes is well-established in the 2005 strike wave. Increase in organisational capacity (F) is demonstrated as the strike wave engulfed sectors that were not traditionally characterised by labour unrest, marking the entry or re-entry of layers of workers in the farm, fishing, airways and gold-mining industries. The

strike wave started with an offensive strike where workers demanded above-inflation wage increases. The Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) organised a strike at Nestle, followed by Delmonte and later a general strike at the Western Cape fishing industries. Of significance was the unity displayed between permanent and seasonal workers who challenged pay disparities among the workforce (Bell, 2014). This year also marked the entry of workers in new occupations, such as the strike by ground staff and cabin crew at South African Airways (SAA) (Bulbulia, 2005). Furthermore, it is in industries where there were more protracted strikes, where workers' determination levels (D) were higher, that a new tactic was employed and a new level of coordination reached between competing trade unions.

> The year 2005 has witnessed the emergence of multi-union strike incidents, like the municipal wage strike in July sanctioned and supported by SAMWU [South African Municipal Workers Union] and IMATU [Independent Municipal and Allied Trade Union]; X-Strata Alloys Lydenburg Works sanctioned by NUMSA [National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa] and Solidarity Union; and Electrical Cable strike called also by NUMSA and Solidarity Union (DEL*,* 2006: vi).

The 90 000 strong national gold miners' strike in 2005 was the first national strike of gold miners since the defeat of the 1987 miners' strike. The gold workers' strike alone accounted for 18.3 per cent of days lost to production. According to Solidarity, a mainly white trade union, the strike was "the first in the democratic South Africa in which trade unions united against the mining groups". Solidarity's competitor is the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) (*IOL*, 2005). Similarly, the multi-union tactic was also employed in the municipal and metal sectors. Along with the 102 strikes that year, COSATU called a one-day political strike against job losses and poverty, hoping to put pressure on the ANC policy conference that was to take place a few days later (*The Guardian,* 2005). Of particular interest in this instance is that calling for a general strike, which is not a normal feature of industrial action, demonstrates not only an increase in determination levels (D) but also can be marked qualitatively as socio-economic protests with unified demands of workers.

Overall, in a remarkable upsurge of working-class solidarity, 2005 was a year that witnessed the entry of precarious workers, where workers regardless of occupational and racial composition united, the re-emergence of wildcat strikes and general increases in the persistence levels of workers. The upswing in the economy, which lasted eight years, was twice the length of the previous business cycle. It was a suitable time to strike and the 2006 strike wave would build on the momentum of the 2005 wave.

The strike wave held on to the increased organisational capacity (F) and was marked by the entry of strikes by workers in business services, contract cleaning and security work. These strikes also included a first national strike by 20 000 contract cleaners and 90 000 security guards. The business service industry workers embarked on five strikes and surprised many as the industry which also displayed the highest determination levels (D) in that year. In 2006, business services had the largest share of working days lost: 1 302 592 compared to only 10 389 in 2005. The number of days (D) lost, which also included public sector and manufacturing workers that year, was double that of 2005 with 4.1 million days lost to production. In particular, the national strike by security workers and contract cleaners took a new turn, and the extent of strike violence (especially against scabs) was reminiscent of the revolutionary upsurge of the 1980s (DEL*,* 2006: 4). According to the Department of Employment and Labour, the "strike also reflects new struggles emerging due to the changing nature of work of the labour market, where work is increasingly casualized and outsourced (DEL*,* 2010: 4). In other words, the strikes were generally a contest of power over changes to the labour process, with the failure to remedy casualisation and outsourcing leading to

a change in tactics – that of strike violence, which featured prominently during the strikes of that year.

The economy sustained a high growth rate in 2007, largely owing to state expenditure ahead of the 2010 FIFA World Cup. The public sector workers engaged in a contest of power; the strike lasted twenty-five days and involved ten trade unions with over 300 000 workers, which accounted for most of the 9.5 million days lost (D) that year. The number of days lost in 2007 was the highest for the decade and was the largest public service strike in the history of South African labour relations. Also, for the first time the mass of workers displayed high levels of preparedness to strike (S) with the total number of strikers nationally reaching 608 919, which was almost three times the average for the period of the 2000s. It is only in 2007 that (S) illuminates a strike wave and this, according to Lenin (1912a, 1913), indicates not only a greater preparedness to strike but also marks a change in political consciousness. The combination of peaks in the strike indices of (D) and (S) in a strike wave year should therefore mark a significant event or rupture having occurred.

Once again, the determination levels (D) of workers were high and once more the tactic of multi-union strike coordination and collective bargaining continued to feature in both the public sector and mining trade union negotiations (DEL*,* 2008: 25). A spate of wildcat strikes organised by autonomous worker committees in construction, which would continue until 2009, hit World Cup infrastructure development. These strikes demonstrated for the first time the increased organisational capacity (F) of construction workers via newly elected worker committees which were extremely successful in mobilising workers and securing wage increases, allowances and bonuses (Cottle 2011: 101–2). There were several large strikes which engulfed the rubber, metal and glass sectors, including the retail motor and engineering sector. Workers at Autopax, a bus company, went on strike due to changes in the wage system and hours worked (DEL*,* 2007: 4–9). The gold mines were rocked by several wildcat strikes. Gold workers demanded 40 per cent wage increases and platinum workers embarked on a twenty-five-day strike, and workers challenged the continuous-operations process which operated 365 days per year (*IOL,* 2007). Overall, the strike dynamic of 2007 saw the most intense strike wave with the highest determination levels of workers since the introduction of a new industrial relations dispensation.

Under immense pressure from its members, COSATU sought to change the economic policy away from neo-liberalism, and contributed to ousting the then President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, as the country's president. Jacob Zuma, who was seen to be more labour-friendly, took over as president in 2009 (Pillay, 2008: 1). The unique combination of high determination levels (D) of workers to win their demands and high levels of preparedness to strike (S) provide for offensive strike action which in this instance brought political change in the presidency of the country.

The 2010 Strike Wave

The massive investments by both the state and the private sector ahead of the 2010 FIFA World Cup had assisted South Africa in shielding the country from the full impact of the 2007–2008 global economic crisis. By late 2009 the economy recovered in a cyclical upswing that would last until 2013. The lull from 2008 was over, and the strikes and community protests took centre stage. According to Ceruti, (2011:151), "COSATU had become assertive towards government, which had thumbed its nose at COSATU over demands to ban labour broking". In 2010, there were strikes in transport, mining, higher education, health, chemical, transport, metal, auto, energy, hospitality, retail and farm workers. In these strikes the demand to end casual labour and labour broking

featured prominently (DEL, 2010: 3–7). In the context of the massive spend on the World Cup and the huge profits accrued to companies involved, a "contest of power" took place between the state and public sector trade unions. Most of the 20.6 million days lost (D), a historical record, was attributable to the public sector where some 1.1 million workers (S) came out on strike, a level of mobilisation last seen a decade earlier. The public sector workers were dismayed at the massive World Cup spend which was aimed at private accumulation while their living standards had dropped. The public sector strike was led by a coalition of more than a dozen unions representing state employees including teachers, police, nurses, customs officials and office workers. The trade unions demanded a pay rise of 8.6 per cent, which was more than double the inflation rate, as well as increased housing benefits (Smith, 2010a, 2010b). The national public sector strike lasted four weeks, with unions claiming victory even though the wage settlement was 1 per cent lower than demanded. Workers of the public transport utility, Transnet, not only won a real increase of 5.3 per cent in wages but also about 1 000 contract workers were made permanent employees. Workers at the public rail agency who disrupted rail services during the World Cup received a real increase of 6.5 per cent in wages plus benefits. At Maemo Motors the 31 000 workers across seven plants received a real increase of 4.3 per cent, had benefits extended to part-timers and ended the use of labour brokers at the plants (De Wet, 2012: 403–5). Just as the public sector strike ended, about 70 000 metal sector workers went on strike demanding a 20 per cent increase in wages, while 8 000 platinum miners demanded a 15 per cent increase (Smith, 2010a, 2010b).

From 2005 to 2010 most strikes were successful in achieving real but modest growth in wages. In several of the strikes, where levels of preparedness (S) had increased, unions were attempting to unify workers through fighting against disparities in pay between seasonal, casual and permanent workers and for higher increases for workers at the lower end of the wage spectrum. Of major significance was that for the first time since 2005 the gigantic increase in the determination levels (D) combined with the increased preparedness to strike (S) would make good on workers' struggles and create limited ruptures in the labour process and the demands to end casualisation and labour broking.

The 2012 Strike Wave

Both the offensive Marikana platinum strike and the Western Cape farm worker strikes in 2012 took place towards the end of the long wave of contraction (see Figure 3 above), where the intensification of worker struggle over the last seven years would culminate in major economic and political ruptures.

By 2012 the number of strikes (F) peaked at ninety-nine, most of which occurred in the public sector (28 per cent), followed by mining (19 per cent) and manufacturing (18 per cent). While registering lower levels than 2007 and 2010, with only 3.3 million days lost and 241 391 strikers, what is striking is that 82.4 per cent of days lost (D) and 57.5 per cent of the strikers (S) came from the mining sector in 2012. In total there were nineteen wildcat strikes in the coal, platinum and gold-mining industries (DEL, 2013: 2, 12). The very high levels of determination (D) and preparedness to strike (S) in the mining sector should therefore mark the occurrence of a significant event or rupture. Furthermore, the high incidence of strikes (F) in the mining sector should point to increases in the organisational capacity to strike.

Other strikes that made an impact included various industries, such as the public sector, transport industry, auto and civil sector, postal services, university employees, media workers and farm workers. The most significant strike in the mining sector was the rock-driller strike at the

Lonmin Platinum mine. A key factor for the strikes was that wages had not kept up with living costs (DEL, 2012: 15). The 28 000 rock drillers were led by an independent strike committee and not a union; the committee demanded a living wage of R12 500 (€1 200) per month. This is even though South Africa is the world's leading platinum group metal (PGM) producer, having accounted for 74 per cent of the world's platinum production (Yager, Soto-Viruet and Barry, 2012: 1). On 16 August 2012, on the sixth day of the strike, a peaceful assembly of mineworkers was brutally crushed, and thirty-four miners were killed in what became known as the Marikana Massacre (Chinguno, 2013: 8). The event in turn triggered a wave of strikes in the mining, auto sector, transport sector and among farm workers. The series of wildcat strikes in the mining sector which was triggered by the Marikana Massacre were also led by autonomous worker committees which were largely successful in pursuing wage increases and bonuses (Alexander, 2013: 609), owing to the increase in the organisational capacity to strike (F). The Marikana Massacre also triggered a political split in the ruling party with the formation of the Economic Freedom Fighters; it also contributed to the rise of the Rhodes Must Fall movement at the University of Cape Town which ultimately led to nationwide student strikes in 2015.

The Western Cape Farm Worker Strike of 2012, which took place one week after the Marikana strike, is one of the most important strikes in early twenty-first century South Africa as it was the trigger for a social uprising which engulfed twenty-five rural towns. The strike wave of 2012 marked increases in the organisational capacity to strike (F), and once again drew in new layers of workers who were united with a new demand for a minimum wage of R150 per day (R4 562.50 a month). The strike united permanent, casual and seasonal workers who were led by an informal organisation of farm workers, a completely new feature in strike action. Furthermore, from the very low levels of preparedness to strike (S) by farm workers in 2010 (only 54 workers) and 2011 (2 608 workers), some 11 087 farm workers came out on strike in 2012. Furthermore, farm workers' determination levels (D) increased from 16 037 days lost in 2011 to 123 399 days lost in 2012, a 669 per cent increase in 2012. The initial strike was led by female seasonal workers in a response to a new contract that reduced their wages, and the strikes then spread from farm to farm before becoming a social uprising of the rural working class (Christie, 2012). At an industry level in the Western Cape province, the farm workers' strikes had combined high levels of preparedness to strike (S) with a new-found increase in organisational capacity (F) and levels of determination (D) which in turn generated ruptures on a scale unseen before in farm worker strike dynamics. Besides triggering a social uprising, the government was forced to announce a 52 per cent increase in the official daily minimum wage for farm workers. This mass strike further gave rise to a national review of minimum wages in the country; the guidelines were subsequently amended, with improved income for lower-earning workers across industry, including domestic workers.

The 2014 Strike Wave

The 2014 strike wave had a lower frequency with eighty-eight strikes, which was consistent with the downswing of the business cycle. The industries affected were platinum, steel and engineering, clothing, public sector and utilities (DEL, 2014: 5). There was a drop in strike levels combined with lower participation rates of workers, with 118 566 workers compared to 297 193 in 2013 or –60 per cent. However, 2014 recorded 10.2 million working days lost, which was three times more than in 2012. The change in the organisational capacity to strike (F) is illuminated by 48 per cent of strikes being unprotected, indicating that the strikes were led by informal strike committees or by members of trade unions without union consent. The increase in days lost combined with

substantial unprocedural strike action by fewer workers is a strong indicator that workers who embarked on strikes were extremely determined (D) to win their demands. Much like 2012, it was mining that contributed 94 per cent to days lost to production. In effect the strikes were fewer but of longer duration (DEL, 2014: VIII, 9).

However, a year after the Marikana strike, the longest and most expensive strike in South African mining history broke out in the platinum industry, organised around a demand for the Marikana living wage of R12 500. Most interesting is that this offensive five-month-long platinum strike occurred in a downturn of the business cycle where, according to business cycle theory, strikes are supposed to be defensive. Building on the Marikana strike, which was led by an autonomous workers' committee, these workers had joined the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU), marking changes in the level of the organisational capacity to strike (F). Furthermore, despite the massacre of their comrades two years previously, the platinum miners maintained a high level of preparedness to strike (S) as 70 000 miners with very high determination levels (D) hit 40 per cent of global platinum production. The platinum strike exerted such tremendous power that the determination of these workers dragged the economy into contraction in the first quarter of 2014; platinum producers lost R24 billion (€1.6 billion) in revenue. The outcome of the platinum strike included a R1 000 per month salary increase, or 20 per cent increase for lower earners (Bell, 2014).

Conclusion

This study developed Lenin's framework of utilising strike data to illuminate qualitative shifts in strike dynamics. This is achieved by providing a qualitative interpretation and label to the quantitative indices of the number of strikes (F), the number of days lost (D) and the number of workers on strike (S) which are reinterpreted qualitatively to mean level of organisational capacity (F), level of determination (D) and level of preparedness to strike (S).

The qualitative shifts that occur during strike waves have successfully been identified in this study as the entry of new layers of workers and new industries, new tactics and new demands, greater levels of worker unity, a changing level of coordination, and economic and political ruptures, including a change of character of strikes from defensive to offensive strikes. Strike waves do indeed mark qualitative changes in the struggle of the labour movement. Once the use of the framework has identified the kinds of qualitative shifts in the strike wave years, more detailed research can be undertaken to reveal patterns of qualitative shifts in the struggles of labour and how these shifts relate to workers in different types of employment contracts, occupations and industries. This is important in testing assumptions as to whether labour mobilisation is withering away or that blue-collar workers are no longer a factor in industrial action, which this study has successfully disputed. The power of using the Leninist framework is that one can tell much about the qualitative shifts of labour mobilisation of a country without even knowing or understanding the socio-economic context of that country.

The twenty-year period of this study has revealed that generally the organisational capacity to strike (F) marked the entry or re-entry of new layers of workers and new industries in industrial action (such as gold miners, fishing and farm workers), with strikes of an offensive character across industries unifying permanent, casual and seasonal workers with new demands such as ending casual labour and the labour broking system, and parity in pay regardless of type of employment. While the most strike-prone sector is the public sector, the study found that mineworkers are the most determined workers in the country. The strikes led by trade unions where determination levels

of workers were high (D) were contests of power; they were marked by increases in associational power of trade unions employing a new tactic, that of multi-union strikes, which proved effective in winning wage demands. The peaks where determination levels were high also included demands for changes in socio-economic policy, a feature of general strikes. In these strike waves the demand to end casual labour and labour broking featured prominently and took on a national dimension compared to the localised level of the demands. So, although new demands are a feature of both (F) and (D) waves, the distinction is the universalising of demands from a local to a national level in (D) waves. Most strikes were successful in achieving real but modest growth in wages. Periods of high levels of preparedness of workers to strike (S) – that is, periods where the mass of workers enter strike action – often result in economic or political ruptures which in this instance was a change in the presidency of the country in order to install a "labour-friendly" president. However, strikes waves denoted by (S) alone are highly unusual, and over the last twenty years the presence of (S) occurs together with (D). In other words, it is when the mass of workers enter the strike movement (S) combined with high determination levels (D) at national, provincial or local level that ruptures such as the Marikana and Western Cape farm worker strikes occur.

However, after the waves of strikes in the period 2005–2014, exhaustion set in marking a general retreat in the mass of workers (S) and a decline in the determination levels (D) of workers participating in strike action. As experience shows, the retreat of 2000–2004 gave way to a ten-year-long offensive strike wave. The recent trend of a retreat of the mass of workers from struggle should be therefore viewed as a period of recuperation before the next round of struggles emerge.

The question is whether organised labour, and specifically public sector unions, will make the necessary connections to unite themselves with other organised and unorganised workers to lead a sustainable struggle against neo-liberal austerity measures in the context and aftermath of the COVID-19 social and economic crisis.

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