

General Strike

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This article is an account of the development of the concept of the general strike—as well as some of its modifications—primarily in Western Europe. The author encourages the continued rethinking of the concept even as it has seen varying expressions in practice throughout its development.

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The idea of downing tools in order to disable the master's enterprise is obviously not a new one. What was new about the Marxist use of the idea of the "general strike" can be found in volume 1 of *Capital* (1867), where Marx wanted to bring about an epistemological change in workers so they would know that they were, together, "the **agent of production,**" and that if they stopped, then production stopped. This basic idea had always been implicit in any notion of the general strike, but that it involved a specific change of mind in workers had not been so clearly perceived. Earlier manifestations had seen society divided into the toilers and the idle, and work stoppage was exhorted without drawing specific connections between cause and effect.

What follows is an account of the European phenomenon of the general strike and its use by Marxism. There are also examples of work stoppage in the Mughal mints in the late eighteenth century, and it is certain that corresponding phenomena can be located elsewhere in the world. But if we accept that the industrial revolution started in Britain and that the bourgeois revolution and its consequences happened in France, then it is in Western Europe we must look.

In the French eighteenth century, although there was a good deal of writing about the general strike (Jean Meslier, 1664–1729, Mirabeau, 1749–91, and many others), the other revolutionary alternative—seizing state power by violent means—was preferred. This is seen both in the French Revolution of 1789 and the subsequent revolutions in 1848 and 1871 (the Paris Commune).

Marx saw a fulfillment of his epistemological project in the Silesian textile workers' strike of 1844. He contrasted it to earlier strikes in France (for example, the strike in Lyon in 1834) and suggested that the earlier strikers were interested in political change alone, whereas the Silesian workers had class consciousness and were working for change in social relations.

In Britain the initiator of the idea of a general strike is usually thought to be William Benbow (1784–1841), who proposed a “national holiday”—a month away from work—again without any detailed discussion of the connection between this cause and the effect of bringing the masters down. This confronted the idea that the work of revolution was to gain state power through insurrection and armed struggle. In Britain all through the nineteenth century, the main motor for the transition from feudalism to capitalism was reform. The Reform Bill of 1832 was the beginning of a series of labor laws. Somewhat apart from the general reformist impulse, though also connected to it, was the British movement called Chartism. Named after the People’s Charter (1838; see also the London Working Men’s Association), Chartists made the following political demands:

1. A vote for every man over the age of twenty-one
2. A secret ballot
3. No property qualification for members of Parliament
4. Payment for MPs (so that poor men could serve)
5. Constituencies of equal size
6. Annual elections for Parliament

The role of women in early Chartism was not feminist in its impulse but was certainly militant in its solidarity with the men.

It will be noticed that these were reformist political demands. In 1842, however, in response to terrible working conditions, particularly in mining, a general strike spread into industrial and commercial labor all through northern England. The cautious Chartist leaders abandoned the strikers with abundant expressions of support and sympathy. It was later claimed that the reforms of 1846 in Britain were a result of the general strike, however remotely.

Marx spoke on behalf of the “Brussels Democrats” at a Chartist public meeting in 1846, arguing for an international workers’ coalition. He spoke again at the inauguration of the International Workingmen’s Association (IWMA; the Chartists had lacked the adjective “international”) in 1864. He was not, however, espousing the general strike. His approach was more theoretical, urging the centralization of the means of production and the socialization of labor. In his view of the 1860s, in order to be able to combat international capitalism, the worker must “master the mysteries of international politics, to watch the diplomatic acts of their respective governments, to counteract them, if necessary” (Marx 1974, 81). In Russia, Mikhail Bakunin (1814–76) is usually credited with formulating the idea of the general strike, although his main contribution to radical thought was the idea of anarchism. Bakunin (1985, 149) was against any involvement with politics as such and thought of strikes as raising the socialist-revolutionary consciousness of the working class: “The news of the European workers’ movement can be summed up in one word: strikes.” In 1872, Marx had Bakunin removed from the IWMA largely because of his perceived utopianism.

More related to the Bakuninist legacy and to the work of the later Georges Sorel (1847–1922) rather than to orthodox Marxism, anarcho-syndicalism in Europe—with its basically antistatist position and its confidence in a basically union-led series of

general strikes as the agency of revolution—must be counted within Marxism in a broad sense. We approach Sorel's work with caution since, in recommending violent general strikes as a "myth" mobilizing the proletariat, he moved away from Marx's epistemological project and toward the heroics of fascism.

The general strike was also thought to be an instrument of protesting war, since the eruption of European imperialist wars was a phenomenon that started in the mid-nineteenth century. As it turns out, workers did not rise against wars. Marx was not himself a supporter of this particular idea, as we find in his famous letter to Engels of 16 September 1868, referring to "the Belgian nonsense that it was necessary to strike against war." Hence, the division of strikes into three categories—revolutionary strikes for bringing about communism, political strikes for the grabbing of state power, and reformist strikes for social democratic change—did not really apply to the thoughts of Marx and Engels. It is correct to say, however, that anarchist tendencies, anarcho-syndicalist tendencies, and social democratic tendencies (Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, et al.) are an important part of the Marxist tradition. The anarcho-syndicalist tradition crossed the Atlantic and animated the Industrial Workers of the World (the Wobblies), established in the United States in 1903. The 1877 strike in St. Louis and the 1886 strikes in Chicago had presaged this development, although the latter ended in unorganized violence perhaps unjustly attributed to the anarchist movement.

It is within this narrative of volatile, conjuncturally responsive transformations that one must pay attention to Rosa Luxemburg's recoding of the importance of the general strike—or "mass strike" as she called it to distinguish her political position—as social democratic instrument, after her experience of the 1905 revolution in Russia, which was the culmination of a series of general strikes starting with the great general strike of the textile workers in St. Petersburg in 1896 and 1897. "Thus has historical dialectics," she wrote, "the rock on which the whole teaching of Marxian socialism rests, brought it about that today anarchism, with which the idea of the mass strike is indissolubly associated, has itself come to be opposed to the mass strike in practice; while on the contrary, the mass strike, which was combated as the opposite of the political activity of the proletariat, appears today as the most powerful weapon of the struggle for political rights" (Luxemburg 2008, 114).

In her influential book, she suggested that certain trades, such as mining, would give rise to a greater number of general strikes than others. Strictly speaking, however, national or regional strikes within one trade do not qualify as a general strike that brings a country to a halt. Within the labor tradition in Britain, the celebrated nine-day general strike took place in 1926, with many trade unions assembled on a mining base under the auspices of the Trades Union Congress (TUC). Strikes took place within the same labor tradition in the United States in 1934, in San Francisco (the West Coast Waterfront Strike, which lasted eighty-three days) and Minneapolis (the Teamsters strike).¹ Likewise, West Virginia saw important miners' strikes in the twentieth century. The general strikes that took place in Spain at the

1. The Marxist-feminist writer Tillie Olsen reported the San Francisco strike under her premarriage name, Tillie Lerner.

end of the nineteenth century were resolutely anti-Marxist. Soon after, anarchism as a named movement came to an end through acts of disorganized violence.

In the introduction to Marx's 1843 *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) found the secret of Marx's epistemological project. Gramsci's only experience of a strike was the general strike organized by workers in Turin in April 1920, which failed because the Socialist party did not support it. Gramsci was so intimately involved in the establishment of Italian communism that, in his descriptions of this event, we come to realize his greater interest in the epistemological transformation of a proletarian collective such that a general strike might be allowed to happen. He was interested not in what he perceived as the bureaucratic capital collaboration of syndicalism (he saw the anarchists as good-faith demagogues) but rather in the real collective learning of the Marxian lesson: control of production. It was this transformed proletariat that he perceived as "the vanguard." The transformation was "pedagogic," the condition and effect of democratically elected workers' councils. Before his imprisonment by Mussolini in 1926, he felt that this northern proletarian vanguard, which had been able to organize a massive general strike, would develop the revolutionary consciousness of the agricultural workers of the south. At the time of his imprisonment, Gramsci (1978, 44–62) was writing about cooperation between the proletariat and agricultural workers, with the emphasis on the latter. Already in this interrupted essay, there is a shift in the proletarian/vanguardist voice. This may of course also be due to the necessary difference between the voice of a leader and the voice of a thinker. Nonetheless, thenceforth the prison writings no longer emphasized the achieved epistemological shift in the Turin proletariat that had enabled the staging of a general strike with the correct political goals; rather, the emphasis turned to finding the correct method for producing the subaltern intellectual. Indeed, Gramsci speculates on how political passion ("myth" in Sorel) can produce permanent structures, a question that Rosa Luxemburg had also considered.

In our own time, strikes have been related to union organization in Britain, Western Europe, and the United States, and they generally have been connected to collective bargaining, which may be theorized as anarcho-syndicalism understood as workplace democracy. This reflects an insufficient preparation to confront capitalist crisis management as capital accumulation undergoes dynamic formal changes.

In 1917 Lenin wrote *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* and suggested that capitalism had been sublated (to use the Hegelian term describing an element at once negated in the previous form and preserved in a new form) into a new stage. Today, finance capital—trade in negotiable instruments—has been sublated through electronification. The value-form has changed into data-form. Industrial capitalism, still crucial and sustaining, is no longer in the driver's seat. Like Rosa Luxemburg, we can perhaps claim that the citizens' strike is no longer a step back toward the bourgeois revolution. Our example is not just Occupy Wall Street, the 2007 citizens' strike that at this stage seems no more than a first move, but we also have the Eurozone and the "broad left" in Greece, shoring up after financial disaster as a result of the capitalist policies of the creditor state/debtor state policies of the European Union. If, at the inauguration of the International, Marx had felt that workers should keep abreast of international politics and diplomacy enough to intervene, then at this

moment of capitalism's sublation the citizen, the agent of the general strike redefined, must keep abreast of the laws regulating capital.

It can, I think, be suggested that strikes have worked better against imperialism than they have specifically in the economic or political spheres. Two examples that come to mind are Gandhi in India against the British Empire and Solidarność in Poland against specifically communist totalitarianism. Although Gandhi would not have considered his efforts to be intentionally modeled on a general strike that had incorporated characteristics of the boycott, and though he tried to give his efforts an Indic identity, it is still interesting that a similar notion of "passive resistance" is abundantly present in the British and French thinking of the general strike.

Finally, I want to suggest that W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963) was trying to expand the idea of the revolutionary subject by pointing out that when a labor force is working in the crux between plantation capitalism and industrial capitalism (as occurred in the nineteenth-century American South) but, because of being enslaved, is nine-tenths illiterate and isolated on country plantations, any mass movement must materialize slowly and painfully. But such workers can still refuse the conditions of production through the fugitive slave phenomenon and by waiting for a chance to join the Union Army, fighting in a war begun to simply save the Union but in the process changing the proslavery opinion of the North into a necessarily antislavery position.

Du Bois was, in other words, rethinking Marxism to see if collective subaltern agency bringing about the necessary change in the mode of production could also be theorized into a general strike, although not on the factory floor. This is what caused him to describe "waiting and watching" for the right moment to join the Union Army so that Northern capital could find its consolidation through abolition democracy and Negro suffrage over against the historically anomalous plantation capitalism—a general strike (Du Bois [1935] 1992). Du Bois does not assign ready-made Marxism to black labor. His is a "world-historical" argument and an effort to rethink the revolutionary subject from within slave labor. In his regret that the white proletariat did not support the more land-based struggles of new black labor, he sometimes approaches Gramsci. But the concept of the general strike is not given a new definition within the accepted discourse of international communism by Du Bois's important effort.

There is no room to take this rethinking any further in these remarks, but it should be kept in mind that the idea of the general strike has been most powerful against imperialism and state capitalism and that, within the Marxist tradition, the definition has undergone a number of reterritorializations.

The task now is to track these reterritorializations in the rest of the world and, going beyond the concept's Latino/Anglo-Saxon limits, compute the differences between all the words used to describe the general strike phenomenon, for the benefit of the activists/ideologues/citizens of the world's many languages.

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