



## Critical review

## The spatial patterns of mass strikes: A labour geography approach



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 1 August 2016

Accepted 18 August 2016

Available online 25 August 2016

## Keywords:

Labour unrest

Strike wave

Emerging economies

Rosa Luxemburg

## ABSTRACT

Labour geography aims to explore aspects of workers' agency that have not yet been at the centre of research, this includes: the links between working-class politics and local communities, the interdependence of global economic networks and working-class activities, and the spatial dimension of workers' organisations. Although these aspects are relevant for the dynamics of mass strikes, an analysis of mass strikes has been largely absent from debates in labour geography. Rosa Luxemburg's seminal analysis of strikes in Russia demonstrated the rapid spatial expansion of these movements without any central organisation. Similar phenomena have occurred in recent mass strikes in the emerging economies. This text shows how mass strikes in Brazil, India and South Africa can be investigated through a labour geography lens and calls for a renewed debate on how a 'strike wave' is defined or understood.

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## Contents

1. Introduction .....	270
2. Mass strikes and patterns of mobilisation .....	271
3. Conclusion .....	272
References .....	272

## 1. Introduction

This text discusses mass strikes with reference to their spatial patterns, and thus it applies the insights of the flourishing debate in labour geography to this specific type of social movement. The motivation to do this stems from recent trends and developments of labour conflicts as well as from trends in academic debates. The upsurge of strikes and labour unrest in parts of the Global South since 2010 saw a revival of the phenomenon of mass strikes, i.e. a rapid expansion of strikes throughout national territories on a mass scale without any type of central organisation or mobilisation. At the same time, the debates in labour geography place more emphasis on the agency of workers and its spatial and geographical aspects (Rogaly, 2009; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011).

In order to show how and why both strands of research can be combined, I will first revisit central concepts of the existing research on mass strikes and on agency-centred labour geography.

Based on my own fieldwork on mass strikes in India and Brazil, I will then illustrate how a spatial analysis of mass strikes is able to detect certain patterns and specific spatial aspects.

Rosa Luxemburg's seminal text *Mass Strikes (1906)* not only underlines the forms of organisation of formally unorganised workers in Russia in 1905, and the success of those mass strikes in implementing important changes, her text also describes how these strikes spread throughout the country during the summer of 1905:

"But even here there was no predetermined plan, no organised action, because the appeals of the parties could scarcely keep pace with the spontaneous risings of the masses; the leaders had scarcely time to formulate the watchwords of the onrushing crowd of the proletariat."

[Luxemburg, 1906, 128]

Indeed, the forms of strike action were similar in different parts of the Russian Empire, despite having no central coordination. Luxemburg does recall the large spatial distribution during a few weeks in 1905, but also the fact that similar strike movements

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began in 1896 and were picked up again in subsequent years up to 1905. Thus, there was both a temporal succession between several strike waves and also within the 1905 strike wave.

In his pioneering publication on labour geography, Herod (1997) has emphasized that workers shape their spaces of action and in turn establish solidarity as a specific type of spatial fix. This can be reformulated in the following way: A wider spatial distribution of working class action in a given national territory is the precondition of the establishment of new fixes in the forms of regulations of labour relations (such as a shorter working day) – but strike waves can also end with a defeat or have no obvious long-term effect at all. A unique feature of mass strikes is that a wide spatial distribution of working-class action does not go back to a national call for action by a trade union federation or any other kind of central political body, but that these strikes spread to different parts of a country in the absence of prior organisation. While every successful strike led by a trade union federation requires initiative from the rank and file, these strikes rely entirely on the rank and file activities, although militants of smaller political organisations are often active in preparing or helping to organise these strikes in the background. Still there is no unified command in mass strikes, rather a succession of activities that inspire each other.

Beyond Herod's emphasis (1997, 2003) that workers do shape their spatial environment, but under conditions chosen for them, different strands of labour geography stressed the following issues: the workplace as a territory of authoritarian rule (Delaney, 2014). The 'discovery' of community unionism as a widespread practice that transcends workplace organising, and herewith a perspective that underlines the manifold linkages of workplace and community struggles (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010; Herod, 2010).

The emphasis on space in the context of labour focuses on certain spatial conditions for worker's resistance: (1) different industrial districts with specific traditions of workers' organisation and resistance; different types of location that conditions workers' actions, such as the workers' home or the employers' home in the case of domestic work (including the phenomenon of workers living in the home of their employers), urban, semi-urban or rural workplaces (farms, plantations or isolated industrial sites); spatial restrictions in construction sites; company housing (Mitchell, 2005; Stenning, 2010; Dutta, 2016). (2) However, spatial aspects are not confined to the specificities of workplaces, but they also include the endless variety of spatial nodes and linkages that emerge with global value chains and global production networks. The increasing global interconnectedness of different workplaces allows for ripple effects across large geographical distances, so that labour unrest in India, like the lockout at ancillary producer Rico Industries in 2009, caused a halt of production in several General Motors factories in Canada and the US (Herod, 2001; GWN, 2009; Coe et al., 2004). Employers use these increasingly dense global networks, too, with the aim of preventing major disruptions of production by working class action. (3) Labour geography allows for the detection of spatial patterns of workers' agency, such as migratory patterns, but also the geographical and spatial aspects of strikes and other acts of resistance (Southall, 1988; Savage, 1998; Johns and Vural, 2000; Rogaly, 2009). The remainder of this essay will examine this last aspect with reference to recent mass strikes in Brazil, India, and South Africa.

## 2. Mass strikes and patterns of mobilisation

The years after the 2008 crisis saw widespread labour unrest around the world, and most prolific were the mass strikes in the emerging economies. There were a high number of strikes in India's automobile industry, primarily in the industrial belt around

New Delhi (GWN, 2009). In Brazil, mass strikes in construction dominated the scene. In 2011, 2012 and 2013 the whole country was hit by strikes in this sector, and this was paralleled by an outstanding public investment in huge construction in industry and infrastructure works (Véras, 2013, 2014; Nowak, 2015). Finally, in South Africa, the mining sector was at the centre of labour unrest after 2008, primarily the strike wave across the entire sector in the summer of 2012 after the massacre in Marikana, and the five months long strike at platinum mines in 2014 (Alexander, 2013; Bond and Mottiar, 2013).

A quick diffusion of practices and organisational learning occurred on a mass scale in all of these mass strikes. The strikes continued to exhibit earlier patterns of protest already established in those industries, but also added new forms of organisation that were often at odds with conventional practices of national union federations. In addition, spatial patterns were clearly detectable. There were certain limits to a quick diffusion across the country. Three kinds of dynamics can be found in these mass strikes: (1) a first pattern is diffusion of a certain form of strike within one sector, copycat strikes; (2) a second pattern is the diffusion of strikes, although not necessarily in the same form, to other sectors in the same national framework; and (3) the third pattern is the establishment of certain forms of strikes and the diffusion of experiences in one industrial region, at times across sectors.

The South African mining strike wave is an example of pattern one combined with pattern two. The characteristics of the first strike in January 2012 were copied in July of the same year. Both strikes were opposed and hostile to the established trade union, the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), and both strike waves created independent strike committees and demanded a 200% wage increase. The massacre by the police in August 2012 triggered a wave of strikes across the entire mining sector. The strikes in mining were followed by strikes organised by truckers and farmers that were obviously inspired by the miners' actions. This pattern also repeated over time. In January 2014, the miners in the Rustenburg area, where the massacre had happened in 2012, went on strike again for the same demands as in 2012, but this time with a new trade union and for a period of five months, until June 2014. The strike remained local but did trigger a strike of the metal union NUMSA (National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa) in the automobile sector that lasted about one month.

The strikes in Brazilian construction also matched pattern one, but with a stronger presence of pattern two. The first wave of construction strikes started in one regional state, Bahia (80,000 strikers), and spread within two months (February and March 2011) to quite distant areas in the North and Northeast of Brazil (100,000 strikers), and continued throughout the year (400,000 strikers after March 2011). The diffusion of the forms of strikes within the construction sector started in March 2011, but continued into the next year with a revolt of workers at Suape against the trade union in August 2012, and a similar action in November 2012 at the Belo Monte Dam. It was also in 2012 that the strike wave reached out to construction sites in other parts of the country and the momentum continued throughout 2013 and 2014. A diffusion of strikes to other economic sectors took place after the street protests in June 2013 galvanized union activities, and strikes of street cleaners and bus drivers in Rio de Janeiro in spring 2014 combined with forms of street protests, mobilised against the official trade unions in the sectors. Thus, in Brazil there was another temporal pattern since the wave that started in February 2011 did not lose momentum, and the street protests in June 2013 added another actor to strikes that took place inside the big cities.

The strike activities in the Indian automobile industry resemble pattern three. The industrial belt around Gurgaon, south of New Delhi, saw a series of strikes in 2005–2007, predominantly in the automobile industry, but accompanied by conflicts in the

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