

# 1 Introduction

## Strikebreaking and industrial vigilantism as a historical problem\*

*Matteo Millan and Alessandro Saluppo*

American historian Warren B. Catlin wrote in 1926,

If it be true that the history of nations has been too largely taken up with warfare and the remembrance of these struggles has served to perpetuate animosity from generation to generation, doubtless the same might be said to have been the effect of the prominence given to strikes, lockouts, and boycotts in the popular discussion of labor activities.<sup>1</sup>

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Europe, the United States and large areas of the globe experienced labour unrest and multiple strike waves at an unprecedented pace and intensity, some of which developed a quasi-revolutionary momentum. From the bitter conflicts of the pre-war period, through the epochal tremors of war and revolution, to the violent spasms of the 1920s and 1930s, a sense of impending cataclysm, symbiotically associated with fears of revolutionary upheaval and forebodings of social anarchy, ceaselessly haunted those who had assumed the role of guardians of the established order. While much work has been devoted to socialist parties and revolutionary organisations, the multifaceted experiences of anti-labour mobilisation and privately organised coercion have not received the same degree of scholarly attention.

As Martin Conway explains in his contribution to this volume, several reasons concur to explain this neglect. There is, first of all, a material problem due to the lack or scarcity of sources. Actors, ranging from employer associations to corporate security and commercial strikebreaking services, have tended to be very protective of their archives or have left few papers behind. This paucity of records, however, is in significant contrast to the important role these actors played in social conflicts. Many years ago, Charles Tilly invited historians to consider the plurality of actors involved in strikes: not only workers and employers, but also local and regional authorities, bystanders and civil and military powers, including “private police”, since it is “the relationship of workers to other groups [that] determines the frequency and character of collective conflict”.<sup>2</sup> Tilly’s invitation has not always been taken up in the field of labour history. As it turns out, historians have generally explained the repressive strategies of both employers and governments as merely Pavlovian responses to the maturation of socialist

organisations. This also implies a sort of automatic identification of those workers organised by left-wing trade unions, parties and associations with the *whole* of the working class. As a consequence, independent and company unions, non-socialist associations as well as strikebreakers and “scabs” were usually out of the general picture or, at best, received little attention.

Studies on the topic have also been limited by the fact that “the boundaries of the nation-state” often turned into “an analytical cage”.<sup>3</sup> In spite of global interdependencies and the transferability of social-political experiences that increasingly bound the fate of industrialised and industrialising countries, research on the methods by which the business and propertied classes attempted to solve the “labour problem” has relied on accounts that have rarely broken through the permeability of national boundaries.<sup>4</sup> The result has often been that national singularities were taken for granted and even exalted, as in the exemplary case of the supposed authoritarian paternalism characteristic of the equally suppositious backward, feudal-like attitudes of German employers.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, we hope that the comparative angle adopted here may contribute to defusing such apparent national particularities and to outlining how and to what extent coordinated anti-union and anti-strike strategies constituted a common repertoire of action across different countries.

Analyses of industrial conflict have, furthermore, tended to focus on the cores of capitalist development, deemed to be comprehensive and paradigmatic examples, with the consequent marginalisation and downplaying of the structural tensions between work, technology and authority in other parts of the world besides North America and Europe. At the same time, the narrative field has too often been restricted to specific industrial sectors or individual companies. This means that, with few exceptions, little attention has been paid to the complex realities of labour disciplining in imperial and trans-imperial settings as well as in secondary markets and industries. At its worst, research has depicted the development of industrial vigilantism, commercial strikebreaking and labour espionage as a uniquely American experience. To be sure, some of the anti-labour strategies and weapons used by employers and managers in the industrial heartlands of the United States still display “archetypical features”.<sup>6</sup> Yet, this does not presuppose that company police systems and cases of para-policing explicitly geared towards counteracting strike action did not exist in Europe and the rest of the world. It would be sufficient to consider the extent of cross-national commonalities in the lexicon applied by trade unionists to anti-labour methods and weapons to refute the postulate of American exceptionalism.<sup>7</sup>

In particular, one of the characterising features usually attributed to the American way of dealing with strikes, namely citizen vigilance and vigilantism, has rarely been investigated outside the United States. Apart from “yellow unionism”, historiography has regularly overlooked exploration of “the labour problem” from the point of view of the public. Notably, the more or less spontaneous mobilisation of citizens with the aim of protecting the general welfare of the people from the disruptive effects of protracted labour stoppages has not received the consideration it might have deserved. This has led to a lack of reflection on

the slippery relationship between visions of “patriotic or responsible citizenship” and the rhetoric of belonging and exclusion. At the same time, this interaction has lured historians into the teleological categorisation of pre-war anti-socialist and anti-union movements as precursors of fascism.<sup>8</sup> All these factors have converged into a broad underestimation of strikebreaking and yellow unionism. More importantly, these issues have rarely been considered as topics in their own right and, consequently, subject to very little comparison, contrast and cross-examination.

Previous investigations into strikebreaking activities on the part of both governments and employers in the period in question have generally been contained within the traditional boundaries of labour history and the history of industrial relations.<sup>9</sup> In mapping out the changing relationships between labour, capital and the state, researchers have seldom touched upon the issue of “yellow unionism” or, broadly speaking, those organisations of workers – normally established and subsidised by employers or groups of employers – who acted against trade union interests and endeavours. The lack of scholarly scrutiny into these formations has hampered detailed sociological and sociographic research on strikebreakers and, in turn, deflected questions over the place of gender, race and religion into the rifts of class solidarity and the morose landscapes of class antagonism.

The first goal of the following pages is to highlight the forgotten dynamics of “the other side of the revolutionary coin”. By bringing together scholars with expertise across a broad geographical and chronological range, this book constitutes the first systematic attempt to understand the political, economic, social, cultural and legal dimensions of strikebreaking and repressive anti-union practices in the decades from the 1890s to the 1930s. Adopting a comparative and transnational perspective, the chapters in this volume reconstruct the diverse spectrum of right-wing patriotic leagues, paramilitaries, vigilantes and para-police corps, and the vast array of private security services that, in support of or in competition with law enforcement agencies, sought to counter the dual dangers of industrial militancy and revolutionary situations. They retrace the formation of an extensive market in corporate policing, privately contracted security services and yellow unionism, as well as processes of professionalisation in strikebreaking activities, labour espionage and surveillance. They also detail the emergence of transnational networks and international cartels of employers that aimed to fight trade unionism by creating their own security apparatuses or by delegating protection services to third parties. The book focuses on the organisation and evolution of these private bodies, which attempted to make inroads into the state monopoly of force. In this way, the volume adds a new dimension to our understanding of the processes of alteration, deformation or fragmentation of public order and labour relations in periods of severe political and social tensions. It also offers an important new perspective on the shocks and strains that marked industrial societies during their turbulent transition to mass politics.

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The rise of working-class parties, trade unions and organisations after the 1880s tested different nation states and empires across the globe to unprecedented

levels. Qualitative leaps in the organisation of labour movements and the increasing influence of Marxism were regularly accompanied by major outbreaks of social conflict, large numbers of strikes and industrial restructuring.<sup>10</sup> These largely novel challenges prompted a wide array of organised responses, from both state authorities and employers: the first part of this volume, therefore, is devoted to the various anti-union and strikebreaking strategies adopted by the preservers of order and property to deal with the social question.

Most autocratic regimes of Europe were not unscathed by the mobilisation and organisation of workers. In the semi-absolutist tsarist empire, as Volodymyr Kulikov and Irina Shilnikova argue in their “Policies and practices against labour movement in the late Russian empire”, the state’s attitudes and policies on labour were persistently shaped by intense worries over social control. Unlike their counterparts in Wilhelmine Germany and Habsburg Austria, the Russian governing classes prevented working-class organisations from gaining a foothold in political life and industry. Under these conditions, the development of collective workers’ organisations, especially in the Stolypin years (1906–11), was systematically thwarted by the combined repressive action of the state and industrialists. Radicalised by the war, workers’ despair found an explosive outlet in the proletarian-socialist revolution of 1917.

At the opposite end of the continent, Spain and Portugal were also experiencing deep political and economic transformations, which greatly affected the established balances. Assumpta Castillo Cañiz’s chapter, “Violence against strikers in the rural peripheries of the Iberian Peninsula, 1890s–1915”, explores the nature of anti-strike violence in three labour disputes that took place in rural areas of Spain and Portugal between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These conflicts shed light on how deep socio-economic and political transformations sparked violent new forms of conflict in the “double periphery” of the rural Iberian Peninsula. The consolidation of capitalism in rural areas brought with it a process of agricultural specialisation, the decentralisation of production and inter-regional interlinking of transport and energy infrastructures, as well as an increase in the mobility of the working population. At the same time, the countryside, in dynamic interaction with economic mutations, began to penetrate into the political space, in particular through the extension of suffrage and union rights. This dual process showed how the rural situation was not alien to the violent contradictions that had already manifested themselves in industrial urban areas. In all the cases examined, violence against striking workers was carried out by a mixture of public and private forces, which ranged from military and police forces to antiquated local private forces. The analysis raises questions about the strength of the state in both countries and the effectiveness of their coercive mechanisms to overcome new internal challenges.

In countries where labour parties and voters had grown sufficiently to exert influence on government policy and legislation, state authorities acted or, at least professed to act, as an impartial third-party arbitrator between employers and employees. On the one hand, recourse to repressive and malignant measures was justified to enforce public order, especially where the strikes involved public

services or affected strategic economic sectors. On the other hand, the extension of the franchise, the development of mass party politics, the huge increase in union membership and, more generally, mass society meant that the use of repressive methods would have costly political consequences. The ability to strike a balance between defending order and production and protecting individual and collective rights became the means by which the wider population could measure the legitimacy and credibility of many liberal regimes. In France, in the years 1902–06, troops were mobilised “on a very large scale” to maintain public order during major labour stoppages, although this was always carefully planned to avoid bloodshed and disparage the “honour” of the Army.<sup>11</sup> In Britain, progress in the demilitarisation of public order suffered a dramatic setback when the government brought in over 58,000 troops to cope with the national railway strike of 1911.<sup>12</sup> In Sweden, as Erik Bengtsson demonstrates in his chapter, “The Swedish labour market c. 1870–1914: a labour market regime without repression?”, the state was less forbearing towards the labour movement than historians have assumed so far. While it is highly disputable whether the liberal policy of gradual concessions to the working class lowered the potential for violent protest, legislative restrictions on trade unionism action continued. The 1899 Åkarp Law, for instance, penalised any attempt by strikers to coerce non-strikers into joining the strike or to prevent them from going to work and back. During the general strike of 1909, the government’s premeditated passiveness played an important role in the disastrous defeat of the labour movement, as a consequence of which membership of the *Landsorganisation i Sverige* plunged to 80,000 by 1912. In several instances, troops were ordered out to protect strikebreakers and property. Little or no blood, however, was spilled until the Ådalen shootings in 1931. This apparently less violent nature of industrial confrontations distinguished Sweden from other continental countries.

In the recently founded German Kaiserreich, the 1878 *Sozialistengesetz* (anti-Socialist law) anaesthetised the labour movement for 12 years. When it lapsed, the growth of social-democratic organisation, fuelled by industrialisation and urbanisation, appeared to be unstoppable. The socialist union movement continued to be subject to political and administrative ostracism in several state legislatures, judicial discrimination and police harassment until 1914.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, on the eve of the Great War, the vigorous growth of the social democrats was such as to fuel projects for extra-parliamentary actions aimed at reforming the constitution.<sup>14</sup> In Austria-Hungary, too, the state’s response to the rise of labour organisation was shaped by tensions between mere repression and the integration of the working classes into the political nation. In her chapter, “State authorities, municipal forces, and military intervention in the policing of strikes in Austria-Hungary, 1890s–1914”, Claire Morelon examines the different types of state intervention during strikes in the Austrian part of the Habsburg Empire. The increased numbers of social conflicts from the 1880s onwards often pushed the overstretched local security forces to the limits. Police forces in most towns (except the larger cities) were still paid by the municipality and were answerable to the mayor. Local governors could only call the gendarmerie and ask for army intervention if the

local forces were not sufficient to maintain order. Based on her examination of the different strategies adopted to quell strikes and the deployment of military unions to replace striking workers, Morelon argues that the Austrian economy and politics became increasingly militarised in the years immediately before the outbreak of the war.

Extending from the 1870s through to the post-war years, qualitative transformations in working-class organisation, ideological orientations and policies had regularly summoned proportionate (and frequently disproportionate) responses from owners and managerial elites around the industrial world.<sup>15</sup> As the secretary of the Italian Minister of Agriculture, Industry and Trade wrote in 1912, “the employers’ organisations come from those of the workers. . . . These are two forces tied to a single life from two opposite poles, around a single fact: the class struggle”.<sup>16</sup> The French economist Charles Gide invited French employers to organise themselves into strong associations in order to establish “armed peace” in accordance with the slogan “*si vis pacem para bellum*”.<sup>17</sup> In his 1922 essay on organised capital in the United States, American historian F.W. Hilbert noted that “Employers’ associations formed solely for the purpose of dealing collectively with labor, come into existence only after organizations of employees have become strong enough”.<sup>18</sup> Associations, such as *the National Association of Manufacturers, the National Metal Trades Association, the National Founders Association, the National Erectors’ Association and the International Association of Bridge and Structural Ironworkers*, were all formed at the end of the nineteenth century to protect the “open shop” from the assault of industrial unionism.<sup>19</sup> In Britain, the rise of New Unionism had similarly precipitated the formation of militant employer organisations and federations. The Shipping Federation, established in September 1890, was specifically envisioned by the large shipping companies as a “permanent battle-axe” in the fight against the rapid growth and militancy of maritime labour.<sup>20</sup> In Wilhelmine Germany, the development of employers’ organisations accelerated only at the beginning of the twentieth century, when the rapid expansion of the trade union organisation prompted manufacturers to coalesce into the *Hauptstelle der Deutschen Arbeitgeberverbände* (Central Confederation of German Employers’ Associations) and the *Verein Deutscher Arbeitgeberverbände* (Federation of German Employers’ Associations). The initial aims of these counter-organisations, which later merged to become the *Vereinigung der Deutschen Arbeitgeberverbände* (Union of German Employers’ Associations) were to fight trade union policies and oppose any outside interference in proprietorial prerogatives.<sup>21</sup>

In France, despite some early initiatives, such as the *Comité des Forges*, established as early as 1864, the small average size of enterprises probably slowed down the reaction of employers to the wave of labour protests that affected almost all regions and industries between 1900 and 1913. Certainly, initiatives such as the *Union des industries métallurgiques et minières* (1901), which involved big industrialists (most notably Eugène Schneider II), the *Comité Central des Armateurs de France* (1907) and the establishment of shop keepers’ and small merchants’ pressure groups were signs of a growing militancy by capital.<sup>22</sup> As of

1908, however, the methods of collective self-defence put in place to counteract strike action were mostly imitations of foreign models.<sup>23</sup>

Also in Italy where, at the beginning of the twentieth century, 59.8 per cent of the population was still employed in agriculture, industrialists had to take steps to centralise their response to trade unionism and Giovanni Giolitti's new-fangled policy of state neutrality in labour disputes. In 1910, this process culminated in the creation of the *Confederazione Italiana dell'Industria*. In rural areas, particularly the Po Valley, pre-war landowners' associations, like the *Interprovinciale* and the *Confederazione Nazionale Agraria*, ferociously opposed the Federation of agricultural labourers (*Federterra*) and proved especially successful in defeating strikes.<sup>24</sup>

In Catalonia, traditional cultural and technical clubs for the promotion of economic development, such as the *Fomento Nacional de Trabajo* and the *Instituto Agrícola Catalán de San Isidro*, paved the way for more antagonistic and resolutely centralised employers' associations, most notably the *Confederación Patronal Española* (1914), which coordinated the actions of several local employers' organisations and made arrangements with political and military authorities to repress strikes and the actions of the working class. Among the more resolute members of the *Patronal* were those Catalan employers, like Eusebi Güell and Claudio Lopez Bru, 2<sup>nd</sup> Marquess of Comillas, who also controlled the powerful and long-established Catalan militia, *Somatén*, which took to the streets several times both before and after WWI in support of the police and the army against strikers and rioters.<sup>25</sup>

In tsarist Russia, inspired by the national centralisation of employers' organisations in Germany, the *St. Petersburg and Moscow Societies of Factory Owners* were established in conjunction with the intensive unionisation following on from the 1905 revolution. The purpose of the organisation, according to its organisers, was to oppose the "unreasonable aspirations" of the workers.<sup>26</sup> Even in the Nordic countries, the growth of trade unionism convinced employers to join forces. In Sweden, the *Landsorganisation i Sverige* (Federation of Trade Unions), which had forged a close alliance with the *Socialdemokratiska Arbetare-Partiet* (Social Democratic Labour Party) on its inception in 1890, was confronted by powerful employer organisations like the *Sveriges verkstadsföreningen* (Swedish Manufacturers' Association), the *Svenska Arbetsgivareföreningen* (The Swedish Employers' Association) and the *Centrala arbetsgivareförbundet* (The Central Federation of Employers). In Denmark, the *Danish Employers' Confederation*, in an impressive display of capitalist solidarity, proclaimed the 1899 lockout as a veritable "declaration of war".<sup>27</sup> During the First World War, in neutral Scandinavian countries the main employers' federations of Sweden, Norway and Denmark drew up an agreement that established an anti-strike mutual insurance plan that allowed employers involved in strikes or lockouts to claim benefits of up to 80,000 crowns per week for a maximum of five weeks.<sup>28</sup> The counter-mobilisation of capital was a truly global phenomenon. In Australia, employers' federations were established or reactivated in response to the arbitration legislation of 1901.<sup>29</sup> In New Zealand, "the country without strikes", as it was internationally renowned, at

least until 1905, the first national federation of employers was founded in 1902.<sup>30</sup> In Argentina, too, at the end of the nineteenth century bodies of employers began to federate to resist unionism and force the state authorities into enforcing more repressive policies.<sup>31</sup>

An interesting aspect of the mushrooming of employers' associations throughout the world was their transnational nature. Remarkably, this period of history marked a distinctive phase of international cooperation among anti-labour organisations. This is not so obvious, as it implied that employers were ready to set aside patriotic interests and to refrain from taking competitive advantage over their global competitors. In other words, the social enemy became an acceptable common foe to the extent that the threat of it could override conflicting national interests and foster forms of capitalist solidarity. In his chapter, "Employers of the world, unite!: the transnational mobilisation of industrialists around World War I", Pierre Eichenberger traces the origins of the International Organisation of Industrial Employers (IOIE). Faced with the formation of international coalitions of labour and socialist parties, employers' organisations had, since the early years of the twentieth century, supported consultations, partnerships and the coordination of resources to deal with the "labour problem" at home and abroad. In the convulsive post-war years these desires for international solidarity among producers gave rise to the IOIE. The scope of this body, founded in 1920, shortly after the Washington Treaty, was to represent and defend the interests of employers' organisations in the governing body and at the general conferences of the International Labour Office. The IOIE, whose early membership included the diplomatically isolated Germany and Austria, was the only organisation of its kind in the interwar period.

As a result of unique economic and logistical characteristics, transnational cooperation among employers and the coordination of strikebreaking strategies were conspicuous in the maritime sector.<sup>32</sup> Shipowners had long recognised the high degree of global interdependence in the maritime industry, which meant that the disruption of labour in one seaport inexorably reverberated in others. These conditions of vulnerability had been spectacularly proven by the cluster of maritime strikes that had cyclically swept through the Atlantic ports from 1889 onwards. Predictably enough, the shipowners were among the prime proponents and movers of the international employers' associations. In 1909, an international cartel of shipowners' federations, which included the *Shipping Federation*, the *Federation Maritime d'Anvers*, the *Sveriges Redareforening*, the *Dampfskibsrederi Foreningen*, the *Zentralverein Deutscher Rheder* and the *Nederlandsche Reedersvereentging*, established the *International Shipping Federation* (ISF). The principal scope of this body was to fight the trade union organisation and to break strikes, but its development was halted by the outbreak of war.<sup>33</sup> In the shipping industry, however, high levels of conflict were ingrained. By 1929, the great ports on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts of the United States still displayed "the same chaotic and tragic spectacle" as in the past.<sup>34</sup>

Institutional responses from governments, firms and business organisations formed only one facet of the opposition to rising working-class organisations.



The employers' need to maintain production, protect company property and deny the right of collective bargaining created a profitable market for commercial anti-union activities. In light of this, the second section of the volume is devoted to a multifaceted analysis of various strikebreaking tactics and practices, ranging from the recruitment of blacklegs along maritime routes to innovative forms of cooperation between state and private actors.

The huge disparity between the supply and demand of labour had given ship-owners across the world considerable power in resisting union pressure to run a closed shop and enact protective legislation for seafarers. In those days of expanding global interconnectedness and transnational alliances in both capital and labour, class struggle transcended the confines of the nation state, powerfully intersecting with ethnic and religious identities. Drawing on research into the *Messageries Maritimes*, Charles Bégué Fawell demonstrated how France's shipping lines outmanoeuvred workers by taking advantage of the interstices between imperial governance and the exchange of global labour. The success of the shipowners and the preservation of harmonious labour relations at sea relied on a variety of anti-labour weapons and tactics, including the systemic turnover of the workforce and the manipulation of racial cleavages. As Prerna Agarwal shows in her chapter, "In the name of constitutionalism and Islam: the murky world of labour politics in Calcutta's docklands", such *divide et impera* strategies were common practices in imperial spaces for a long time. Agarwal's contribution describes how a powerful coalition of political, business and criminal interests was behind the formation of the "black-flag" *Calcutta Dockers' Union* (CDU). The organisation was expressly designated to countermand red propaganda in the port of Calcutta. When the *Calcutta Port and Dock Workers' Union* (CPDWU), affiliated to the Communist Party of India, was made illegal after the strike of 1934, shipping companies instantly recognised the CDU as the exclusive bargaining representative.

The maritime sector is a paradigmatic example of how strikebreaking dynamics worked. Nevertheless, as many chapters in this volume show, a basic law of strikebreaking applying to a wide array of sectors is identifiable: work replacement was more successful wherever workers could be easily replaced, namely in those sectors that required little or no skill from the workforce. Wherever unskilled workers predominated, a strike could only be won by mobilising the entire workforce and preventing the arrival of replacement workers. This posed huge challenges and required tremendous organisational efforts by union leaders. In very few situations was this possible, and it was often at a cost of rocketing tensions and extremely bitter confrontations, as clearly shown by events in the ports of Europe. Another paradigmatic case is that of the day labourers in Italy's Po Valley. There, socialist labour leaders were able to organise several thousands of unskilled workers in a vast network of unions, co-operatives and associations, as well as by exerting social pressure and employing coercive methods.<sup>35</sup>

It is no surprise, then, that in many trades that had originally relied on a skilled workforce, employers made significant efforts to increase productivity and tighten labour discipline by deskilling production, introducing piecework wages

and other performance-based compensation schemes. The introduction of new organisational and technological systems magnified fears of displacement and unemployment, in particular among craftsmen. The establishment of temporary devices to stabilise employment by limiting the maximum output of the machines or regulating the way they were used proved unworkable in the long run. The reconfiguration of production and manufacturing processes gave employers an additional advantage against unions, as it significantly facilitated use of the “most formidable” anti-strike weapon: the recruitment of blacklegs.<sup>36</sup> Thanasis Betas, in his “Cairo, Athens, Salonica: strikebreaking and anti-labour practices of employers and the state in the early twentieth-century cigarette industry”, shows that processes of labour casualisation and subcontracting also encompassed the peripheries of capitalist development. In the tobacco industries, the decision of Greek manufacturers to replace manual with machine production led to violent struggles not only between employers and employees, but also between skilled and unskilled female and juvenile labour. The sabotaging, breaking or disabling of casing machines or revolving steam boxes by workers was regularly met with severe police repression.

Anti-labour practices certainly benefitted from increased cross-border labour mobility and large emigration flows. Employers refusing to meet unions’ demands for better wages, improved employment conditions or simply recognition could secure labour from other regions or countries. While the traditional stereotyping of foreign or immigrant workers as wage depressors or strikebreakers is misleading – labour migrants in fact played a prominent role in the worldwide surge in socialist organisation – there were numerous reported instances of employers importing large numbers of foreign strikebreakers during strikes. Portuguese workers were brought into Spanish Galicia to break a strike in the building sector in 1895,<sup>37</sup> while British shipowners were able to import labour from Sweden and the Netherlands in the 1893 Hull Dock Strike.<sup>38</sup> Thousands of Belgian workers were brought into the coal mines in the Pas-de-Calais region in the general strike of 1892.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, German employers regularly exploited cheap labour reservoirs in neighbouring Polish, Czech and Austrian territories.<sup>40</sup> In the United States, employers routinely recruited “scabs” from large reserves of cheap immigrant labour. It comes as no surprise, then, that the terminology used to define strikebreakers had obvious racist overtones. In common Italian parlance, labour replacements were referred to as “krumiri”, with reference to a north African nomadic tribe. In France, they were sometimes called “bédouine”, while “blacklegs” (or simply “blacks”) was the term that British workers gave to those workers who had taken anti-trade union action or helped break a strike.<sup>41</sup> In America, deplorable ethnic slurs, such as “Wop”, “Dago” or “Greaser”, designated foreign-born American workers.<sup>42</sup>

Of course, besides transnational cooperation and cross-national labour strategies, employers devised a variety of comprehensive strikebreaking techniques. Importing strikebreakers from distant regions or even from abroad would have been insufficient. Apart from in the maritime sector, this option was subject to global conditions and usually proved costly and logistically demanding, so

employers had first of all to find their own scabs locally. Nearly everywhere, employers played a direct role in hiring labour replacements in anticipation of or during strikes. In several cases, large companies decided to establish artificial unions in order to have a permanent (or insulated) reserve of labour in case of dispute and to undermine the solidarity and strength of the labour organisation. These bodies were variously known as “company unions”, “household unions”, “peaceful unions”, “tame unions” or “yellows”. However, while in the United States, the term “yellow” was largely used to describe bogus unions, in Europe it broadly included those unions that opposed socialist or class struggle principles and opportunistically promoted harmonious relations between employers and wage earners.<sup>43</sup> These unions of non-unionists gave employers the possibility to outsource the cumbersome tasks of recruiting, supplying and even protecting labour replacements to third parties and thus relieve themselves of costly legal liabilities. Not surprisingly, they found fertile soil in industries overfed by casual labour and chronic underemployment. In Britain, the National Free Labour Association (NFLA) first served the interests of shipowners and then, from the early twentieth century onwards, those of the railway companies. Founded in 1893 by former omnibus driver and one-time union organiser William Collison, the NFLA maintained a network of free labour exchanges, which funnelled thousands of unskilled or semi-skilled non-union workmen into British industry until the First World War. Although this strikebreaking organisation was normally involved in small-scale disputes, it wound up playing a decisive role in the events which led to the Law Lords’ momentous decision in the Taff Vale case.<sup>44</sup>

In France, the *Jaunes*, as George Mosse emphatically wrote years ago, “may well provide the most important example of a working class movement of the Right before the first world war”.<sup>45</sup> Under the leadership of Pierre Biétry, the *Jaunes* professed anti-Marxist and anti-socialist views, asserting the organic notion of class collaboration (rather than class conflict) as an essential condition for the realisation of a rich and robust national future.<sup>46</sup> Local branches of the *Jaunes* were subsidised financially and supported materially by industrialists and employer associations, who provided Biétry’s men not only with money, but also with guns and other weapons. In exchange, the *Jaunes* took on the role of action squads to intimidate local union leaders and provoked violent incidents. This was the case in 1905 when Alexander Dreux, director of the *Comptoir métallurgique of Longwy*, subsidised Biétry and other *Jaunes* to intimidate the leader of the local socialist unions; Dreux also tried to supply the *Jaunes* with two cases of weapons, including war rifles and guns.<sup>47</sup>

In spite of the strong nationalist character of the *Jaunes*, their leadership – and their supporters – tried to establish international alliances based on common anti-socialist and anti-democratic cooperation around Europe. Relationships were established with employers and politicians in Switzerland and Germany, and from there French-inspired yellow unionism spread to Austria-Hungary.<sup>48</sup> In the aftermath of the revolutionary events of 1905–06, Biétry had already attempted, apparently with little success, to set up unions on the model of the *Jaunes* in Imperial Russia.<sup>49</sup>

The tsarist empire provided a particularly favourable environment for such coercive endeavours. In what was the most backward of the major European powers, anti-strike forces amongst Russian nationalists had mobilised in response to the appearance of mass-based labour organisations and popular protest, which spread first in the industrial cities and then in the vast countryside at the turn of the century. George Gilbert's chapter, "In Reaction to Revolution: anti-strike mentalities and practices in the Russian radical right, 1905–14", investigates the ideas, worldviews and types of action engaged in by the Union of the Russian People (URP) and the other right-wing bodies that emerged across the Empire to "actively oppose" labour protest. Far from being compliant forces created at the behest of Russian governance, they were driven mostly by their own desires to restore Russia to what they perceived as a time of order in contrast to the contemporary realities of unrest and conflict.

Besides creating complacent yellow unions, another option was to turn to professional union busters. The hostile attitude of American employers to trade unionism generated a vast market for investigative, private security and commercialised strikebreaking services. In September 1914, over 270 detective agencies were still assisting employers involved in strikes and lockouts.<sup>50</sup> This impetus towards delegating policing functions to private bodies and developing strikebreaking into a distinct occupation did not only concern America. In Europe, attempts at emulating the strikebreaking businesses of Pinkerton, Farley and Baldwin-Felts became a quasi-instinctive response of employers to the sudden strengthening of labour organisation. Amerigo Caruso, in his "We can kill striking workers without being prosecuted": armed bands of strikebreakers in late Imperial Germany", traces the forgotten stories of professional anti-strike organisations in Wilhelmine Germany. In response to the intensification of labour militancy, the most intransigent sectors of German capital resolved to arm strikebreakers and recruit "anti-strike gunfighters". Resort to strikebreaking provided an unanticipated pathway for professional criminals and men with violent reputations into legitimate industrial conflicts. By taking a micro-historical approach, his chapter explores the activities of Friedrich Hintze's band and the ill-famed strikebreaker agent Karl Katzmarek. Not infrequently, these gangs of armed strikebreakers benefitted from the support of conservative and right-wing nationalist politicians and the overt connivance of police forces.

Sometimes, however, employers and conservative parts of the "consuming public" did not simply rely on subcontracting to suppliers of strikebreakers and specialised agencies. They felt they needed to intervene directly in the repression of social unrest in order to defend private property and a social order they perceived as being in peril. This gave rise to a variety of forms of self-mobilisation by entrepreneurs and patriotic middle classes, which usually acquired violent overtones. These corps usually had controversial relationships with the legitimate holders of the monopoly of force. The third and last section of the volume, therefore, is devoted to examination of a few case studies which illustrate the complex hybridisation of private interventions in traditionally public domains.

In their chapter, “The wild west of employer anti-unionism: the glorification of vigilantism and individualism in the early twentieth-century United States”, Vilja Hulden and Chad Pearson describe how employers’ organisations drew on the practices and imaginaries of frontier vigilantism to praise those employers and workers who took the law into their own hands for the purpose of protecting individual freedom, private property and freedom of contract from trade union policies and methods. The chapter pays special attention to the organisation and media strategies, which included the publicity work of the writer of Western novels, Owen Winster, that were carried out by the Citizens’ Industrial Association of America (CIAA) in its efforts to forestall any infringement of the “open shop”. In southern Italy, landowners benefitted from the services of rural guards and other hybrid groups to enforce order, discipline and respect for their authority in their estates.<sup>51</sup> According to socialist accounts, semi-criminals and young thugs were recruited by capitalist leaseholders of the Po Valley to provoke members of socialist unions and to intimidate strikers.<sup>52</sup> French mining conglomerates also had recourse to illegal methods of control over workers by raising vigilante squads for labour espionage. For example, the *Bande à Patin*, a sort of private police, allowed the manager of the Blanzay mines, Léonce Chagot, to keep strict surveillance over employees, avert infiltration from left-wing unions and prevent strikes and conflicts within the premises of his company. The *Bande* collected information on the moral attitudes, political inclinations and religious beliefs of every individual employee, filling thousands of secret personal files. They also intimidated and threatened workers during local and national elections to ensure the results went in favour of the candidates supported by the company.<sup>53</sup>

In the midst of the processes of democratisation and its ruthless opposition, the issue of strikebreaking easily overstepped the boundaries of economic interest to erupt right at the very heart of the idea of citizenship. In 1913, the British-born American socialist writer, John Spargo, wrote in his critique on revolutionary syndicalism that “[s]o long as there exists sufficient armed force to preserve the essentials of public order, the middle class in every country has sufficient skill and power to prevent the complete paralysis of society”. Spargo cited the example of upper and middle class Swedish citizens who volunteered for the *Frivilliga Skyddskåren* – the Public Security Brigade – to provide water, light, transport and sanitation services during the Great Strike of 1909.<sup>54</sup> The “Swedish experiment” attracted considerable attention in the United Kingdom, where even the prestigious *Times of London* advocated emulating it. After the transport strikes of 1911, “civic strikebreaking” turned into reality when a myriad of volunteer organisations rose up with the intent of assisting the authorities and securing the maintenance of indispensable services and supplies. Preeminent among these anti-labour bodies was the London-based Volunteer Police Force (VPF). In his chapter, “Vigilant citizens: the case of the Volunteer Police Force, 1911–14”, Alessandro Saluppo reconstructs the origins, organisation and operations of this quasi-military organisation, whose purpose was to protect life, liberty and property from strike violence. The opposition of the Liberal government to increasing vigilante behaviours prevented the VPF from effectively carrying out its programme. The

experience of the VPF serves to reveal the overt propensity of upper and middle classes to take defensive action in the years of the “Great Unrest”.

In the post-war years, the spectre of a general strike and the fear of Soviet contagion spread across Europe and the wider world<sup>55</sup> and contributed to the rise of new, sophisticated forms of strikebreaking. The revival of private participation in policing strikes and the taking to the streets against supposed revolutionary threats was common to both defeated and victorious countries. Already during the war, the US government had invited private citizens to be vigilant, which resulted in the mushrooming of vigilante and surveillance groups. On mining company properties or in isolated estates, in particular, ultra-diligent citizens, who believed they were defending the Constitution and enforcing law and order, took up arms and contributed to the repression of social disturbance.<sup>56</sup> In Germany, in response to the quasi-revolutionary events of 1919, a largely spontaneous multitude of “defence organisations” and auxiliary militias emerged to repress strikes and social upheavals and to keep public services running. Groups like the *Einwohnerwehren* attracted hundreds of thousands of volunteers and soon acquired the semblance of a real paramilitary corps. Their aim was not simply to police industrial unrest but also to oppose Bolshevism, repress criminality and foster national cohesion. The main purpose of the *Technische Nothilfe* (Technical Emergency Corps), which was under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Defence, was to keep operating essential public services during major strikes, ensure a modicum of productive continuity and to assist authorities in case of emergency, fire, storms and other natural disasters.<sup>57</sup> In Spain, the fear provoked by some huge strikes, especially in Catalonia, prompted brutal repression, in which criminal gangs and civilian militias, such as the *Somatén*, cooperated with military authorities and police forces. This sparked a vortex of violence and terrorism which became known as the age of *pistolero*.<sup>58</sup> In Britain, the renewal of industrial militancy and the bugbear that was the Triple Alliance of dockers, railwaymen and miners prompted the government to form an extensive strikebreaking apparatus. “An *embarrass de richesse* of volunteers” flooded the specialist committees of the Supply and Transport Organisation (STO) to lend their services and skills at each labour crisis. Notably, this body helped to break the General Strike of 1926.<sup>59</sup> In France, “good citizens” responded enthusiastically to government invitations to cooperate in the repression of social disturbances and strikes. The purpose of the *Unions Civiques* was to gather together civilian volunteers and, under the strict supervision and control of government authorities and prefects, keep the railways and public services running.<sup>60</sup> While the mobilisation of French urban middle and lower middle classes largely resulted in a patriotic, anti-revolutionary effort which strengthened the government’s legitimacy, in Italy the situation took quite the opposite turn. There, the government’s reliance on “loyal citizens” to defeat industrial action had never been so unambiguous as it was in the immediate post-war years. In his “From ‘State Protection’ to ‘Private Defence’: strikebreaking, civilian armed mobilisation and the rise of Italian fascism”, Matteo Millan analyses how a combination of the government’s efforts to foster civilian cooperation in strikebreaking and the largely spontaneous self-mobilisation of “good citizens”

against the “red fear” contributed to irreparably jeopardising public order in the country. The limited legitimacy and contradictory attitudes of the Italian ruling elites opened a Pandora’s box of clear anti-government attitudes and fuelled the emergence of a plethora of civilian militias and strikebreaking groups which ultimately became a favourable breeding ground for fascist mobilisation. At the same time, Millan’s chapter shows how such post-war groups took inspiration and even legitimacy from much older forms of civilian mobilisation and points to significant continuities across the watershed of the Great War.

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We started this introduction with historian W.B. Catlin, who, in 1926, urged his contemporaries to consider how not only wars and conflicts, but also “strikes, lockouts, and boycotts” contributed to perpetuating “animosity from generation to generation”. In the end, we think that Catlin was right, and for various reasons.

What emerges from the cases presented here is that many of the social challenges which affected Europe and the wider world in the aftermath of the Great War had some similarities to or even found their precursors in the crucial decades between the 1880s and 1914. The relatively lengthy temporal focus of this book also allows us to map the strategies of states and employers as they sought to halt, or at least forestall, the advance of socialist movements. At times, overreaction to the “red threat” helped to escalate political and social crises and paved the way for the rise of fascist movements, which promised a “Third Way” between capital and labour. In most cases, coercive anti-labour practices gave way to strategies of corporate negotiation that minimised the risks of violence and usurpation of public authority. Certainly, this is not to underestimate the disruptive impact of war and revolution or to overstretch the search for historical continuities. However, drawing attention to the emergence and development of anti-labour militancy helps us trace the anxieties that occupied the minds of the governing classes, conservatives and business interests in a period marked by social turbulence, global wars and crises of capitalism. It is equally possible to retrace the ways in which these strategies were able to pass through the epochal watershed and were driven by long-term models based on previous experiences and shaped by enduring scripts. Many years ago, Charles Maier defined the corporatist agenda which characterised the “recasting of bourgeois Europe” after the Great War as being marked by “the growth of private power and the twilight of sovereignty”.<sup>61</sup> From this volume’s perspective, it appears that this transfer of power was a dream which already inhabited the minds of many employers during the Belle Époque. In this regard, additional research should be carried out to further investigate how industrial disputes, social conflicts and processes of social democratisation were intertwined with state collapse, revolutionary contagion and military defeat if we are to fully understand the unprecedented levels of paramilitary, political and ethnic violence which were a feature of Europe and global empires on the eve of the Great War.<sup>62</sup>

These are just a few examples of why we think strikebreaking is important, and not just as a minor erudite detail in traditional accounts of social and labour history. We are also aware that the volume is far from being exhaustive. Nevertheless,

we hope that the chapters presented here may persuade readers of the potential of strikebreaking as a powerful tool with which to investigate broader questions. In fact, we think that study of the methods deployed by employers, state authorities and professional and amateur strikebreaking bodies to fight socialist political forces and trade unionism in the crucial decades from the 1890s to the 1930s has tremendous historiographical potential. We are happy that Martin Conway is able to illustrate some of them (along with many other things) in his conclusive remarks.

## Notes

\* This introduction has been discussed and devised together by the two co-editors. However, Alessandro Saluppo has realised the first part (approximately pages 1–8) while Matteo Millan worked on the last sections (approximately pages 9–16).

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