

IN SEARCH OF LOST RADICALISM

The Hot Autumn of 2010 and the Transformation of Labor Contention in France

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The fall of 2010 was an unexpectedly contentious season in France, reminiscent of May 1968 and the Italian “hot autumn” of 1969. After the government announced it would increase the minimum retirement age from 60 to 62, protests began: great numbers of workers took to the streets several times in just a few months; gas stations shut down because of strike-generated shortages; high school students surprisingly joined in to defend retirement at age 60; and public opinion both supported the protests and faulted President Sarkozy for intransigence. French trade unions managed to mobilize between 1 and 3.5 million people on ten separate occasions between 27 May and 6 November 2010. The “contentious French” were alive and kicking!¹

The mobilization of such large numbers over several months stands in sharp contrast to what was happening almost simultaneously across the Channel. As the Conservative-led government of Prime Minister David Cameron announced “the biggest shake-up in Britain’s sprawling welfare system since the years immediately after World War II,” with cuts in government spending amounting to a total of \$130 billion,² very little was taking place in the streets. Although students mobilized in significant numbers—most notably on 10 November 2010, when 50,000 students demonstrated and occupied the headquarters of the Conservative Party in London—British trade unions remained mostly quiet. Britain is not unique in this respect. In spite of drastic austerity measures, trade unions in Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain have not managed to mobilize significant numbers of people over *extended* periods of time. Greece, Portugal, and Spain experienced more protests as well as general strikes but these events were relatively isolated and the mobilizations did not last.³

How can we make sense of such variation? Considering the limited reforms in France compared to those in Britain, Greece, Ireland, and Spain, one is bound to ask whether this is yet another expression of France's famous exceptionalism. Is the French labor movement fundamentally more radical and thus more prone to confrontation than its European counterparts? Addressing such a question would require a systematic cross-country comparative analysis that would go beyond the scope of this article. I will focus instead on France and put the recent wave of protests in historical context so as to identify elements of both continuity and change in the practices of the French labor movement. My goal in what follows is more interpretive than explanatory.

This article argues that, in spite of the wave of protest of the fall of 2010, the French labor movement is no longer radical. Such a claim does not imply that industrial conflict is disappearing; strong legacies and institutional processes still feed distrust and conflict in the workplace and often push workers to employ contentious, extra-institutional means. Yet industrial conflict is not what it used to be: not only because the total number of working days lost to strikes has been decreasing steadily over the past forty years, but also because conflict has been reconfigured and transformed. Labor contention is no longer driven by a desire to stay on the offensive, but has instead become essentially defensive. If there is any radicalism left in France, it resembles in some respect what Craig Calhoun has called the "radicalism of tradition."⁴

In order to substantiate these claims, the article first describes the mobilization against the proposed pension reform in the fall of 2010 and identifies a few other recent instances of conflict that could support the belief in the persistence of French labor radicalism. Secondly, it explains why these protests fit most accounts of French social movements and industrial relations and outlines the transformation of industrial conflict in France since the 1990s. And finally, it discusses the relevance of "radicalism" as an analytical category to make sense of labor contention in France and stresses the need to situate historically and relationally the meaning and significance of modes of action and mobilizations.

The Hot Autumn of 2010

The wave of protest that broke over France from May to November 2010 was striking in three respects. First, although the protests were supported by opposition parties and many social movement organizations, the so-called "national days of action" were organized by an alliance of *all* French labor confederations, namely the CGT, the CFDT, FO, the CFTC, the CGC, UNSA, the FSU, and Solidaires (the "G8" of French labor).⁵ Such an alliance—called "intersyndicale"—was not unprecedented, but it had never held together over such an extended period. In previous waves of protest against pension reforms, trade union unity was either absent, as in the strikes of November and December 1995, or broke down rapidly, as in June 2003 when the CFDT

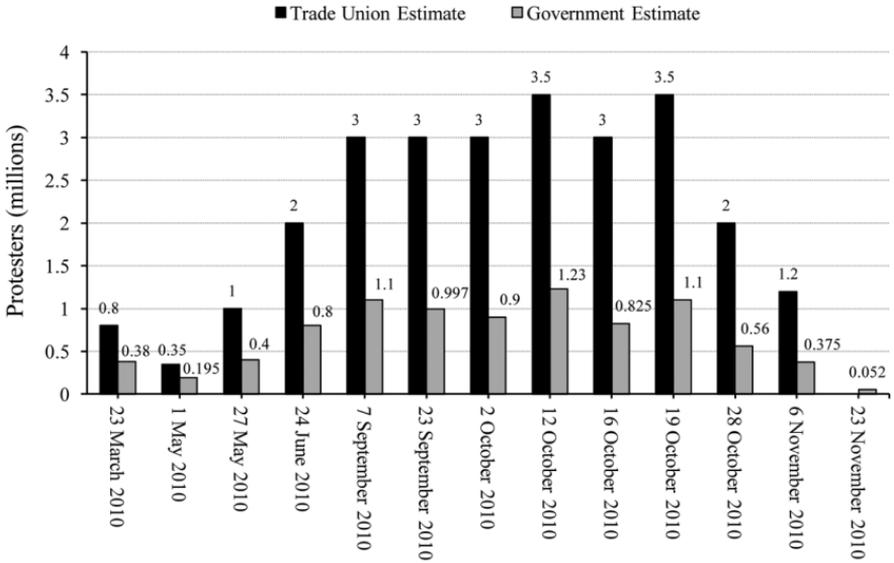
accepted a compromise with the government. The shift toward a more united front was facilitated by the reform of trade union representativeness that began to formally close the gap between the five labor confederations certified by the state in 1966—CGT, CFDT, FO, CFTC, CGC—and the others—UNSA, Solidaires, and the FSU. It also benefited from the CGT's strategy of consolidating its membership and status by looking for alliances (what it calls "syndicalisme rassemblé") as well as from the CFDT's desire to avoid replicating the dynamic of June 2003, when it lost a significant number of members after breaking apart from the *intersyndicale*. The impressive size of the mobilization also contributed to the downplaying of internal divisions.⁶

Second, the intensity and length of the mobilization stands out. As Figure 1 shows, between 27 May 2010, when the mobilization picked up, and 23 November 2010, when the mobilization ended, there were eleven national days of action. Similarly, the number of participants was significantly higher than in the past. According to the unions, at the aggregate level each national day of action mobilized between 1 and 3.5 million people all over France (Figure 1), while in 1995 and 2003 the largest protests attracted respectively "only" 2.2 million and 2 million people. The mobilization capacity of French trade unions is all the more impressive when one compares it to the low turnout for the 29 September 2010 Euro-protest against the financial crisis that mobilized between 56,000 and 100,000 people in Brussels. Moreover, continuing a trend that began with the 1995 strikes, there were protests not only in Paris and large cities such as Marseille, Lyon, Toulouse, Lille, and Bordeaux, but also in small and mid-size cities throughout the French territory. Overall, there were regularly more than 200 simultaneous protests in French cities on each national day of action.

Furthermore, although the reform concerned retirement, mobilization gradually extended to youth. According to government figures, by mid-October, 340 of France's 4,302 high schools (*lycées*) had been disrupted, while the National Union of High Schools (Union nationale lycéenne, UNL) claimed that up to 1,100 high schools had been mobilized.⁷ The UNL and informal student networks began to organize their own rallies, independent of those of the trade unions and, according to several youth organizations, 70,000 youths (high school and university students) participated in the national day of action on 19 October 2010.⁸ Youth participation also involved some violence, particularly on the eve of the national day of action mentioned; violent clashes between youths and the police took place in the poor suburbs of Paris as well as in Lyon, Lille, Montpellier, Nantes, Rouen, Mulhouse, Montbéliard, Perpignan, Clermont-Ferrand, Valenciennes, and Lens.⁹

Insofar as the magnitude of the protests was taken as an indicator of the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of both the trade unions and the government, estimating the number of participants became more controversial than usual. Figure 1 shows that beginning on 27 May 2010, the gap between the police/government estimate and that of trade unions widened significantly to

Figure 1. National Days of Action in 2010



Source: *Le Monde*.

I searched *Le Monde*, *Libération*, and *L'Humanité*, but was not able to find trade union estimates for the 23 November 2010 national day of action. This lack of information is surprising considering the battle of estimates that raged throughout the fall; it suggests that trade union estimates are not significantly higher than those of the government.

reach a 1:3 ratio. In Marseille, for the protest of 12 October 2010, the ratio was 1:10 as the police provided an estimate of 24,500 protesters while unions claimed a figure of 230,000. But in some cities, media estimates were actually lower than those of the police. For example, the information website *Mediapart*, created by *Le Monde's* former chief editor Edwy Plenel, estimated that in Paris the 12 October 2010 protest mobilized 76,000 people versus 89,000 according to the police and 330,000 according to the unions.¹⁰

Third, the national days of action that punctuated the months of demonstrations were a combination of protests and strikes coordinated at the national level. Not surprisingly, the strikes were essentially confined to the public sector, particularly in transportation and utilities. In the public rail company SNCF, the strike rate fluctuated between 30 and 40 percent, while in the Paris regional public transportation company RATP, it varied between 9 and 22 percent; in the public electricity company EDF, the strike rate was between 15 and 20 percent.¹¹ Although such actions did not entail widespread disruptions, many public servants and school teachers also walked off the job, and truckers engaged in “snail operations” to slow down traffic on major highways. However, the most disruptive and publicized strikes were undoubtedly those that blocked France’s twelve oil refineries in October 2010, thereby

generating gas shortages that threatened to paralyze the economy. These strikes were led primarily by the chemical workers' federation of the CGT and directly affected around 5,000 gas stations out of a total 12,300 stations in France as well as Paris's Roissy and Orly airports.¹² In late October, the situation reached a climactic point where the government regained control of some refineries by force and requisitioned workers to resume the gas supply so that the start of the Toussaint vacation would not be too affected; workers refusing to comply with the government requisition could receive a €10,000 fine and be sentenced to six months imprisonment.¹³

In spite of these more confrontational episodes, overall the protests remained within the bounds of the accepted rituals of French political life. As the mobilization unfolded, French trade unions consistently attempted to give proof of what Charles Tilly calls "WUNC"—that is, Worthiness, Unity, Numbers, and Commitment—so as to sustain the motivation of participants, attract new supporters, and legitimize their existence in the eyes of the authorities and the public.¹⁴ The mobilization benefited from the strong support of public opinion throughout the conflict. According to a poll conducted on 20 and 21 October 2010, after most of the national days of action had taken place and with oil refineries still paralyzed by strikes, 69 percent of respondents continued to support the protests, 52 percent backed the strikes in public transportation, and 46 percent supported the blockage of refineries.¹⁵ The gap between this noteworthy level of public support and the limited participation in strikes suggests that a phenomenon akin to the 1995 "strike by proxy" ("grève par procuration") was taking place.¹⁶

As it often happens with large contentious events, the protests had several dimensions. Officially, they embodied a rejection of Sarkozy's pension reform that increased the minimum retirement age from 60 to 62, and the dynamic of mobilization was shaped by the legislative life of the reform: protest began in late May 2010, after then Minister of Labor Eric Woerth confirmed that the retirement age would go up; dramatic increases in the number of protest participants took place in June 2010, when the reform was formally introduced, and in September 2010, when it was being discussed at the National Assembly; and protests fell off in late October and early November 2010, after the Senate approved the reform on 22 October.

Yet the protests also expressed a more general discontent with Sarkozy's policies and alleged Bonapartist governing style, to some extent representing the culmination of several years of growing social despair, political alienation, and "anti-Sarkozysme." Sarkozy was elected president in May 2007 on a promise to boost purchasing power and reintroduce a meritocratic ethic of hard work (with the slogan "Travailler plus pour gagner plus"). Instead, purchasing power declined and Sarkozy was embroiled in affairs of nepotism and illegal funding that fueled public discontent.¹⁷ These sentiments were accentuated by the world financial crisis and the contrast between, on the one hand, the sacrifices the working and middle classes were being asked to make

and, on the other hand, revelations about the bonuses of traders and top managers as well as the bail-out and later renewed profits of banks. Indeed, there were already several very large protests against Sarkozy and for the defense of employment and wages in 2009: on 29 January 2009, between 1 and 2.5 million people took to the streets across the country; on 19 March 2009, it was between 1.2 and 3 million; and the traditional 1 May demonstration was larger than usual, attracting between 465,000 and 1.2 million people behind an exceptionally united trade union front. The mobilization of the fall of 2010 often explicitly echoed the main themes of these previous protests.

Furthermore, some French workers were not satisfied with street protest alone and resumed practices of the 1970s. They engaged in a wave of so-called “boss-nappings”—that is, the kidnapping of their bosses and/or top managers—targeting primarily foreign multinational firms. In spring 2009, the firms targeted included Sony (Japan), 3M (USA), Caterpillar (USA), Scapa (UK), and Faurecia (France); in January 2010, another operation targeted the Swedish company Akers. The main goal of the worker-kidnappers was to gain public visibility, force negotiations, and obtain better severance packages.¹⁸ So far, these “boss-nappings” have proven largely successful and, according to polls conducted in April 2009, 30 percent of the French approved of these tactics while 45 percent found them “acceptable” and 63 percent pronounced them understandable.¹⁹ After “strike by proxy,” was this “kidnapping by proxy”? Quotes from interviews carried out in poor suburbs of Paris in October 2010, during the youth protests, pointed to a similar indignation and social despair, but also strategic calculation. As a high school student questioned by *Le Monde* put it:

Faire la grève du RER ou manifester à Paris, ça ne sert à rien. Il faut continuer à emmerder l'État, sinon il ne s'occupe pas des jeunes.... Les quartiers sensibles restent des lieux dont personne ne s'occupe, des déchetteries où les flics ne viennent plus, et on envoie que les profs pourris, jeunes ou sans formation. Pendant ce temps-là, la mairie ne donne des sous qu'aux zones pavillonnaires.... C'est comme pour les retraites, en fait, les privilégiés restent privilégiés, et ceux qui se font avoir en ont marre. C'est pour ça que les jeunes se rebellent. Et chacun ses méthodes: ça dépend juste si t'es à l'école, et que tu t'organises plutôt calmement, ou si tu y es pas, et là, c'est la guerre.²⁰

The Transformation of Labor Contention

The protests of the fall of 2010 confirm the extent to which French trade unions regularly act as *political* rather than strictly *social* actors.²¹ Public protest compensates for their weakness in the workplace. Instead of engaging only in collective bargaining at the firm level, they invest substantial amounts of their limited resources in national mobilizations aimed at shaping public policy and labor law. In doing so, they act outside the traditional realm of industrial relations and in their efforts to mobilize the support of bystander publics come

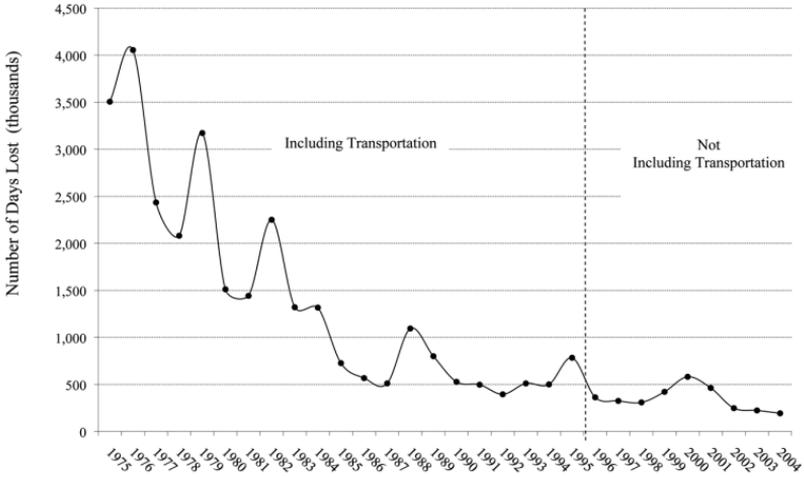
to look more like social movement organizations. Even though the issue of retirement age is not specific to unions or industrial relations, it was unions that took the lead in organizing the protests—a role never questioned by left-wing opposition political parties. In fact, opposition parties failed to provide a political outlet for the massive discontent in any way that could significantly affect the dynamic of the upcoming 2012 presidential election.

The active political role of unions also reflects the abidingly exclusive nature of the French state. The closed manner in which the state manages the country leaves little space for civil society actors to access the policy-making process, thereby fostering the use of extra-institutional, contentious modes of collective action.²² As many comments collected by journalists during the fall of 2010 clearly indicate, Sarkozy's imposition of the reform without a real attempt at negotiation fed the mobilization and contributed to an escalation in the tactics used by some unions. Similarly, the contentious character of French trade unions has been exacerbated by the historical hostility of paternalistic employers.²³

The events of the fall of 2010 also demonstrate the ongoing salience of the class cleavage in France. In contrast to neighboring European countries such as Germany or the Netherlands, where so-called "new" social movements putting forward post-materialist demands dominate the streets, in France the "old" social movement contesting industrial capitalism is still the most visible actor.²⁴ Although with less than 8 percent of unionized workers as a share of the total workforce France has the lowest union density rate of all OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries, trade unions still "own" the streets more than any other collective actor in French public life. In the early 1990s, they organized 43 percent of all street demonstrations in Paris; outside Paris, they were responsible for more than 70 percent of all demonstrations in the 1980s.²⁵

The persistence of such activities contrasts with what appears to be the dramatic decline of strikes in France. As Figure 2 illustrates, in spite of a few peaks, since the 1970s there seems to be a clear and steady trend toward fewer and fewer working days lost to strikes. Besides, in the fall of 2010 the vast majority of workers engaged in street demonstrations rather than strikes. France may well be the European country where people protest the most, as a well-known French specialist of social movements recently claimed,²⁶ but it is not the country where workers strike the most. Although the number of strikes in France remains relatively high compared to many other OECD countries (Figure 3), the number of workers involved in these strikes—and, therefore, the mobilization capacity of unions in the workplace—has decreased significantly since the 1960s (Figure 4).²⁷ In other words, French strikes mobilize fewer and fewer workers. The number of working days lost in France has thus converged with that of most other OECD countries (Figure 5).²⁸ Apparently, French workers are not as contentious in the *workplace* as they are in the *streets*. How can we reconcile these seemingly contradictory trends?

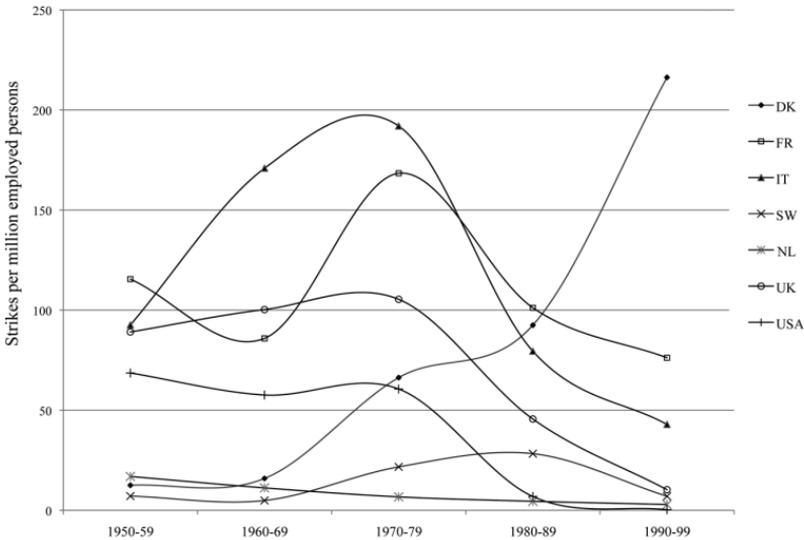
Figure 2. Number of Individual Working Days Lost to a Strike in a Firm (1975–2004)



Source: Ministry of Labor, France.

The fact that after 1995 transportation is no longer included in the data is problematic because many strikes regularly take place in the public rail company SNCF and the Paris-region public transportation company RATP.

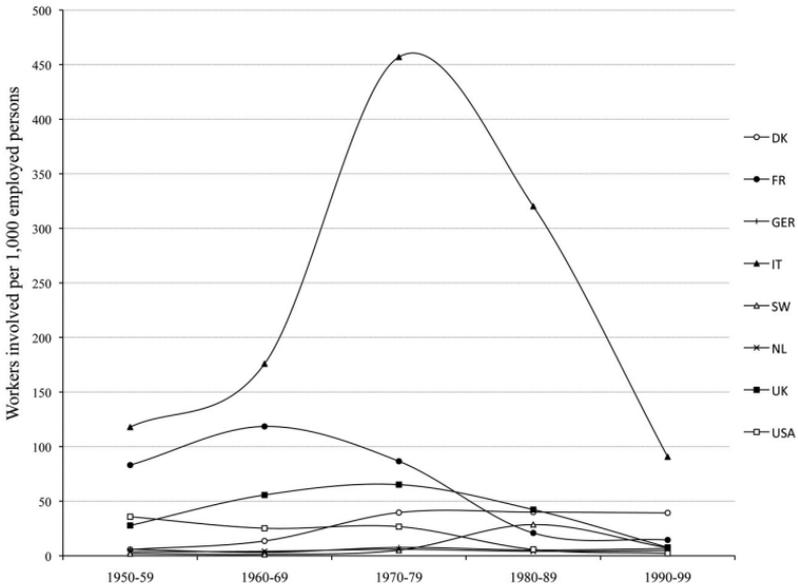
Figure 3. Frequency of Strikes



Source: Lorenzo Bordogna and Gian Primo Cella, “Decline or Transformation? Change in Industrial Conflict and Its Challenges,” *Transfer* 8, 4 (2002), 592.

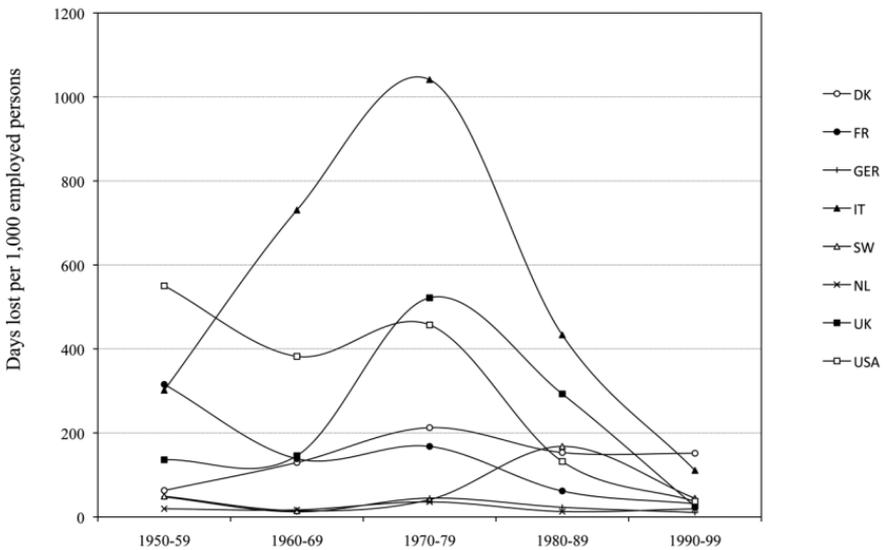
DK: Denmark; FR: France; IT: Italy; SW: Sweden; NL: Netherlands; UK: United Kingdom; USA: United States.

Figure 4. Relative Involvement in Strikes



Source: Lorenzo Bordogna and Gian Primo Cella, "Decline or Transformation? Change in Industrial Conflict and Its Challenges," *Transfer* 8, 4 (2002), 592.

Figure 5. Volume of Strikes



Source: Lorenzo Bordogna and Gian Primo Cella, "Decline or Transformation? Change in Industrial Conflict and Its Challenges," *Transfer* 8, 4 (2002), 592.

In fact, recent evidence suggests the trends in protest and industrial conflict are not as much at odds with one another as one might think. The main indicator used to assert that industrial conflict has been declining in France is the number of individual working days lost to strikes. This indicator is central partly because it measures the economic damage that workers can inflict on employers and the state by withdrawing their labor. However, it suffers from several flaws.²⁹ First, a working day lost to a strike is calculated on the basis of the number of hours not worked in a given workplace multiplied by the number of strikers. Eight working hours have to be lost for the day to be counted as lost. So if eight strikers stop working for one hour, one working day is lost; if sixteen strikers do likewise, two working days are lost; but if seven strikers do likewise, then the conflict is not reported because it involves less than eight hours of work stoppage. It follows that short strikes involving a small number of workers are unlikely to be included in official strike statistics and are, thereby, ignored.

Second, the data on the number of working days lost to strikes are collected according to different methods by three different bodies: the DARES (tied to the Ministry of Labor), the Ministry of Transportation, and the DGAFP covering public administration.³⁰ While the DARES collects data only on local conflicts, the Ministry of Transportation and the DGAFP collect data on both local and national conflicts and both sectoral and inter-professional conflicts. The final, cumulated data are thus incomplete and biased. It is partly for this reason that after 1995, the Ministry of Transportation data were no longer added to the DARES data (Figure 2). As a result, the longitudinal strike data are inconsistent over time and it is therefore difficult to determine the exact magnitude of the decline.

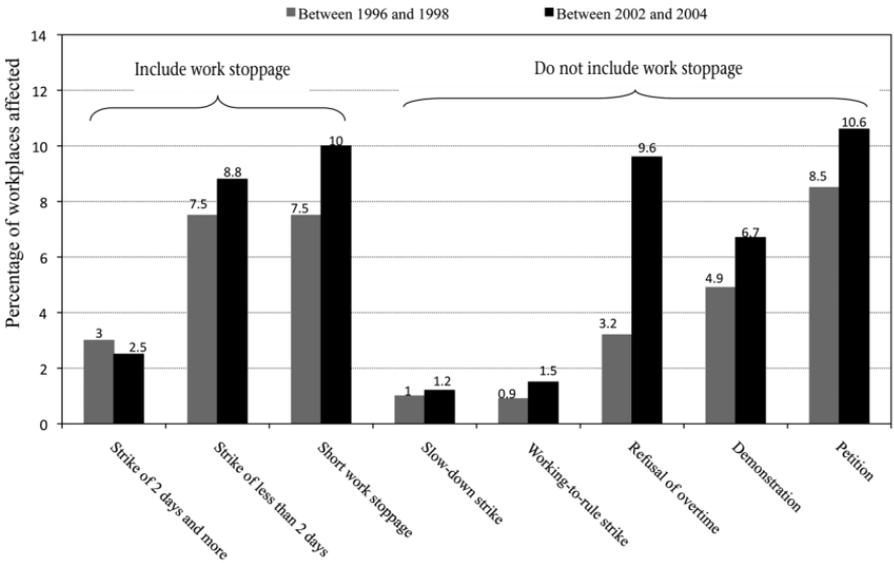
Third, the number of working days lost is estimated by state labor inspectors. Insofar as the latter are understaffed and responsible for many other tasks, they are not able to conduct an exhaustive assessment of industrial conflict in France. The discrepancy between administrative statistics generated by labor inspectors and the results of a survey called REPONSE (“Relations professionnelles et négociations d’entreprise”)³¹ carried out by the DARES speaks for itself. For 1992, administrative statistics reported 304,300 local conflicts whereas the REPONSE survey reported 630,200 local and general conflicts.³² That is administrative statistics reported just under half of the individual working days lost as compared to REPONSE. By 2004, the gap had grown considerably with administrative statistics reporting 190,000 local conflicts and REPONSE reporting 821,100 local and general conflicts. Administrative statistics produce a more accurate picture for large firms with more than 500 employees, particularly if they are located in manufacturing; inversely, the gap is most acute for small firms employing fewer than 50 workers and located in the construction, services, and retail sectors.³³

Finally, the number of individual working days lost to a strike is a very narrow indicator that fails to measure work stoppages lasting less than a working day and ignores other forms of contention like petitions, demonstrations, and production slow-downs. Thus insofar as strikes were limited during the events of the

fall of 2010, they would not significantly affect a dataset based exclusively on the number of individual working days lost. Even though millions of workers were in the streets, the autumn of 2010 would not seem particularly hot in this respect. Such an incomplete picture is problematic because the REPONSE survey—which does take into account all of these forms of contention and is more comprehensive for all the reasons mentioned above—suggests that since the mid-1990s industrial conflict has actually been *increasing* in France: between 1996 and 1998, 20.7 percent of all surveyed workplaces reported at least one form of conflict, while between 2002 and 2004, this went up almost by half to 29.6 percent.³⁴ Moreover, as Figure 6 indicates, the modes of contentious action used by workers have become quite diverse and traditional strikes lasting more than two days—measured by the number of individual working days lost—play a fairly marginal role. The claim according to which industrial conflict in France is declining and in the process of being “pacified” holds only if one focuses exclusively on these traditional strikes. It is thus more accurate to say that industrial conflict and forms of labor contention are changing and diversifying rather than substantially declining. As Charles Tilly has shown, the repertoire of action—that is, the limited set of learned routines through which people act collectively—changes very slowly as actors innovate at the margins of the existing repertoire rather than break completely with the old ways.³⁵ The growing forms of labor contention presented in Figure 6 are thus likely to coexist with the traditional strike for a relatively long period rather than replace it straightaway.

Petitions, short work stoppages, the refusal of overtime work, strikes of less than two days, and demonstrations are today the most commonly used modes of action. Nonetheless, the latter are a priori less disruptive than traditional strikes lasting more than two days. Indeed, when engaging in these newer forms of action workers are not significantly withholding their labor power and, thereby, not seriously affecting either their employers or the functioning of the economy. Although short work stoppages and production slowdowns can potentially be disruptive in economic sectors that use just-in-time production and are very sensitive to the pace of work, delivery schedules, and coordination,³⁶ such tactics are seen by French employers as the *least* disruptive for the social climate of the firm.³⁷

Moreover, even though *collective* forms of action still dominate, a growing number of workers express their discontent through *individual* modes of action. The highest increase in the forms of labor contention for the periods 1996–98 and 2002–04 has been the refusal of overtime work (see Figure 6). Similarly, Michel Lallement points out that the number of disputes managed by labor arbitration boards, such as the Prud’hommes councils, “went from 188,000 in 1984 to 213,500 in 1998.”³⁸ Another widespread individual form of action is absenteeism. In 2004, 47 percent of workplaces surveyed by REPONSE reported having problems with absenteeism. Not surprisingly, this mode of action was particularly favored by low-skill workers who hold repetitive, taxing jobs in hierarchical environments.³⁹ It follows that the persistence of labor

Figure 6. The Evolution of Forms of Labor Contention in France

Source: REPONSE survey, in Alexandre Carlier and Élise Tenret, “Des conflits du travail plus nombreux et plus diversifiés,” *Premières Synthèses de la DARES 08*, 1 (2007), 3.

A “short work stoppage” lasts less than eight working hours and is commonly called a “*débrayage*”; a “slow-down strike” involves a coordinated slow-down of production and is called “*grève perlée*”; a “working-to-rule strike” entails a slow-down of work by systematically following every little formal rule of the workplace and is referred to as “*grève du zèle*.” Slow-down strikes and working-to-rule strikes do not imply a work stoppage.

contention is not necessarily a reflection of the continued strength and legitimacy of unions. Certainly, workers are more likely to behave contentiously if there is a union in their workplace, but increasingly they are also by-passing unions in their attempt to have their grievances heard.

In Search of Lost Radicalism

Is the continuation of labor contention in France evidence of persisting labor radicalism? Social movement scholars often associate radicalism with the use of particular modes of action. For example, Sidney Tarrow and Hanspeter Kriesi treat, respectively, the diffusion and intensification of disruption and the increasing use of violence as an indicator of radicalization.⁴⁰ Following this logic, the growth of certain forms of labor contention since the 1990s in France could be interpreted as the sign of a renewal of labor radicalism. The “boss-nappings” of 2009 and 2010 and the blockage of oil refineries during the protests in the fall of 2010 were presented as such by the media. However, the latter events

are more the exception than the rule, and many forms of contention that do not involve relatively long work stoppages have only a limited disruptive effect. Furthermore, attempts to measure radicalization and radicalism on the basis of the use of certain modes of action assume that the latter have the same implications and meaning over time and across social and institutional arenas.

Such an assumption is problematic because the public significance of a given mode of action is historically, politically, and institutionally situated. It becomes meaningful and thereby exists socially insofar as it is inserted into a hierarchy of symbolic structures in terms of which it is—together with all the acts to which it is related and contrasted—produced, perceived, and interpreted.⁴¹ A barricade, picketing, the occupation of a factory, or a sit-in, will not have the same meaning and significance in all places at all times and will thus not entail the same expectations and responses from participants and opponents. For example, in the 1910s women picketing to demand the right to vote were labeled “radical” not only because they disrupted public order in an innovative way but also because they went against gender prescriptions; today, insofar as picketing has become routinized and gender prescriptions have partially changed, that action would have different implications and would thereby be a different type of action. Similarly, actors using elements of an existing repertoire of action do not simply “download” an invariant template; they improvise within constraints and adapt “to the immediate circumstances and to the reactions of antagonists, authorities, allies, observers, objects of their action, and other people somewhat involved in the struggle.”⁴² In doing so, they transform the meaning of their chosen mode of action. For example, Étienne Penissant has shown how, in France, the meaning and implications of an older mode of action such as occupying a factory has changed as a result of competition and strategic interaction between the two main labor confederations, the CGT and the CFDT, in the 1960s and 1970s.⁴³ It is problematic to simply assume that occupying a factory is evidence of radicalism.

Thus, in assessing radicalization and radicalism on the basis of predefined, invariant modes of action, we run the risk of interpreting contentious politics with outdated categories while simultaneously either reproducing dominant understandings or sneaking in our own normative biases about the nature of a “normal” conflict.⁴⁴ I am not suggesting that we abandon the newspaper-based quantitative methods of analyzing protest that Kriesi, Tarrow, and many other social movement scholars use, but simply that we complement them with in-depth case studies based on thick description so as to reconstruct the inter-subjective meanings that define and give life to the modes of action in which actors engage.⁴⁵ This research strategy also implies interpreting modes of action in light of the goals to which they are directed. The ends contribute to defining the meaning of the means. Do actors hold “radical” goals? For that matter, what is “radical”?

Standard dictionary definitions of radicalism point to a focus on the root of a problem and/or to an aspiration to far-reaching change. Nonetheless,

there is seldom, if ever, a consensus on what the root of a problem is. That is very often what the struggle is about. It follows that radicalism is to some extent a matter of perspective. For example, in the case of pensions, is the root of the problem the funding structure of the French welfare state and the distribution of costs and benefits, the demographic evolution of French society, the structure of French capitalism, or globalization and the world financial crisis? In this instance, the range of potential answers makes any assessment of radicalism either an impossible task or a biased simplification.

At first glance, focusing on the aspiration to far-reaching change is a safer road for identifying labor radicalism and determining its reach in contemporary France. The conclusion seems straightforward. Compared with the revolutionary syndicalism of the early twentieth century and its celebration of the general strike, or with the factory takeovers of the 1970s in the name of socialist workers' self-management, the contemporary French labor movement appears, if not conservative, then at least as a monument to moderation. Aspiring to far-reaching change requires having an offensive agenda and a vision of an alternative future. The collapse of the French Communist Party, which had historically supplied the CGT with radical perspectives and embodied the political strength of the French working class, has left the CGT in a political no man's land, while the transformation of the CFDT since the late 1970s has turned workers' self-management into liberal anti-statism and "flexicurity." Smaller unions such as SUD do try to develop a critical alternative, but results have so far been slim. In short, today, French labor protests and strikes are guided by a defensive rather than an offensive agenda. The socio-economic and political context of the last thirty years has forced trade unions to focus primarily on, and invest most of their resources in, the defense of employment, existing social benefits, and the status quo, instead of demanding new rights and advocating a transformation of society.⁴⁶

Although French trade unions are regularly faulted for not having a constructive culture of compromise and negotiation like their German and Swedish counterparts, they keep stressing the necessity of social dialogue and generally engage in contention to force employers to negotiate with them and/or improve their leverage in these negotiations. The protests in the fall of 2010 demanded not so much the withdrawal of Sarkozy's reform as the opening of real negotiations with unions to reach a compromise on the retirement age and pensions. Even in cases of "boss-napping" the main goal was simply to force employers to negotiate. As social movement scholars pointed out a long time ago, dramaturgy, protests, and strikes are resources that can generate public visibility for gaining leverage and access to the decision-making process. They are compatible with more institutionalized modes of action.⁴⁷

The modes of action in which French trade unions engage can be contentious but, in the great majority of cases, are neither violent nor aimed at provoking root-and-branch changes. Therefore, there would seem to be little grounds for the claim that the French hot autumn of 2010 reflects the persis-

tence of labor radicalism in France. Some qualifications are in order, however. First, we should not overestimate the prior reach and hold of labor radicalism. Even during the period of revolutionary syndicalism, at the beginning of the twentieth century, radicalism was not as pervasive as it is often portrayed. According to Duncan Gallie,

The CGT⁴⁸ was in no sense committed to an insurrectionary programme for achieving socialism, and the more extreme views of its leaders about parliamentary politics and the role of violence were personal statements and did not constitute agreed CGT doctrine.... [D]espite the centrality of the strike to revolutionary syndicalist strategy, there was little distinctive about the French strike pattern in this period that could be attributed to the influence of syndicalist ideas.... Collective bargaining was certainly relatively rare in France at the time, but this reflected the employers' unwillingness to bargain and had little to do with the character of union ideology.... [T]he level of violence in France was not distinctive.... [Peter] Stearns concludes that, far from there being evidence of any widespread adherence to revolutionary syndicalist ideas, "strike demands in France before World War I reveal a conservative pragmatic labour force" and that "syndicalism failed to cause any distinctive features in French workers' protest between 1899 and 1914."⁴⁹

Although perhaps in the early twentieth century demanding collective bargaining was enough to make one a radical, Gallie's picture makes it difficult to simply oppose a radical/revolutionary past to a moderate/conservative present.

The second qualification mirrors the first. In the same way that in the past the French labor movement was not as radical as we might think, today's labor movement is not as conservative as its focus on the defense of employment and the status quo suggests. Instead of assessing the radicalism of labor contention on the basis of predefined, invariant goals—for example, anti-capitalist revolution—we would be better served by contextualizing it. As Craig Calhoun has argued, actors "are radical not in themselves, in the abstract, but, rather, in relation to what goals other people are pursuing and what concessions governments or privileged groups are prepared to make."⁵⁰ According to Calhoun, nineteenth-century artisans were radical because the social and economic basis of their lives and communities stood in fundamental contradiction with the new capitalist order; in contrast, modern workers are essentially reformist because they lack the sociocultural foundations that artisans derived from their communal lives. As he notes of the modern laborer: "They were born of capitalism and could compete within it for various distributive gains without fundamentally threatening the new order."⁵¹

One could amend Calhoun's argument by contending that perhaps today the sociocultural basis of radicalism is to be found not in remnants of traditional communities but in the public sector. If actors "are radical not in themselves, in the abstract, but, rather, in relation to what goals other people are pursuing," then perhaps French public sector workers are radical in relation to the goals of the neoliberal project. That is, their lives and worldview—the product of a class compromise associated with the so-called "Golden Age" of

capitalism and the consolidation of the welfare state—are incompatible with the realization of this project; by resisting welfare retrenchment and the privatization of public services, they are attacking the basis of neoliberalization itself. They would thus be not merely selfish “insiders” enjoying benefits at the expense of “outsiders,” as for example Timothy Smith implies in his controversial book on the failings of the French welfare state, but what Calhoun calls “reactionary radicals”:⁵² reactionary because attempting to prevent a particular change from taking place; radical because aspiring nonetheless to a type of far-reaching change that would foster a balance of power more favorable to labor, neutralize the neoliberal project, and allow for the continuation of the sociocultural world of public sector workers. But, as is clearly illustrated by the inability of the labor movement—in France but also in other developed countries—to take advantage of the world financial crisis to advance an alternative political vision and shift the balance of power, public sector workers do not have the capacity for action enjoyed by nineteenth-century artisans.⁵³

France does not need radicalism, however understood, to experience labor contention and protracted industrial conflict. As I have shown, despite gradual transformations, such conflict is still at the center of public life and is likely to remain so as long as the state and employers engage in exclusionary practices and refuse to open up the decision-making process. So the real question is not so much “why are the French contentious?” but rather, “what would it take for the state and employers to support a substantial democratization of politics and the economy?” Perhaps more contention...

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Notes

1. See Charles Tilly, *The Contentious French: Four Centuries of Popular Struggle* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986).
2. John F. Burns and Alan Cowell, “Facing Austerity, Britain Unveils Welfare Cuts,” *New York Times*, 11 November 2010.
3. Greece experienced more strikes than other European countries but the number of people taking to the streets was significantly lower than in France. Similarly, since 15 May 2011 Spain has experienced street protests as the “Indignados” occupied

public squares such as Madrid's Puerta del Sol, but these protests have not come near the magnitude of the French protests. On the Greek protests, see Michalis Psimitis, "The Protest Cycle of Spring 2010 in Greece," *Social Movement Studies* 10, 2 (2011): 191–97. On the Spanish Indignados, see 15-M, *Indignados: Toma la calle* (Madrid, Spain: Mandala Ediciones, 2011) and Movimiento 15M: Democracia real, ¡Ya!, eds., *La rebelión de los indignados* (Madrid, Spain: Editorial Popular, 2011).

4. Craig J. Calhoun, "The Radicalism of Tradition: Community Strength or Venerable Disguised and Borrowed Language?" *American Journal of Sociology* 88, 5 (1983): 886–914.
5. The unions were the Confédération générale du travail (CGT), the Confédération française démocratique du travail (CFDT), Force ouvrière (FO), the Confédération française des travailleurs chrétiens (CFTC), the Confédération générale des cadres (CGC), the Union nationale des syndicats autonomes (UNSA), the Fédération syndicale unitaire (FSU), and Solidaires (also called Solidarité, unité, démocratie [SUD]).
6. For a discussion, see Sophie Bérout and Karel Yon, "Automne 2010: Anatomie d'un grand mouvement social," *Contretemps* (retrieved from <http://www.contretemps.eu/interventions/automne-2010-anatomie-dun-grand-mouvement-social>).
7. "Le mouvement lycéen prend de l'ampleur," *Le Monde*, 15 October 2010.
8. "Retraites: les étudiants prennent le relais de la contestation," *Le Monde*, 26 October 2010.
9. Luc Bonner, "Les manifestations de jeunes prennent un tour violent," *Le Monde*, 20 October 2010.
10. Yves Bordenave, "Polémique sur le comptage des manifestants," *Le Monde*, 18 October 2010.
11. SNCF stands for Société nationale des chemins de fer français (French National Railway Corporation); RATP refers to Régie autonome des transports parisiens (Autonomous Operator of Parisian Transportation); and EDF means Electricity of France. All the strike data come from *Le Monde's* coverage of the events. It is worth pointing out that in spite of these strikes, the country was not paralyzed as it had been in December 1995. In this respect, the minimum service law of 21 August 2007 seems to have played a critical role in mitigating the impact of contentious collective action.
12. Dominique Gallois, "La pénurie d'essence suspendue au blocage des dépôts," *Le Monde*, 18 October 2010, and "Lente amélioration sur le front du carburant, selon le gouvernement," *Le Monde*, 21 October 2010.
13. "La raffinerie de Grandpuits évacuée, mais toujours en grève," *Le Monde*, 22 October 2010.
14. See Charles Tilly, *Contentious Performances* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
15. Pierre Jaxel-Muller, "Selon BVA, le soutien au mouvement social contre la réforme des retraites se renforce," *Le Monde*, 22 October 2010. The poll also notes, however, that 52 percent of the French disapproved of the blockage of the refineries.
16. See Louise Fessard, "Raffineries: 'On bloque pour ceux qui ne peuvent pas faire grève'," *Mediapart*, 16 October 2010 (retrieved from <http://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/161010/raffineries-bloque-pour-ceux-qui-ne-peuvent-pas-faire-greve>).
17. For example, in the fall of 2009 the decision to appoint Sarkozy's 23-year-old son Jean the head of the public agency running Paris's La Défense, one of Europe's largest business districts, triggered such a backlash that Sarkozy was forced to back down. Opposition parties and critics sarcastically dubbed Sarkozy's son "Prince Jean." Furthermore, in the spring and summer of 2010, the Bettencourt Affair, named after the heiress to L'Oréal cosmetics empire and the richest woman in France, Liliame Bettencourt, revealed that Sarkozy's party, the UMP, had used illegal funding practices during the 2007 presidential election campaign. The affair

- brought about the fall of Minister of Labor Eric Woerth, who had been personally involved in the scandal.
18. See also Jean-Michel Denis, "Le conflit en grève? (Quelques éléments de synthèse)," in *Le Conflit en grève? Tendances et perspectives de la conflictualité contemporaine*, ed. Jean-Michel Denis (Paris: La Dispute, 2005), 339.
 19. Sylvia Zappi, "Pourquoi les séquestrations sont populaires," *Le Monde*, 11 April 2009. See also Institut Supérieur du Travail, "Faut-il séquestrer son patron?," 2009 (retrieved from <http://istravail.com/article429.html>).
 20. Michaël Szadkowski, "En banlieue, des lycéens motivés pour faire durer le mouvement," *Le Monde*, 20 October 2010.
 21. As Lipset has shown, the politicization of trade unions is a common feature of labor movements faced with repressive states in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: "Whether they liked it or not, unions became political institutions; they had first to change the distribution of power within the state before they could effectively exert power in the market." Seymour Martin Lipset, "Radicalism or Reformism: The Sources of Working-Class Politics," *American Political Science Review* 77, 1 (1983), 7. The persistence of labor exclusion in France even after World War II has entailed the continuation of this pattern. On unions as political actors, see Wolfgang Streeck and Anke Hassel, "Trade Unions as Political Actors," in *International Handbook of Trade Unions*, ed. J. T. Addison and C. Schnabel (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2003): 335–65.
 22. Here I am drawing on well-known accounts articulated by Hanspeter Kriesi, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly. For a more detailed discussion, see Marcos Ancelovici, "Social Movements and Protest Politics," in *Developments in French Politics 4*, ed. Alistair Cole, Patrick Le Galès, and Jonah Levy (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 79–80.
 23. See Thomas Philippon, *Le Capitalisme d'héritiers: La crise française du travail* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil/La République des idées, 2007).
 24. See Ancelovici, "Social Movements and Protest Politics." For a systematic comparison, see Hanspeter Kriesi et al., *New Social Movements in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
 25. Olivier Fillieule, *Stratégies de la rue* (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1997), 182–84. The public and political presence of trade unions often impresses foreign commentators who see in it an expression of labor power. For example, Sullivan writes: "The French labor movement illustrates that a high rate of union membership is not, in and of itself, a necessary precondition for labor movement power. Equally important are the level of activist mobilization and the popular support for the movement goals." Richard Sullivan, "Density Matters: The Union Density Bias and Its Implications for Labor Movement Revitalization," *Mobilization* 14, 2 (2009), 244. While I agree with Sullivan that activist mobilization and public opinion support are critical, I treat the level of labor contention as a partial product of labor's exclusion from the decision-making process; in other words, in France the use of contentious modes of action is fostered by the institutional and political *weakness* of unions rather than being an expression of labor power.
 26. Olivier Fillieule, "La France est le pays en Europe où l'on manifeste le plus," *Le Monde*, 12 October 2010.
 27. This declining participation of workers in strikes is directly tied to the rise of unemployment in the late 1970s and 1980s and the simultaneous fall of union density.
 28. With respect to the strike data of Figures 3-5, it should be noted that the French series do not include the public administration, particularly France's postal and telecommunication services (two sectors where several strikes have taken place since the late 1980s). Furthermore, there was a change in the data collection methods of the US series: since 1982, strikes involving fewer than 1,000 workers were

- excluded from the statistics, whereas prior to that date only strikes involving fewer than six workers were excluded. See Lorenzo Bordogna and Gian Primo Cella, "Decline or Transformation? Change in Industrial Conflict and Its Challenges," *Transfert* 8, 4 (2002), 591 n2.
29. The following discussion builds on Sophie Bérout, Jean-Michel Denis, Guillaume Desage, Baptiste Giraud, and Jérôme Pélisse, *La Lutte continue? Les conflits du travail dans la France contemporaine* (Bellecombe-en-Bauges: Éditions du Croquant, 2008).
 30. The DARES (Direction de l'animation de la recherche, des études et des statistiques) is the Research Institute of the French Ministry of Labor; the DGAFP is the Direction générale de l'administration et de la fonction publique.
 31. The REPONSE survey was conducted in 1993, 1999, and 2005. In 1993, it covered 2,700 workplaces (*établissements*) at firms with more than 50 employees in all sectors; in 1999 and 2005, it covered about 3,000 workplaces with more than 20 workers regardless of the size of the firm to which they belonged. Insofar as there are sampling inconsistencies between the 1993 survey, on the one hand, and the 1999 and 2005 surveys, on the other, many analysts using these data focus on the 1999 and 2005 results. See Alexandre Carlier, "Mesurer les grèves dans les entreprises: Des données administratives aux données d'enquêtes," *Document d'études de la DARES* 139 (2008), 8, and Bérout et al., *La Lutte continue?* 14–16.
 32. While a "local" conflict is contained within a *single* firm even though it may affect several workplaces of this firm, a "general" conflict involves *several* firms. See Bérout et al, *La Lutte continue?* 26.
 33. Carlier, "Mesurer les grèves dans les entreprises," 13–16.
 34. The forms of conflict mentioned in the REPONSE questionnaire were short work stoppages ("débrayages"), strikes of less than two days, strikes of two days or more, slow-down strikes ("grèves perlées"), working-to-rule strikes ("grèves du zèle"), refusal of overtime, demonstrations, petitions, and "other forms of conflict." Alexandre Carlier and Elise Tenret, "Des conflits du travail plus nombreux et plus diversifiés," *Premières Synthèses de la DARES* 08.1 (2007), 2. A note of caution is in order however: the 2002–2004 period includes the mass protests and strikes of June 2003 against the reform of pensions and arguably is thereby not representative of longer-term trends; a breakdown of the available data by protest event and more longitudinal data are needed to assert that industrial conflict has really increased since the 1990s.
 35. Charles Tilly, "Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain, 1758–1834," in *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action*, ed. Mark Traugott (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 27–28.
 36. For example, Beverly Silver argues that "in some situations just-in-time (JIT) production actually *increases* the vulnerability of capital to disruptions in the flow of production, and thus can *enhance* workers' bargaining power based on direct action at the point of production." Beverly J. Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 6.
 37. Carlier and Tenret, "Des conflits du travail plus nombreux et plus diversifiés," 2. The REPONSE survey includes employers in its sample and thus provides a two-sided picture of industrial conflict.
 38. Michel Lallement, "New Patterns of Industrial Relations and Political Action since the 1980s," in *Changing France: The Politics that Markets Make*, ed. Pepper D. Culpepper, Peter A. Hall, and Bruno Palier (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2006), 65.
 39. Bérout et al, *La Lutte continue?* 76.
 40. Sidney Tarrow, *Democracy and Disorder: Protest and Politics in Italy, 1965–1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Kriesi et al., *New Social Movements in Western Europe*.

41. Here I am paraphrasing Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973), 7.
42. Tilly, "Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain," 27.
43. Étienne Peissant, "Les occupations de locaux dans les années 1960–1970: Processus sociohistoriques de 'réinvention' d'un mode d'action," *Genèses* 59 (2005): 71–93.
44. The labeling and framing of contention are the objects of symbolic struggles with implications for potential alliances, public opinion, and state responses. As Sophie Béroud points out, labeling a protest, an organization, or a movement as radical contributes to the identity and legitimacy of this actor and shapes other actors' expectations and line of conduct. See Sophie Béroud, "Violence et radicalité dans les conflits du travail: quelques pistes d'analyse," in *Violences et société: Regards sociologiques*, ed. Abou Ndiaye and Dan Ferrand-Bechmann (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2010), 147–65.
45. On protest event analysis, see Jennifer Earl, Andrew Martin, John D. McCarthy, and Sarah A. Soule, "The Use of Newspaper Data in the Study of Collective Action," *Annual Review of Sociology* 30 (2004): 65–80. What I am proposing here is not particularly original and underpins the work of several scholars working from the standpoint of cultural sociology (for example, Javier Auyero, Nina Eliasoph, Paul Lichterman, Francesca Polletta, and William H. Sewell, Jr.).
46. When trade unions do try to introduce new rights, they have a hard time mobilizing workers in their favor. Consider, for example, their difficulty in mobilizing support for the so-called "professional social security." Paul Bouffartigue, "À propos des alternatives revendicatives de sécurisation," in *Quand le travail se précarise, quelles résistances collectives?* ed. Sophie Béroud and Paul Bouffartigue (Paris: La Dispute, 2009), 307–14.
47. See, for example, the classic article by Michael Lipsky, "Protest as a Political Resource," *American Political Science Review* 62, 4 (1968): 1144–58.
48. At the time, the CGT was the *only* trade union of the French labor movement.
49. Duncan Gallie, *Social Inequality and Class Radicalism in France and Britain* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 192–93. Gallie quotes Peter Stearns, *Revolutionary Syndicalism and French Labor* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971), 64, 93.
50. Calhoun, "The Radicalism of Tradition," 906.
51. *Ibid.*, 907.
52. For example, commenting on the 1995 strikes against the reform of pensions, Smith notes: "Here was a mass social movement, to be sure, but one which was geared towards the *maintenance* of costly benefits which served not to diminish inequality but rather to widen the social divide. The most comfortably employed workers of France were hoping to retain their corporatist privileges." Timothy B. Smith, *France in Crisis: Welfare, Inequality and Globalization since 1980* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 38.
53. On the failure of the labor movement to take advantage of the financial crisis, see Lucio Baccaro, Robert Boyer, Colin Crouch, Marino Regini, Paul Marginson, Richard Hyman, Rebecca Gumbrell-McCormick, and Ruth Milkman, "Discussion Forum I: Labour and the Global Financial Crisis," *Socio-Economic Review* 8, 2 (2010): [341–76](#).