

ed in rural, social and economic issues and so have started to provide a voice for farm workers in wider issues. It seems inevitable that there will be some fusion or arrangements made between FWA and NZWU. The present passions and the tensions of the mid-70's must first subside but it is extremely unlikely that it will take a further 70 years before the farm workers are fully admitted to industrial citizenship. In the meantime, farmers must contemplate whether they have shot an albatross.

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## INDUSTRIAL STRUGGLE: NEW DIRECTIONS IN SOCIAL RESEARCH\*

by  
Stephen J. Frenkel  
and  
Alice Coolican

### INTRODUCTION

Studies of labour struggle span a wide range of analytical and methodological standpoints. At one extreme one finds quantitative modelling of strike behaviour<sup>1</sup> while at the other there are the sociological accounts of specific incidents of conflict.<sup>2</sup> Clearly, the choice of research strategy and methodology depend upon the issues addressed and the disciplinary context from which such questions emerge. Our concern is to understand and explain variations in inter-industry patterns of industrial action. By working at an intermediate level of analysis we hope to steer between the Scylla of extreme abstraction (evidenced by most national level strike studies<sup>3</sup>) and the Charybdis of interpretive empiricism (exemplified by many plant level case studies of strikes<sup>4</sup>). There are two further important considerations underlying our research strategy: previous studies suggest that certain industries in different countries exhibit similar strike features<sup>5</sup> but there is no satisfactory theory at present

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1. For example, D. Britt and O. Galle, "Industrial Conflict and Unionisation", *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 37, 1972, pp. 46-57; J. Vanderkamp, "Economic Activity and Strikes in Canada", *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 9, 1970, pp. 215-230; and R.N. Stern, "Inter-metropolitan Pattern of Strike Frequency", *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 29, 1976, pp. 218-235.
  2. For example, A.W. Gouldner, *Wildcat Strike*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1955; E.V. Batstone, I. Boraston, S.J. Frenkel, *The Social Organisation of Strikes*, Blackwells, Oxford, 1978, Part II.
  3. For a critique of national level quantitative studies (and others) see R.N. Stern, "Methodological Issues in Quantitative Strike Analyses", *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1978, pp. 32-42.
  4. For example, T. Lane and K. Roberts, *Strike at Pilkingtons*, Fontana, London, 1971.
  5. C. Kerr and A. Siegel, "The Inter-industry Propensity to Strike", in A. Kornhauser, R. Dubin and A. Ross, *Industrial Conflict*, McGraw Hill, N.Y., 1954, pp. 189-212. There are exceptions: see for example, G.V. Rimlinger, "International Differences in Strike Propensity of Coal Miners: Experiences in Four Countries", *Industrial and Labor Relations Reviews*, Vol. 12, 1959, pp. 389-406.
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Paper presented at the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, 49th Congress, Auckland, New Zealand, January, 1979. Stephen J. Frenkel was educated at Cambridge and Warwick prior to working as a research associate at the Industrial Relations Research Unit at Warwick. He is currently lecturer in Industrial Relations at the University of New South Wales in Sydney. Alice Coolican is a graduate of New South Wales University. She is currently employed as a research assistant on a project concerning the comparative analysis of industrial action in Australia.

which accounts for such observations.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, the available evidence indicates that within any society the differences in patterns of industrial action are most pronounced between industries<sup>7</sup> so that it makes good sense to concentrate on inter-industry comparisons.

There are two respects in which our approach differs from most other studies in this *genre*: we are not interested simply in strike activity but also in the comparative incidence and nature of other forms of collective industrial action. More important perhaps is the intention to describe, understand and explain the various facets of industrial action. These are predicated on a conception of industrial action as typically entailing four aspects: *protest against* a particular deprivation, *demands for* amelioration or compensation of this condition, and *processes of social mobilization* which in turn imply a greater or lesser degree of *social organisation*. This notion of industrial action can be readily adapted to the requirements of empirical research by conceptualizing the pattern of industrial action in any industry as including the following dimensions: *incidence* or frequency; *form* which summarizes the characteristics of the dominant mode of industrial action; *organizational scope* which denotes the size and breadth of typical industrial action; *duration* which gives some idea of the intensity or obduracy of the parties; *issues* which indicate the grievances and demands considered legitimate or practicable; *leader characteristics* which, especially when taken together with other aspects, suggest the nature of the mobilization process and attendant social organization. Finally, there is the *degree of stability* demonstrated by the industrial action pattern. This conveys the extent of durability implied by the prevailing pattern of institutional power relationships.

The purpose of this paper is to show that industries tend to display discernible variations in their patterns of industrial action and that these can be interpreted with the aid of an analytical framework based on conflict and accommodation. In the subsequent section we describe this framework and then apply it to two markedly dissimilar industries located in different societies. In the final part of the paper a number of important implications of the foregoing analysis are discussed.

## INDUSTRIAL ACTION: A FRAMEWORK FOR RESEARCH

At this preliminary stage two caveats are worth entering: the exposition in this section is intended to simply highlight and clarify the meaning of various concepts. A discussion of their complex interrelationships and their influence on industrial action patterns are beyond the scope of a short paper. Secondly, the framework should not be viewed as a rigid deterministic model rather it is a flexible construct whose purpose is to sensitize the researchers to potentially important factors and hence act as a guide in the collection of data.

A convenient starting point can be made with the familiar notion of the *product market*. It is a commonplace that product markets affect industrial rela-

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6. The most influential theory available has recently been comprehensively criticized. See P.K. Edwards, "The Kerr-Siegal Hypothesis of Strikes and the Isolated Mass", *Sociological Review*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 1977. A useful contribution to disaggregated strike studies is provided by D.J. Turkington, *Industrial Conflict*, Methuen, N.Z. 1976.

7. H.A. Turner, G. Roberts and D. Roberts, *Management Characteristics and Labour Conflict*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1977, p. 73.

tions<sup>8</sup> and it is but a short step to suggesting that the incidence and nature of industrial action may be affected by particular aspects of the product market. Four dimensions have been identified for analytical purposes: *standardization*, i.e. the extent to which products are more or less substitutable. The greater the product differentiation the more fragmented and possibly monopolistic the market is likely to be. This is likely to affect the unity of employers especially in their attitude to trade unions and industrial conflict.<sup>9</sup> Second, *stability* refers to the frequency and amplitude of fluctuations in market demand. Research indicates that unstable product markets, when associated with certain other structural conditions, encourage militant rank and file efforts to ensure job property rights.<sup>10</sup> Third, *pressure of demand* which refers to a particular period, is self explanatory while the *degree of competition* indicates the existence or otherwise of certain market control practices exercised by employers. Market control is obviously facilitated by oligopoly.<sup>11</sup>

If the strategies of employers and unions are subject to product market considerations both are also influenced by (and sometimes take part in) decisions concerning the *macro political-economic environment*. Changes in tariffs, exchange rates, interest rates, incomes policy, labour legislation, are but a few of the many features of the political-economic environment which may affect industrial relationships.

Turning to *employer structures and strategies*, it is likely that the two aforementioned factors condition the *number, size and geographical distribution of firms*.<sup>12</sup> Three further facets of employer structures are important to distinguish: the *nature of ownership*, i.e. whether enterprises are privately, state or socially owned; the extent of *centralization*, i.e. the degree to which employers associations or corporations concentrate power nationally or locally; and the degree of *standardization*, i.e. the extent of variation between employers' industrial relations policies in any industry.<sup>13</sup>

Another important dimension which may affect employers susceptibility to industrial action is their *cohesion* in respect of labour issues.<sup>14</sup> And finally, the *ideology*<sup>15</sup> and *political networks* of employers in an industry is bound to influence their attitudes to trade union militancy and their consequent actions.

It is not simply the characteristics of employers as a group which will tend to have a bearing on the shape of industrial disputes, it is also the nature of *management control systems*<sup>16</sup> internal to various firms, since these are likely to affect workers' satisfaction and hence influence their propensity to engage

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8. H.M. Levinson, *Determining Forces in Collective Wage Bargaining*, Wiley, N.Y., 1966.

9. G.K. Ingham, *Strikes and Industrial Conflict*, Macmillan, London, 1974, Chs. 3 & 4.

10. H.A. Turner, G. Clack and G. Roberts, *Labour Relations in the Motor Industry*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1967, Ch. 3; and D. Turkington, *op. cit.*, pp. 310-311.

11. Economists use the concept of concentration ratio but this is a measure of the extent to which any market is dominated by few of many firms. It does not directly indicate whether competition is weak or strong. For an imaginative analysis using this concept, see G.K. Ingham, *op. cit.*, Ch. 3.

12. A stimulating discussion is provided by Ulman. See L. Ulman, "Connective Bargaining and Competitive Bargaining", *Scottish Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 21, 1974, pp. 97-109.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Regarding the cohesion of Swedish employers see G.K. Ingham, *op. cit.*, and P. Jackson and K. Sisson, "Employers' Confederation in Sweden and the U.K. and the Significance of Industrial Infrastructure", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1976, pp. 306-323.

15. R. Bendix, *Work and Authority in Industry*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1974 and P.D. Anthony, *The Ideology of Work*, Tavistock, London, 1977.

16. H.A. Turner *et al.*, *Management Characteristics and Labour Conflict*. For a theoretical analysis see E.E. Lawler III, "Control Systems in Organizations", in M.D. Dunnette, (Ed.), *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, Rand McNally, Chicago, 1976, Ch. 29. Also J. Purcell "Control Systems and Industrial Relations", *Industrial Relations Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 1977, pp. 41-54.

in collective action. Such control systems may vary in their degree of *consultation, centralization and routinization* where routinization refers to the extent to which rules provide for contingencies in a detailed written manner. Again the degree of *standardization* or similarity of control systems may vary from one industry to another. Likewise, the *significance of labour as a resource* will be dissimilar depending on current and anticipated market, technological and legislative conditions. Highly valued workers are likely to be treated differently to their less favoured counterparts.<sup>17</sup>

It is well known that employer and trade union behaviour are influenced by the external *labour market*,<sup>18</sup> which in turn is shaped by a great many factors, some of which have been referred to earlier. The impact of the labour market on the propensity and character of industrial action necessitates consideration of the four dimensions analogous to those associated with the product market, *viz. standardization, stability, pressure of demand and extent of competition.*

Trade unions typically provide the institutional context, norms and leadership in labour protests. It is important therefore to acknowledge those features of trade unions particularly important in influencing the incidence and nature of industrial conflict.<sup>19</sup> These include first, the *number, size and geographical distribution of unions* in any industry. Second, the extent of *inter-union competition and internal factionism.* Union power and more particularly the authority of certain officials is indicated by the *locus of decision-making and control.* This may vary from concentration at the centre (e.g. union executives and national officials), to dispersal on the periphery (e.g. branch officials and workplace representatives). Fourth and finally, the *ideology and political networks* of the trade unions in any industry will have a bearing on the nature of industrial action.

Governments and official agencies have come to play a significant role in the industrial relations systems of many countries, while their influence in certain industries may differ within any particular society. Thus, any framework for analysis of industrial action must take into account both the *scale* of state intervention and the *mode* or nature of such activity.<sup>20</sup>

The orientation and strategies of the parties may also be strongly influenced by the quality of government intervention. In some industries it may be that the state has a reputation for acting in a partisan manner while in others its role as a neutral conciliator may be highly valued. The quality of intervention may vary over time; it may also switch from an emphasis on *ad hoc* strategies to systematic reform. Furthermore the state may use its power overtly, for example by legislation, or covertly by discriminating against employers in their bids for public sector contracts. These various features of state activity are likely to influence employer and union behaviour, occasionally inviting massive opposition. Indeed in periods of political crisis industrial conflict may assume the form of violent riots as in South Africa or full scale revolution as has happened recently in Iran.

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17. A Friedman, *Industry and Labour*, Macmillan, London, 1978.

18. *Ibid.*, pp.

19. An instructive contemporary picture of British unions can be found in R. Taylor, *The Fifth Estate*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978. For an international perspective see H. Clegg, *Trade Unions under Collective Bargaining*, Blackwells, Oxford, 1976.

20. A challenging theoretical framework has recently been elaborated by Crouch. See C. Crouch, *Class Conflict and the Industrial Relations Crisis*, Heinemann, London, 1977, Part I

The propensity to engage in industrial struggle is not simply a product of structural and institutional factors affecting the employers, unions and the state. The *characteristics of the labour force* which may vary considerably, even between industries in any one country, is also likely to be of prime importance. Again, a number of factors can be singled out for special attention. In the first place the *composition, location* and *size* of the labour force is important. This covers such aspects as the age, sex, ethnic, religious, occupational and other dimensions of the workforce which are likely to influence their values and attitudes. The location of the labour force may also be important — geographical isolation may permit solidarity under certain conditions while on the other hand the existence of various industries in large metropolitan centres may be conducive to the generation of political awareness and collective action.<sup>21</sup> The size of an industry's labour force may contribute to a certain set of conditions and attendant solidarity, especially when concentrated in specific locations over a long period of time.<sup>22</sup>

Though *technology, work organization* and *social cohesion* of workers are, like the previous factors, subject to managerial influence, these facets of an industry's relations of production are liable to influence the nature of workplace dynamics and trade unionism more generally.<sup>23</sup> Such factors will in turn contribute to the *strategic power* of the labour force, but most importantly perhaps, the latter is much influenced by the industry's strategic location within the wider national or international economy. This typically feeds back to influence the nature of work and union organization in the industry. Finally, there is the relevance of *workplace union organization* which may differ a good deal between industries.<sup>24</sup> The reasons for this cannot be discussed here but clearly the power of workplace unionism can be expected to have some impact on the shape of industrial action.

The factors considered thus far interrelate and contribute to what we term an *accommodation structure*.<sup>25</sup> This concept summarizes the informal and formal arrangements by which employers, trade unions and the state regulate their relationships. Several key features are worth noting. First, such arrangements may vary in *complexity* from, for example, comprehensive industry-wide agreements between one employer's association and an industrial union to a series of collective agreements superimposed by legal awards effected by many different organizations on both sides of industry. The *coverage and nature of procedural arrangements* is also of significance, for this indicates the extent to which the procedural rules embrace all or only some enterprises and workers in the industry under examination. In addition, industrial relations systems differ a good deal in regard to the role played by the state, the amount of legalism, the nature and timing of negotiations and so forth. This is most obvious when inter-industry comparisons of industrial conflict are made across national boundaries. Since such procedures have been developed to deal with

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21. E. Shorter and C. Tilly, *Strikes in France, 1830-1968*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1974, Ch. 10.

22. K.G.J.C. Knowles, *Strikes — A Study in Industrial Conflict*, Blackwells, Oxford, 1952, pp. 186-209.

23. Regarding the British motor vehicle industry, see H.A. Turner, G. Clack, and G. Roberts, *Labour Relations in the Motor Industry*, *op. cit.*; E. Batstone *et al.*, *op. cit.*, H. Beynon, *Working for Ford*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973.

24. I. Boraston, H. Clegg and M. Rimmer, *Workplace and Union*, Heinemann, London, 1975. Compare also H. Beynon, *op. cit.*, with T. Nichols, and H. Beynon, *Living with Capitalism*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1977.

25. Clegg uses the term "bargaining structure". This is not appropriate to procedures which mainly rely on statutory or forms of regulation other than collective bargaining. Nevertheless, we are indebted to him for many concepts and ideas.

industrial conflict it would be surprising if they did not exert some influence on such activity.

The *level of rule making* may range from being fully centralized at national level in one industry to plant level negotiations in another. Clearly, who negotiates and at what level will affect as well as reflect the distribution of power in the various contending organizations. This in turn is likely to make certain types of industrial action easier and some others more difficult to organize. The *scope of issues subject to joint union and employer regulation* (with or without the involvement of the state) will give some indication of the issues likely to generate routine conflict but their scope may also suggest the reasons why conflict may be endemic in some industries where employers, perhaps supported by legal norms, refuse to widen the scope of joint regulation. This brings us to the *nature, legitimacy and effectiveness of industrial relations rules*. Procedures may vary in formality and detail while their transgression may evoke sanctions of differing degrees of severity. The rules may be accepted willingly as codes of behaviour or at the other extreme these may be viewed as instruments of naked domination. Both their nature and legitimacy will influence their effectiveness. This is crucial to understanding the mobilization of opposition against employers. Finally, accommodation structures may differ in their *stability* either over time or in comparison with arrangements in other industries. Instability may not simply reflect the ineffectiveness of the rules but also contribute to endemic anomie.<sup>26</sup>

The manner in which the factors relevant to the analysis of industrial action have been introduced, may give the impression that we are simply offering a checklist. This is not our intention, indeed, a deeper rationale underlies these concepts. It may be termed an accommodation theory of industrial action, deriving its initial inspiration from Clegg's recent path breaking work on comparative international union behaviour.<sup>27</sup> In essence this theory suggests that the characteristics of industrial action (to be outlined below), are related to the accommodation structure of an industry as forged by employers, unions and state. But proceeding one step further, one must ask what factors determine the ways in which the parties develop and sustain arrangements on the lines which exist empirically? The key to this answer lies in an historical and current examination of the factors impinging on employer, union and state behaviour. These include all the elements which we have discussed earlier. In short, the pattern of industrial action in any industry is shaped by the accommodation structure which in turn is the product of the power relationships and attendant strategies, tactics and unintended consequences of employer, union and state behaviour.

#### **APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK: INDUSTRIAL ACTION IN THE U.S. CONSTRUCTION AND FRENCH OIL INDUSTRIES.**

While we cannot illustrate the aforementioned theoretical framework historically, it is possible to see how the factors mentioned earlier operate to

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26. A. Fox and A. Flanders, "The Reform of Collective Bargaining: from Donovan to Durkheim", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1969, pp. 151-180.
27. H.A. Clegg, *op. cit.*, and recent papers by one of the authors. For example, S.J. Frenkel, "Towards a Theory of Strikes in Australia", Dept. of Industrial Relations, University of New South Wales, Working Paper No. 4, 1978, and S.J. Frenkel, "Workplace Organization and Accommodation Structure: Industrial Conflict in the Pilbara Iron Ore Industry", *The Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 20, No. 4, 1978.

*sustain* particular accommodation structures whose consequences include different patterns of industrial struggle. We shall take as our empirical examples the U.S. construction and the French oil industry in turn. These have been chosen essentially on three grounds: firstly, recent research provides sufficient, though not fully comprehensive information on aspects of industrial relations relevant to our framework. Secondly, the examination of two very different industries located in diverse socio-political contexts constitutes a challenge to the efficacy of this framework. And thirdly, there appeared to be several interesting parallels between French trade unions and certain of their Australian counterparts. Furthermore, the U.S. construction industry serves as a useful point of comparison in the current phase of our research on industrial action in the Australian building industry.

Table 1 summarizes the recent patterns of industrial action<sup>28</sup> in U.S. construction and French oil industries. These are discussed in more detail below.

**Table 1: Patterns of Industrial Action.**

Dimensions	Industries	
	U.S. Construction	French Oil
Incidence	very high	high
Form	inter and intra-contract strikes	strikes in the context of mobilization programmes
Organizational scope	mainly confined to particular trades in specific areas	mainly multi-plant, industry or nationwide
Duration	variable — long interest disputes, short jurisdictional	very brief
Issues	mainly wages, working conditions and job control	wages, working conditions and job control but in the context of wider political-economic strategies
Leader characteristics	local full-time officials strongly receptive to rank and file demands.	central union executives and union officials with the aid of militant stewards
Degree of stability	fairly stable	signs of instability

#### **The U.S. Construction Industry Strike Pattern.**

This industry is thought to be amongst the most strike-prone in America. In the 1960's for example, the construction industry employed 5% of the non-

28. By recent, we mean between 1965 and 1975 in respect of the U.S. construction industry, while our information for the French oil industry spans the period 1963 to 1972.

agricultural labour force yet accounted for about 22% of both the number of man days "lost" and the number of strikes.<sup>29</sup> Between 1972 and 1975 it has been estimated that working days "lost" averaged .85% compared to .17% for all industries.<sup>30</sup>

The only evidence we have found regarding the form of industrial action in this industry is Mills' observations that in 1969 and 1970 strikes occurred in 36% of all contract renewals which was above the 20% level which existed between 1960 and 1967.<sup>31</sup> These interest disputes are of course typical in the U.S. but much less common is the high incidence of intra-contract stoppages which characterize the construction industry.

The organizational scope of construction strikes appears to vary: at the termination of a contract these usually involve many workers which might span several trades or areas. It is noteworthy that for the period 1946 to 1967 Lipsky and Farber calculated that the average construction strike involved 385 workers which is roughly half the size of the all industry average.<sup>32</sup> But this is largely explained by the large number of jurisdictional disputes which tend to be brief and embrace few workers.<sup>33</sup>

Some idea of the incidence and duration of demarcation disputes is given by the following data: between 1960 and 1968 40% of total construction strikes centred on these issues yet they contributed only 8% to working days "lost".<sup>34</sup> Disputes concerning wages and related issues made up the bulk of the remaining strike issues;<sup>35</sup> these struggles being particularly lengthy when new contracts are being negotiated; possibly longer than the all industry average.<sup>35</sup> Mention should also be made of the increasing number of strikes and use of violence against open shop contractors.<sup>37</sup>

Who assumes the role of strike leader in the typical U.S. construction dispute? Though international union leaders may be called in to settle strikes,<sup>38</sup> the initiative is usually taken by local full-time union officials commonly known as business agents. But being elected officials they are normally in very close touch with the feelings of the rank and file.<sup>39</sup> Finally, there is little evidence that the strike pattern has altered significantly over the post-war period.<sup>40</sup>

### The French Oil Industry Strike Pattern.

Lack of data precludes the determination of the incidence of strikes in the French oil industry in comparison with the all industry average. Nevertheless, Gallie's recent analysis<sup>41</sup> suggests that the French oil industry is relatively strike-prone when set against the record of its British counterpart. It would seem that French oil refineries are halted approximately once a year.<sup>42</sup> These strikes generally occur at the culmination of a programme of mobilization which

29. D. Lipsky and H. Farber, "The Composition of Strike Activity in the Construction Industry", *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 1976, p. 388.

30. H.G. Foster, "Industrial Relations in Construction: 1970-1977", *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1978, p. 10.

31. D.Q. Mills, *Industrial Relations and Manpower in Construction*, M.I.T. Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1972, p. 69.

32. D. Lipsky and H. Farber, *op. cit.*, p. 392.

33. D.Q. Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

34. D. Lipsky and H. Farber, *op. cit.*, p. 402.

35. D.Q. Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 20, note 36.

36. D. Lipsky and H. Farber, *op. cit.*, p. 402.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 403.

38. D.Q. Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

40. D. Lipsky and H. Farber, *op. cit.*

41. D. Gallie, *In Search of the New Working Class*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1978.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

might include the submission of petitions and the holding of demonstrations.<sup>43</sup> They are typically multi-plant in scope, frequently encompassing one or more industries. This can reasonably be implied from the fact that most stoppages are initiated and orchestrated from union headquarters, a point which we shall return to below.

Paralleling the general French experience, the oil industry is characterized by strikes of very brief duration. Thus, in two refineries between 1963 and 1971 there were 24 strikes only two of which lasted longer than 24 hours.<sup>44</sup>

What issues do French oil industry workers strike over? Salary levels, working conditions and work arrangements appear to be the most common issues.<sup>45</sup> But a typical set of strike demands includes a large number of items: for example, one strike referred to by Gallie included 22 separate claims.<sup>46</sup> These frequently call for radical political changes and are therefore directed as much at the state as at employers.<sup>47</sup> Indeed full-time union leaders and stewards see their role largely in class struggle rather than grievance handling and economic bargaining terms. Strikes are seen as forming part of a strategy for political mobilization of the working class directed from union centres but tailored to suit the needs of particular groups of workers.<sup>48</sup> Thus, of the 24 strikes referred to earlier, 19 were initiated by union executives acting singly or in concert with others while only five emerged from the workplace.<sup>49</sup>

The stability of the strike pattern is difficult to evaluate: there are indications that a long term trend towards decentralization of strike initiatives and action might be occurring as company bargaining increases and workplace organization increases in strength.<sup>50</sup>

Having outlined the character of strikes in the two industries we may now proceed with the analysis, beginning with the U.S. construction industry. In order to facilitate what is perhaps a rather complex set of arguments, Table 2 sets out in a summary way our estimation of the relevant factors.

**Table 2: Factors associated with industrial action patterns in the U.S. construction and French oil industries.**

Factors	U.S. Construction industry	French oil industry
<b>Product market:</b>		
standardization	low	high
stability	low	high
pressure of demand	mixed	high
competition	strong	weak
<b>Macro political-economic context</b>	unfavourable	unfavourable

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 252-253.

44. *Ibid.*, p. 289.

45. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 267.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 260.

50. E. Shorter and C. Tilly, *op. cit.*, pp. 184-187; and S. Mallet, *The New Working Class*, Spokesman Books, U.K., 1975.

Factors	U.S. Construction industry	French Oil industry
<b>Employers' structures &amp; strategies:</b>		
number, size and geographical distribution	many, small, dispersed	few, large, strategically located
centralization and standardiz'n	low	high
cohesion re labour	low	high
ideology and political networks	laissez-faire	lassez-faire
ownership	private	private
<b>Managerial labour control system:</b>		
consultation	high	low
centralization	low	high
routinization	variable	high
standardization	low	low
significance of labour as a resource	high	high
<b>Labour market:</b>		
standardization	low	high
stability	low	high
pressure of demand	mixed	mixed
competition	low-increasing	high
<b>Trade unions' structures and strategies:</b>		
number, size and geographical distribution	many, small, dispersed	few, large centralized
inter-union competition and internal factionalism	high	high inter-union competition
locus of decision-making and control	localized	centralized
ideology and political networks	business unionism	communist and socialist
<b>State structures and strategies:</b>		
scale and mode of intervention	extensive legislation	modest legislation
quality of intervention	unpopular with both sides	conciliatory
<b>Characteristics and dynamics of the labour force:</b>		
composition, location and size	white, male, skilled	ageing, male semi-skilled
technology, work organization and cohesion	craft control	team and individual monitoring
strategic power	quite high	very high
workplace union organization	weak	weak

Factors	U.S. Construction industry	French Oil industry
<b>Accommodation structure — key features:</b>		
complexity	very complex	quite complex
coverage and nature of procedural arrangements	high	high, unregulated
level of rule-making	decentralized	centralized
scope of issues jointly regulated	low	low
nature, legitimacy and effectiveness of I.R. rules	informalism, not very effective	little legitimacy, not very effective
stability	some change	some change

### Towards an Explanation of the U.S. Construction Industry Strike Pattern.

This industry covers all activity "involving the erection, maintenance and repair of physical structures, including buildings, highways, earthworks, and so on".<sup>51</sup> It is a highly differentiated and competitive industry: there exist various types of contractors who often specialize in different aspects of construction and who may operate in different branches of the industry. For example, some firms may only install windows and concentrate their activity in the residential building branch while others may move from one branch of the industry to another. Others still may prefer to act as general rather than specialized contractors. It is a very heterogeneous industry, keenly competitive because firms are small and localized; barriers to entry are low while assessments concerning quality of service can be easily made.

The industry is particularly sensitive to changes in the economy though various branches are affected differently. Residential building, for example, is strongly influenced by changes in credit conditions while major civil engineering works depend directly on government expenditure. Seasonality of production also plays an important role in creating instability.

It is difficult to obtain a total picture of demand over the recent past since conditions vary from one area to another. However, observers have noted that buoyant product markets characterized the sixties, but by the mid-seventies the construction industry was in severe recession lasting longer than virtually all other industries.<sup>52</sup> This was mainly due to the federal government's anti-inflation policy.

The nature of employers' structures and strategies appear to be strongly conditioned by product market and efficiency considerations. Significantly, there are a great many firms in the industry, the average establishment size being about ten men.<sup>53</sup> It has been estimated that no firm does more than 1% by volume of receipts of the work in the industry.<sup>54</sup> Contractors tend to operate on

51. D.Q. Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 4.  
 52. H.G. Foster, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2.  
 53. D.Q. Mills, p. 5.  
 54. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

a local rather than nationwide basis. Paralleling this, employers' associations tend to be numerous and localized, finding great difficulty maintaining policy; indeed employers may contract out of an association's collective bargaining arrangements if they elect to do so.<sup>55</sup> A significant feature in recent years has been the growth of non-union contractors' associations: groups of firms united in their opposition to trade union labour. Thus the employers appear to be fragmented and decentralized as a group with cohesion always under strain given the competitive nature of the product market. But a further contributory factor may be the fierce *laissez faire* ideology sustained by the small entrepreneur who views government intervention with suspicion and union involvement as a threat to his authority and livelihood.

At the site level many contractors must fulfil their contractual obligations while the major contractors are responsible for organizing and programming sequences of specialized operations. Essentially, control is decentralized to the work teams who execute their tasks on the basis of professional knowledge.<sup>56</sup> The non-routinized nature of this system probably owes its existence to instability in the product market coupled with the technological and organizational exigencies involved in the sequencing and execution of skilled work. Construction organization is, in Burns and Stalker's terms, organismic rather than bureaucratic.<sup>57</sup>

Labour constitutes a relatively high proportion of total costs and moreover, it is generally the organization and efficiency of workers which is paramount in determining whether a profit or loss is secured on any project.

A significant characteristic of construction labour is its high mobility in and out of the industry.<sup>58</sup> This reflects the instability of the various product markets and the transferability of certain craft skills. A consequence of this is that building workers probably have wider comparative reference groups in regard to wages and conditions than most other types of workers.<sup>59</sup> Of significance too is the organization of tasks into over 20 craft union jurisdictions.<sup>60</sup> This specialization tends to limit competition in the labour market since workers must demonstrate some qualification in order to obtain a union ticket. However, in recent times formerly unskilled workers have been able to enter the industry in increasing numbers owing to the growth of non-union firms. This has probably been encouraged by the simplification and specialization of work tasks.

The construction industry unions developed from local craft organizations. Nineteen unions cover the industry, many of these being small by U.S. standards.<sup>61</sup> The branch or local is the key unit of organization and decision making. These vary in size and are scattered over both the U.S. and Canada. The high frequency of jurisdictional disputes indicates the strong undercurrents of competition which exist between the unions. Moreover, bitter struggles have also characterized relations between locals and internationals. These have centred

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55. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

56. A.L. Stinchcombe, "Bureaucratic and Craft Administration of Production: A Comparative Study", *American Science Quarterly*, Vol. 4, 1959, p. 170.

57. T. Burns and G. Stalker, *The Management of Innovation*, Pergamon Press, London, 1961. See also, A.L. Stinchcombe, *op. cit.*

58. D.Q. Mills, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

59. *Ibid.*

60. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19. Cf *Statistical Abstract of the U.S.*, Bureau of Census, Washington, 1977, n. 420.

on the distribution of union authority with the locals generally retaining their control.<sup>62</sup> Ideologically, it would appear that the construction unions are amongst the most conservative in the U.S.<sup>63</sup> but their political influence is difficult to assess.

The government has played a significant role in attempting to regulate various aspects of the construction industry. The Davis-Bacon Act of 1931 for example, requires that the prevailing wages in an area for a given type of work are the minimum wages which must be payed on federal or federally administered projects.<sup>64</sup> This was intended to prevent wages on such projects undermining rates in the area. Employers have been canvassing to abolish or amend the Act since wages have been rising rapidly. This encouraged the government to institute wage controls which in the 1970's were administered by a two tier structure. The Construction Industry Stabilization Council which included the government together with employers and unions, was invested with authority to control wage settlements.<sup>65</sup> Recently there have been a number of programmes designed to equalize employment opportunities in the industry.<sup>66</sup> Overall, government intervention has not been very successful, in part due to the lack of consultation with the parties but also apparently because employers and unions have not welcomed government interference in their affairs.<sup>67</sup>

There are several characteristics of the labour force which are relevant to our discussion. First, construction workers are typically white males who tend to be strong union adherents conceiving of unionism in instrumental rather than class terms. They view the union as a pressure group charged with the protection and improvement of their wages and working conditions.<sup>68</sup> Certainly, these skilled craftsmen tend to be powerful in two rather different senses: their skills facilitate mobility in the labour market while their strategic importance in the work process ensures that their claims are not dismissed without due consideration. Finally, some mention should be made of workplace organization, however there is little information available. It is apparently common for specific trades or work teams to go on strike while others keep working.<sup>69</sup> Solidarity tends to be confined to the members of the work group or trade.

It is against the background provided in the previous pages that one can understand the nature of the accommodation structure and the strike pattern in this industry. The organizational complexity is evidenced by the many localized employer groups and unions. Most procedural arrangements take the form of collective contracts bargained between employers' associations and local unions. But there are several variations on this theme, including the existence of national agreements for certain branches of the industry.<sup>70</sup> Generally however, the locus of rule making is at the area level. Collective agreements are

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62. D.Q. Mills, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-22.

63. The construction unions are notorious for their allegedly racist policies. See H.G. Foster and G. Strauss, "Labor Problems in Construction", *Industrial Relations*, Vol. 11, 1972, pp. 299-301.

64. D.Q. Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

65. For further details and its effects see H.G. Foster, *op. cit.* pp. 4-5.

66. *ibid.*, pp. 12-ff. and D.Q. Mills, *op. cit.*, Ch. 10.

67. *ibid.*

68. G. Mackenzie, *The Aristocracy of Labour*, Cambridge University Press, London, 1973, pp. 142-146.

69. D.Q. Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

70. For a summary of the various types of contracts see J. Dunlop in A. Weber (Ed.) *The Structure of Collective Bargaining*, The Free Press, N.Y., 1961, pp. 255-278.

not prominent in all industries: it has for example been suggested that residential building is predominantly undertaken on a non union basis.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand a recent study showed that 68% of construction workers employed by general contractors or their subcontractors were union members.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, it should be noted that there are wide variations in union density between urban and rural areas and between different states.

The scope of collective bargaining does not seem to have altered much over the years;<sup>73</sup> emphasis continues to be placed on wages and conditions. Unlike most U.S. collective contracts construction industry agreements rarely include disputes procedures which ban strikes during the life of the contract.<sup>74</sup> Flexibility seems to be valued at site level and this again may be related to the nature of product markets coupled with technological and efficiency requirements. The highly dynamic organizational environment does not lend itself to formal procedures and standardized rules. Indeed in the field of labour relations as with other aspects of the construction industry, the law of the market predominates: "the classic pattern of bargaining is for each side to exact its demands from the other when conditions permit, then to try and hang on to its gains as conditions change".<sup>75</sup>

The general character of accommodation structures have not changed substantially over time. To be sure there have been new developments, especially in relation to open shop contracting and government intervention but wide area and centralized bargaining remain the exception.<sup>76</sup> These comments must nevertheless not be taken to mean that accommodation structures in this industry are stable. In fact the opposite is the case though they do not vary much in form. Two examples may help to clarify this statement: the many agreements which are reached at the local level are not co-ordinated in their timing. This tends to encourage leapfrogging and continuous bargaining.<sup>77</sup> A second observation offered by Mills<sup>78</sup> is that when economic conditions decline unions group together for bargaining purposes but more favourable periods give rise to bargaining on an individual union basis. Thus bargaining structures change but they tend not to depart from a conventional pattern.

We come now to the explanation of the strike pattern. A start can be made by suggesting several reasons which might account for the high incidence of strikes in this industry. In the first place, informality and flexibility being key features of the industry, do not encourage a strong commitment to stable accommodation structures. Pragmatic attitudes are further reinforced by the comparatively short life of most construction projects. It is not surprising then that there have occasionally been exceptionally bitter strikes over the shape of bargaining structures.<sup>79</sup> More common however is the continuous bargaining resulting from the unsystematic scatter of contract dates which span most of the year.<sup>80</sup> Stoppages are also facilitated by the coercive com-

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71. D.Q. Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

72. *Ibid.*

73. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

74. Lipsky and Farber cite a Bureau of Labor Statistics Survey of 1972-73 to the effect that only 200 out of 769 construction contracts contained an absolute no strike or no lockout clause. See D. Lipsky and H. Farber, *op. cit.*, p. 400.

75. D.Q. Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

76. J. Dunlop, *op. cit.*

77. D.Q. Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

78. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

80. *Ibid.*

parisons generated by workers with a wider than average knowledge of prevailing wages and conditions. Perhaps even more important is the existence of 19 unions which increases the probability of strike activity especially since negotiations are carried out at the local level. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, a significant number of disputes arise from inter-union struggles over job territories.

A point of considerable importance is that the absence of disputes procedures not only affects the value placed on flexibility by the parties it is also a product of decentralized employer and union organizations. In short, there is little restraining influence exercised by higher level officials on local leaders: these remain highly responsive to their constituents.<sup>81</sup> Business agents therefore have few resources to counter the influence of militant workers especially when strikes are associated with higher wage settlements.<sup>82</sup>

The scope of stoppages is explicable in terms of the size of bargaining units and the frictional problems which arise at site level. When contracts are renegotiated, local unions (for the most part) will develop strategies according to the prevailing circumstances. Rarely do strikes in the construction industry cover the entire nation and though we do not have supporting data one would expect their scope to follow the contours of craft unions. However, in recession, it may be that strikes involve unions of several trades acting in concert.

As previously noted, a high proportion of stoppages occur over jurisdictional issues. This may be expected where localized craft unions compete for job territories which are continuously being called into question by technological developments. Specialization is the enemy of craft unionism for it undermines traditional demarcation lines and reduces the grip of unions over the labour supply. Unfortunately little more can be added on the nature of jurisdictional disputes however judging from their size and duration these are generally confined to specific sites. They therefore symbolize the craft consciousness of construction workers.

Earlier we referred to data which suggested that strikes over contract renewals tended to be long while the other major dispute category, jurisdictional disputes, were of short duration. The former characteristic is common to most industrial strike patterns in the U.S.; it represents the acceptance by both sides of industry that there are certain periods during which it is legitimate to define the management-labour relationship in terms of almost total conflict. The commencement of this period is triggered by the expiry of the previous contract. This allows the process of mobilization to get under way which in turn affords an opportunity for the union to renew its links with the rank and file. U.S. building unions are sufficiently well organized and powerful to conduct long strikes, indeed the availability of alternative employment during strikes probably contributes to their longer than average duration.<sup>83</sup> The reasons for the comparatively short duration of jurisdictional disputes may be related to our earlier hypothesis to the effect that such conflicts represent protest actions by job conscious workers. By engaging in strike action business

81. It is quite rational for building workers to employ militant tactics since their income must tide them over during periods of frictional unemployment. In addition, the higher than average liability to injury means that it is probably wise to "make hay while the sun shines."

82. D.Q. Mills, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

83. *Ibid.*

agents are alerted to their problem more rapidly and it would seem successfully resolve most of these frictional issues in a short space of time.

If the scope of U.S. construction strike issues is relatively narrow this is not much different to other American industries. Trade unionism in the U.S. is largely business unionism, and this it should be noted, reflects fairly faithfully the values and attitudes of the membership. Indeed, instrumental materialism is probably more pronounced in the building industry where possibilities of becoming a small contractor are likely to be higher than in most other industries. But what may herald quite serious changes is the increasingly bitter strikes against non-union labour. This touches the very quick of institutional union interests *and* threatens to undermine the wages and conditions of union members. Not surprisingly these strikes take on similar features to the organizing struggles of yesteryear.

One is tempted to conclude that the relative stability of the construction industry strike pattern owes much to market, technological and ideological features which have not altered appreciably over time. Hence the basic features of the accommodation structure and strike profile remain intact.

### **Towards an Explanation of the French Oil Industry Strike Pattern.**

The demand for oil appears to be sufficiently strong to sustain an expansion in the industry and the introduction of new technology.<sup>84</sup> Little however is known about market stability but a reasonable assumption would be that this was fairly stable since oil constitutes an almost fixed cost for many users. Data on the extent of competition is also not readily available but economists would probably agree that the degree of concentration in the French product market indicates that competition is quite weak. As far as product standardization is concerned, the various grades and varieties of oil are processed by sophisticated automated technology so that from the standpoint of production relations the oil industry, in contrast to construction, is quite standardized.

During the sixties and until the mid-seventies the French economy grew at an unprecedented rate;<sup>85</sup> unemployment remained at low levels during this period.<sup>86</sup> Despite May 1968, it was clearly a hospitable environment for the oil industry.

The employers are few in number and probably represent some of the largest companies in France. Information on the size of the oil industry labour force is lacking but it is certainly less than 1% of total employment. Workers are concentrated in large, capital intensive plants each employing about 1,000 men.<sup>87</sup> Available information suggests that these are scattered around the country but are located close to or in industrial centres.<sup>88</sup>

The oil companies are grouped into one employers' association which concentrates decision making at the industry level.<sup>89</sup> The lack of union success at the bargaining table testifies to the unity and intractability of the oil companies.<sup>90</sup> This is fostered by a strong paternalistic industrial philosophy.

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84. D. Gallie, *op. cit.*, p. 41 and 43.

85. P. Dubois, C. Durand, and S. Erbes-Seguin, "The Contradictions of French Trade Unionism", in C. Crouch and A. Pizzorno (Eds.), *The Resurgence of Class Conflict in Western Europe*, Vol. 1, Macmillan, London, 1978, p. 54.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 314.

87. D. Gallie, *op. cit.* p. 42.

88. *Ibid.*

89. *Ibid.*, p. 157.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

The key feature of this is the tenacious upholding of managerial prerogatives and concomitantly the underwriting of individual worker subservience. In terms of strategy this is translated into three general policies: the maintenance of high wages, the provision of corporate facilities for workers' families and the treatment of workers on an individual rather than a collective basis.<sup>91</sup>

At the enterprise level management control is centralized, avoiding at all cost any devolution of bargaining to the shop floor.<sup>92</sup> Decision-making in labour affairs is routinized; this is made possible by the stable production environment dominated by process technology. However, the salary system, which forms the cornerstone of management's control apparatus, embodies the principle of managerial prerogative by virtue of management control over individual merit and other payments. In fact these may form as much as a half of a worker's salary,<sup>93</sup> the balance being made up of collectively negotiated minima. Significantly, the salaries of similarly skilled workers may differ by 40% which further reflects the extent to which managerial philosophy is manifested in the control system.<sup>94</sup>

That labour is considered a valuable resource is due to several factors: first, this is compatible with a paternalistic managerial philosophy; second, the cost of labour inefficiency can be enormous under capital intensive technology; third and finally, this same logic applies even more forcefully to a dissatisfied workforce where industrial action may not easily be predicted or controlled.

Jobs at the oil refineries are continually sought after given the high wage strategy and above average conditions which are key features of the industry. Because, under capital intensive technology, wages constitute a small proportion of total costs, the companies can more readily afford to pay high wages. But this also implies that expansion will not generate a large number of jobs. Indeed the introduction of more sophisticated automatic machinery would seem to counter any significant expansion in the labour force.<sup>95</sup> In the context of buoyant yet steady pressure of demand for oil products, the labour market has remained quite stable. Despite differences in the nature of work and hence accompanying skills<sup>96</sup> the division of labour has not led to significant market discrepancies. Thus work in the oil industry remains highly sought after given the relatively high wages and good conditions characteristic of this industry.

Although at least three trade unions are active in the oil industry it is effectively dominated by the communist C.G.T. and the socialist C.F.D.T.<sup>97</sup> These are the two largest national confederations in France; they organize many different types of workers in most industries. Competition between them is fierce, this being accentuated by the absence of any law providing for stable union jurisdictions.<sup>98</sup> In effect, the unions are free to compete for members almost anywhere and at any time.<sup>99</sup> This merely reinforces the strong ideological differences between the unions as each attempts to differentiate itself in the hope

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91. *Ibid.*, p. 309.

92. *Ibid.*, pp. 161-163.

93. *Ibid.*, p. 158.

94. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

95. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

96. for a discussion of different occupational groups, see *ibid.*, pp. 77-78.

97. The initials C.G.T. stand for Confederation Generale du Travail, (General Confederation of Labour), while the C.F.D.T. is an abbreviation for Confederation Francaise Democratique du Travail, (French Democratic Confederation of Labour).

98. D. Gallie, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

99. For a summary of these and related details, see P. Dubois *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-97.

of gaining members. Internal factionalism seems to be a feature of French unionism with small ideologically differentiated breakaway groups establishing themselves in competition with the larger unions.<sup>100</sup>

French trade unions are highly centralized, this being especially true of the C.G.T. while the C.F.D.T. has been attempting to delegate more power to the regions.<sup>101</sup> Nevertheless, a high degree of control over the membership is sought by the union executives and full-time officials. This is not achieved very effectively, however the unions are able to mobilize the workers through their recruitment of militant stewards whose ideological views are consistent with those of the official union hierarchy. In addition, the unions attempt to maintain their presence in the plant by distributing a mass of information via their workplace representatives.<sup>102</sup>

French trade unionism is incomprehensible except in relation to its political, economic and ideological contexts. This requires an historical perspective and is touched on later in the paper. Here we confine ourselves to identifying a few major current characteristics of French unions.

In the first place, both major unions view their role largely in political terms. Their major aim is the transformation of society; the C.G.T. emphasizing nationalization and political control by the Communist Party while its counterpart leans towards a self-management socialist model. Although the C.F.D.T. gives more autonomy to its stewards in developing industrial action, both unions strive to mobilize the workers in accordance with a strategy devised by them external to the plant. This does not mean that workers' immediate demands are ignored, rather these are incorporated within the wide programmes which are mainly designed to raise the consciousness of the mass and to influence public and political opinion. Despite inter-union rivalry, it is not uncommon for the two major unions to wage campaigns on a united front.

The effectiveness of such attempts at mobilization depend on various organizational factors but the receptiveness of the workers is clearly a key variable. In this respect the oil industry employees may be thought to be unwilling conscripts, given their relatively high salaries and favourable working conditions. Moreover, low labour turnover has ensured that the majority of workers are in the older age categories.<sup>103</sup> Such employees are unlikely to be very militant. But against these aspects must be set the following features which are conducive to collective action: most workers live in large urban centres; oil refineries are amongst the largest plants in the country; the workers have little control at the plant level and therefore view managerial authority as a system of naked coercion.<sup>104</sup> Relatedly, despite the advanced technology and comparatively progressive management policies, workers do experience considerable deprivations at the workplace.<sup>105</sup> Finally, of significance also, is the fact that many work tasks are organized on a semi-autonomous work group basis which also allows considerable mobility around the plant.<sup>106</sup> Coupled

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100. H. Clegg, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

101. D. Gallie, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

102. *Ibid.*, pp. 249-250. The C.G.T. also has methods of controlling information initiated and distributed by the stewards. See *ibid.*, p. 259.

103. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

104. *Ibid.*, Ch. 6.

105. *Ibid.*, Ch's. 3 and 4.

106. *Ibid.*, Ch. 4.

with a high strategic power potential such workers are in a favourable position to attract the attention of union organizers. It is not by chance that union density in the oil industry is over 75% in contrast to the national average of approximately 32%.<sup>107</sup> French workplace organization in the oil industry remains rudimentary; the strategies of employers and unions are interrelated in ways which have curtailed the development of strong independent shop steward organizations. Hence as noted earlier, employers have sought to centralize negotiations at company rather than plant level.<sup>108</sup> The unions remain highly suspicious of collective bargaining seeing it as a means of being incorporated into the capitalist system.<sup>109</sup> They have preferred to maintain their distance and have therefore discouraged the emergence of bargaining relationships at all levels. On the shop floor, stewards are expected to act as agents of mobilization in times of struggle and counter-capitalist ideologues during less active periods.<sup>110</sup> The role of grievance handling is acknowledged but not stressed.

French labour law provides for workplace organization but it tends to reflect the basic attitudes of the parties. Thus, at this level there is no duty to bargain or even encouragement to consult over a wide range of issues. Though the stewards have tried to extend their influence into new areas management has generally opposed such activity.

The role of the state is intimately related to the nature of the prevailing accommodation structure.

Several general labour statutes regulate industrial relations in France.<sup>111</sup> There is little point in discussing these in great detail except to make the following observations which are particularly relevant to the oil industry. In the first place, the law lays down in a comprehensive manner the types of issues which should be included in industry-level collective agreements.<sup>112</sup> Secondly, strikes are generally permissible, however there is a legal obligation to submit to an official conciliation process. Advisory arbitration is also available. In essence the parties, having fulfilled their obligation to meet with a conciliator, are free to continue their dispute.<sup>113</sup> A third important facet of the law concerns the legal validity of collective agreements. These may be deemed to be valid if only one union (which might represent only a small minority of workers) agrees with the employer's offer.<sup>114</sup> The effects of these regulations can be assessed in relation to the dimensions of the accommodation structure discussed below.

The relatively complex nature of negotiating arrangements arises partly because the oil industry employers have a two-tier bargaining structure with company level substructures strongly conditioned by the existence of laws relating to the *delegates*, the works committee and the union section respectively.<sup>115</sup> In addition, the absence of clearly defined bargaining units tends to create difficulties in company level negotiations when union constituencies vary in strength and scope from one refinery to another. But certainly the

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107. *Ibid.*, p. 274.

108. *Ibid.*, p. 162.

109. P. Dubois *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-73.

110. D. Gallie, *op. cit.*, Ch. 10.

111. For a general discussion of the French legal framework and institutions, see P. Dubois *et al.*, *op. cit.*

112. D. Gallie, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

113. E. Shorter and C. Tilly, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

114. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-27.

115. For details see D. Gallie, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-157.

French oil industry accommodation structure is a good deal less complex than its U.S. construction industry equivalent.

All employers and workers in the oil industry are covered by industry-wide collective agreements. The negotiating procedures are complicated by two factors: two types of meetings exist, one designed to alter collective agreements, the other (which meets more frequently) determines that part of the salary level appropriate to industry-wide regulation.<sup>116</sup> Those Parity Commissions — and this is the second point — meet several times a year at the unions' request. Negotiations tend to be protracted with very few genuine agreements being reached despite their validity at law.<sup>117</sup> This means that the major unions feel little obligation towards upholding the rules, while the workers are kept in a more or less permanent conflict situation with management.<sup>118</sup> This contrasts with the practice in many other countries where bargaining and hence legitimized conflict is confined to specific periods of the year.

The centralization of rulemaking is not only encouraged by the state, it is favoured by employers and unions. In this way employers can maintain uniformity of basic policy against the two dominant militant trade unions. Moreover, the accommodation structure allows for substantial managerial discretion, particularly in relation to the operation of the salary system. This makes it possible for the companies to employ a paternalistic strategy within a collective umbrella.

The advantage of centralized negotiations to the unions are also twofold. On the one hand, the unions can try and obtain some degree of equity in salaries and conditions for all workers in this and other industries. Centralization also has the advantage that it ensures that control continues to rest at the centre rather than on the periphery. As Gallie rightly suggests, unions of mobilization cannot afford too much rank and file autonomy.<sup>119</sup>

That the scope of issues subject to joint regulation is fairly narrow is not surprising. Faced with unions espousing the goals of communism and democratic socialism respectively, employers are reluctant to cede control. The process however may work equally in reverse: perhaps because French employers have maintained such a hostile attitude towards unionism these organizations have been forced to adopt militant political strategies.<sup>120</sup>

It follows from our discussion that most industrial relations rules have been formulated by the employers. Of course, there are the minimum protections afforded by the law but these were for the most part already custom and practice in the refineries. Simply stated, the workers do not accept the legitimacy of the rules. This is reflected in their criticisms of management which focus on inequalities of power and lack of managerial consideration for workers' interests.<sup>121</sup>

But dissatisfaction with managerial relations does not signify economic inefficiency. Impressionistic evidence suggests that the French refineries may be more efficient than their British counterparts where joint regulation is firmly

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116. *Ibid.*, pp. 157-161.

117. *Ibid.*

118. *Ibid.*, p. 190.

119. *Ibid.*, pp. 247-263.

120. E Shorter and C. Tilly, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-39 and Ch. 7.

121. D. Gallie, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-119.

established.<sup>122</sup> However, as we have noted earlier, strikes are more frequent under this paternalistic regime. But it may be mainly for efficiency reasons that collective bargaining has been slow to emerge in this industry. Nevertheless some progress has been made with an increase in negotiations at company level.<sup>123</sup>

If strike activity is frequent in this industry it is probably not because of market or technological conditions since under apparently similar circumstances the British oil industry is comparatively strike free. The answer seems to lie more in the institutional arrangements and social values which have been created by management, unions and the state. Thus, French workers' aspirations appear to be heightened by the militant vocabularies and political traditions of the trade unions<sup>124</sup> but at the same time they face paternalistic employers. With little genuine bargaining taking place workers' dissatisfaction is expressed in the form of strikes and probably in other ways as well. This analysis suggests then that workers are *receptive* to calls for industrial struggle but this does not explain the *incidence* of such activity. If the unions are the major initiators of strike action, and this is what we have suggested, then the explanation must be sought in terms of trade union strategy.

Several related hypotheses can be advanced for the frequent use of politically inspired strikes by French trade unions. Firstly, historically, French employers were unusually hostile to trade union interference in their affairs. According to Shorter and Tilly: "the desire to be absolute master within one's own house (factory) which so keynoted labour relations was part and parcel of a larger pattern of entrepreneurial mentalities" . . .<sup>125</sup> Workers therefore attempted to use the state in their struggles against capital. In this they were largely successful, at least as far as state involvement in the resolution of strikes was concerned. For it was usually the employers who were dislodged from their typically intransigent position rather than the unions.<sup>126</sup> This encouraged the use of strike action for the purpose of alerting the state to labour problems as well as establishing as routine their usage as a symbolic gesture in support of working class political interests. This latter aspect has been associated with the failure of French political parties to accept ideological compromise as a normal aspect of politics. Thus, French workers continued to rely on their unions for representation in the corridors of power so that: "the strike became ever more a probe in the hands of an impatient contender for power, used continuously to test and try other contenders in an ongoing struggle".<sup>127</sup>

Strikes which concern the oil industry are characteristic of French stoppages more generally: they demonstrate the continuing protests of militant unions against the paternalism of employers and the inflexibility of successive governments. In addition, they symbolize the weakness of workplace organisation.

One indicator of workers' commitment to collective action is the duration of disputes. It can be argued that because French unions give priority to wide socio-political issues, workers do not demonstrate great determination in their

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122. *Ibid.*, pp. 310-311.

123. *Ibid.*, pp. 176-181.

124. *Ibid.*, p. 304.

125. E. Shorter and C. Tilly, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

126. *Ibid.*, pp. 30-33.

127. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

struggles. For they live out their reality on a much more parochial plane; their preoccupations are much less with affairs of state than with the bread and butter issues of maintaining a reasonable standard of living with a measure of dignity hence their overwhelming preference for keeping political issues out of the industrial arena.<sup>128</sup> The strategic response of the unions to this lack of working class consciousness has been to minimize the duration of disputes.<sup>129</sup> In this way trials of strength are avoided.

While the social organization and process of strike mobilization is ultimately related to the political goals of union leaders<sup>130</sup> the rank and file would not be easily activated if their immediate claims were not emphasized in the typical programme of action. It therefore becomes relevant to ask why salary levels, working hours and working arrangements head the typical list of workers' strike demands? The reasons are associated with management strategy and the requirements of technology.

We have noted earlier that the oil industry workers opposed management's mode of determination and control of salaries. Hence the widespread belief that the levels of pay were unfair. This orientation is reinforced by the unions' continual critique of capitalist exploitation. Thus expectations and reality are rarely aligned. Demands for a shorter working week are understandable in the light of two observations, one general, the other more specific to continuous process industries. According to Dubois and colleagues, "average working hours (in

France) are among the highest of the industrialized countries".<sup>131</sup> The demand for greater leisure time is also a response to shift work — health, family life and leisure time are impaired by the indecent requirement of process technology.<sup>132</sup> Finally, claims concerning working arrangements point to the lack of joint regulation at plant level. French oil industry workers are no exception in demanding a measure of control over their immediate working environment.

What of stability and change in the oil industry strike pattern? We have shown that strikes in this industry are part and parcel of wider institutional and political pressures. To the extent that French firms are becoming larger, more concentrated and professionalized, while left wing parties are demonstrating a less doctrinaire posture, accommodation structures and strike patterns are likely to change in the coming years.<sup>133</sup> The modern characteristics of the oil industry make it a useful barometer of emerging trends in French industrial relations. Undoubtedly, changes are afoot though these are as yet difficult to discern in terms of strike activity. Nevertheless, the development of company level bargaining and the emergence of stronger workplace organizations perhaps signify a watershed in French union history.<sup>134</sup>

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128. D. Gallie, *op. cit.*, p. 285.

129. *Ibid.*, p. 289.

130. *Ibid.*, pp. 259-260.

131. P. Dubois *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

132. D. Gallie, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-97.

133. A summary of recent economic and political trends in France can be found in P. Dubois *et al.*, *op. cit.*

134. Some observers have anticipated the growth of a modern syndicalist movement but perhaps more probable is the gradual development of national bargaining at the centre and more decentralized union structures emphasizing sectional economic and job control issues at the enterprise level. See S. Mallet, *op. cit.* Cf. E. Shorter and C. Tilly, *op. cit.* pp. 184-187.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper has outlined a particular approach to the study of industrial action; one which is primarily concerned with the dialectics of structure and consciousness at an intermediate level of abstraction. The approach is also distinguished by its emphasis on comparative studies: The illustrative material in this paper was cross sectional in nature but there is no reason why variations in industrial action patterns cannot be examined historically.

Several important implications flow from our discussion. First, it would appear that the industrial relations pattern in an industry is closely related to certain national-cultural structures and processes. This suggests that international and inter-industry studies of industrial action could benefit from continuous interchange of information and insights for advances at the one level would seem to depend on progress at the other. Indeed, even if the idea of a general theory of industrial action is too optimistic, our approach does nevertheless hold out the possibility of fashioning a theory of inter-industry variations in industrial action.

At this stage perhaps a cautionary implication of our analysis should be mentioned. We have proceeded on the assumption that the definition of industry and hence the utility of inter-industry comparisons of industrial action is unproblematic. In fact this is a serious misconception: the concept of industry is sometimes merely a bureaucratic accounting category such that firms have neither product market nor technological affinities. Faced with this situation the sociologist must create his/her own categories. A more serious difficulty arises when this problem is compounded by the existence of unions based on occupational, ideological or other divisions which transcend industry boundaries. In these cases the rationale and difficulties involved in inter-industry comparisons make such an exercise much more hazardous. An approach which employs enterprises, plants, sectors or unions as the unit of analysis would probably be more fruitful.

A final but nonetheless important implication in defence of inter-industry analyses of the kind outlined in this paper is that such studies contribute to a wide body of knowledge and theory concerning many aspects of industrial and class relations. The role of employers, and the state, the nature of management strategies and the character of organized labours' responses — these are all key areas which require detailed attention if the nature of modern capitalism is to be better understood. Hopefully the contents of this paper has conveyed something of the wide potential utility of our framework.