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[Review of the Book *When Strikes Make Sense—And Why: Lessons from Third Republic Coal Miners*]

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[Review of the Book *When Strikes Make Sense—And Why: Lessons from Third Republic Coal Miners*]

**Abstract**

[Excerpt] Cohn's study is based on an analysis of wage and strike data from French coal miners between 1890 and 1935. Using a statistical analysis of the relative impact of strike activity and market determinants on changes in coal miner wages over the 45-year period, as well as a more traditional historical review of primary union, government, and employer sources, Cohn comes to some rather interesting conclusions about the relationship between strike activity and wage outcomes.

**Keywords**

labor unions, wage outcomes, labor movement, worker rights, strike, coal miners, France

**Disciplines**

Labor History | Labor Relations | Unions

**Comments**

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—Mary Romero  
University of Oregon

*When Strikes Make Sense—And Why: Lessons from Third Republic Coal Miners*, by Samuel Cohn. New York: Plenum Press, 1993, 254 pp. \$37.50 (cloth).

Industrial relations research on strikes has long been dominated by a narrow economic focus that fails to take into consideration the more complex (and more difficult to measure) considerations of union and employer goals and strategies, noneconomic demands and outcomes, and the interaction with the broader legal, social, and political climate. Almost universally, strikes are described as a failure of the bargaining process, and strike outcomes are measured solely in terms of the costs in lost wages and production versus the costs of any wage gains in the final settlement. In this context, Samuel Cohn's work comes as a breath of fresh air, leading us beyond a simplistic economic perspective to a deeper analysis of why and how unions gain from strike activity.

Cohn's study is based on an analysis of wage and strike data from French coal miners between 1890 and 1935. Using a statistical analysis of the relative impact of strike activity and market determinants on changes in coal miner wages over the 45-year period, as well as a more traditional historical review of primary union, government, and employer sources, Cohn comes to some rather interesting conclusions about the relationship between strike activity and wage outcomes.

Cohn found that it was strike frequency, rather than actually winning or losing strikes, that had the greatest impact on wage outcomes. Unions gained most when they engaged in frequent short strikes. Wage gains in longer strikes were undermined both by the daily toll in lost wages and by employers' ability to ride out a long strike once they had the time to recruit and train a replacement workforce and find alternative sources of supplies and alternative ways to structure production. In contrast frequent short strikes enhanced the union's reputation for militancy and caused employers to avoid the economic costs of frequent short work stoppages.

Surprisingly, losing strikes appeared to produce greater long-term economic gains than winning strikes. Cohn asserts that this is because employers are more reluctant to pay the costs of future strikes once they witness "workers' willingness to engage in a desperate struggle."

However, the ability of unions to translate strike activity into long-term wage gains also depends on the existence of a more unified labor movement. During periods when communists or more militant unions dominated the labor movement, strikes resulted

in significant wage gains. However, during periods when the labor movement was divided between communist unions and more moderate reformists, Cohn found that employers "steered" wage improvements to the more "strike averse" reformist groups, in order to punish and undermine the more radical unions.

Cohn also found that strikes based on broader social issues rather than straight economic demands were more likely to result in wage gains than strikes focused primarily on wage issues. This lends support to those in the American labor movement who have long argued that focusing on broader justice and dignity issues, rather than "bread and butter" concerns, is critical to labor's success in organizing and contract campaigns, both to gain public support and to build commitment and solidarity among the rank and file. What Cohn tells us is that focusing on nonwage issues can also have unintended positive effects on wage gains.

Unfortunately, Cohn's work is somewhat limited by his data source, especially the lack of data on union and employer strategies. Strikes are not won or lost on demands alone, but also on how those demands are framed, on the ability to build effective coalitions with community and labor groups, on the participation and commitment of the membership, and on the broad range of internal and external pressure tactics the union and the employer choose to use.

The focus on wages is especially problematic in trying to extrapolate the implications of Cohn's findings to American unions in the 1990s. Unlike France, the United States experiences fewer and fewer strikes in which wages are the central issue. Strikes are much more likely to be over issues such as retiree benefits (Pittston), health insurance (NYNEX), and health and safety (UPS), or the very existence of the union itself (Eastern). When workers are forced out on strike by absolutely untenable employer demands, the length of the strike is less a matter of union strategy than an inevitable by-product of fighting for their lives. Recognizing the risks of lengthy strikes, many unions are turning to alternative pressure tactics, ranging from work-to-rule inside campaigns, to external pressure on investors, suppliers, and stockholders worldwide.

It is also important to go beyond wage gains in measuring the long-term impact of strike activity. Strikes not only serve to remind employers of union power; when done well, they also can serve to revitalize the union, develop new leadership, strengthen public support, and increase union organizing opportunities. It is no accident that during the Mineworkers' recent bituminous coal strike, the union was able to win more than 20 major organizing victories.

Despite these limitations, Cohn provides us with an innovative and intellectually sophisticated analysis of the relationship between strikes and union wage gains. His theories and models beg to be tested in other industries in other time periods, in both this country and around the world. His work also sets the standard for other industrial relations researchers to look for less simplistic explanations for the nature and process of union strike activity.

—*Kate Bronfenbrenner*  
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