

# THE CHANGING CONTOURS OF IRISH STRIKE PATTERNS: 1960-1984

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Our article in this journal "*The Pattern of Strike Activity in Ireland, 1960-1979: Some Preliminary Observations*", concluded that the incidence of strikes, worker involvement and man-days lost was at a considerably higher level during the decade of the 1970s when compared with the previous decade (Kelly and Brannick, 1983). We also highlighted the significance of the large strikes in their exceptionally disproportionate contribution to the overall man-days lost volume for that 20-year period. Furthermore, public sector employees were identified as being considerably more strike-prone than their private sector counterparts.<sup>1</sup>

The data set compiled by the Industrial Relations Department at University College Dublin, which provided the basis for the analysis in that article, has now been updated. All strike statistics and their organisational characteristics have been collated for the 5-year period ending 1984, thus allowing us to provide a comprehensive assessment of the Irish strike pattern over the last twenty-five years. The intention of this article is to provide the strike data for the 5-year period 1980-1984; the data is structured in the same form as in the previous article, which allows us to highlight any significant changes beginning to take shape during the early years of this decade.

Table 1: *Annual Statements of Numbers of Strikes, Workers Involved, Man-days Lost and Firms Involved, 1980-1984*

Year	Number of Strikes (A)	Workers Involved (B)	Number Man-days Lost (C)	Strikers per Strike (B ÷ A)	Days Struck per Striker (C ÷ B)	Number Firms Involved (D)	Firms Involved per Strike (D ÷ A)
1980	130	30,379	412,118	237.5	13.3	158	1.2
1981	117	31,958	433,979	273.1	13.6	126	1.1
1982	131	29,952	434,253	228.6	14.5	153	1.2
1983	154	30,482	319,015	197.9	10.5	256	1.7
1984	192	30,992	386,421	161.4	12.5	246	1.3

Source: Irish Statistical Bulletins.

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IBAR—Irish Business and Administrative Research, Volume 8, Part 1, 1986, pp 77-88

## The Pattern of Strike Activity in the Early 1980s

Table 1 contains a record of the annual statements of strike data as measured through conventional indices, and the data in Tables 2 and 3 contain 5-yearly summaries spanning the period 1960-1984. Here, we can see that for the first time since the late 1960s the country experienced the lowest absolute number of strikes recorded for a 5-year period. Similarly, there has been a considerable decline in the level of worker involvement in strikes and a corresponding fall-off in the absolute volume of man-days lost. Measures on these two strike indices have not fallen to this level since the early 1960s. Furthermore, when these 5-year summaries are controlled by employment levels this same pattern is sustained. Returning to Table 1, however, we can see that one of the strike indices has been moving in a different direction to that suggested by the data in Tables 2 and 3. The total number of strikes for any one year was at the lowest level in 1981 since 1967; however, since then annual strike frequency has continued to rise, having reached a level only once surpassed, in 1974. Thus, strike frequency has been on the increase in very recent years, but this rate of increase has not been matched by similar movements on the other indices.

*Table 2: 5-Yearly Statements of Numbers of Strikes, Workers Involved, Man-days Lost and Firms Involved, 1960-1984*

Period	No. Strikes	Workers Involved	Number Man-days Lost	Strikers per Strike	Days Struck per Striker	Number Firms Involved	Firms Involved per Strike
	(A)	(B)	(C)	(B ÷ A)	(C ÷ B)	(D)	(D ÷ A)
1960-64	362	83,811	1,340,638	231.5	16.0	967	2.7
1965-69	540	212,720	2,860,217	393.9	13.4	1,808	3.3
1970-74	799	170,029	2,246,997	212.8	13.2	1,057	1.3
1975-79	752	187,389	3,604,028	249.2	19.2	1,021	1.4
1980-84	724	154,263	1,985,786	213.0	12.9	939	1.3

Source: Irish Statistical Bulletins.

*Table 3: Strike Frequency, Breadth and Man-days Lost per 100,000 employees, 1960-1984*

Annual Average for	Strikes	Workers Involved [per 100,000 employees]	Man-days Lost
1960-64	6.8	1,579.8	25,271.2
1965-69	10.1	3,994.7	53,713.0
1970-74	14.9	3,178.1	41,999.9
1975-79	14.0	3,483.1	66,989.4
1980-84	12.6	2,645.0	36,438.0

Source: Irish Statistical Bulletins.

Table 4: *Details of Each Strike Exceeding 30,000 Man-Days, 1980-1984*

Year	Number Strikes	Strike Title	Total Annual Man-days Lost of Large Strikes	Large Strike Man-days as % of Total	Workers Involved in Large Strikes	Large Strike Worker Involvement as % of Total
1980	2	Wimpey/Hegarty Health Boards	136,800	31	7,440	25
1981	2	Unidare Tara Mines	156,033	33	1,605	6
1982	4	Cadburys Dublin Corporation Commissioner of Lights McInerney Homes	149,013	33	6,483	23
1983	1	Clerys	45,040	14	563	2
1984	3	ESB Bacon Factories Central Bank	138,480	28	2,314	8
1960-69	19			53		37
1970-79	24			60		18
1980-84	12			29		13

## The Waning of the Large Strike

In our earlier assessment of strikes during the 1960-79 period we described in graphic detail the extraordinary significance of large strikes in terms of their accountability for substantial shares of the total of man-days lost. To recap, large strikes during the 1960s, numbering 19 in all, accounted for 53% of all man-days lost. In the ensuing decade 24 such strikes explained 60% of the total. The data in Table 4 shows a substantial reduction in the impact of large strikes. Here, we see that the absolute number of these strikes, which took place during the first half of the 1980s, remained relatively stable; however, the corresponding level of man-days lost shows a considerable drop, down to 29% of the overall total for the period.

Table 5: *Percentage Distribution of Strikes, Workers Involved and Man-days Lost by Size of Strike, 1960-1984*

Strike Size (Days Lost)	1960-69	Period 1970-79	1980-84
1-99			
No.	22.8	16.8	12.2
WI	2.0	1.8	1.3
MDL	0.3	0.2	0.2
100-499			
No.	32.0	32.4	29.4
WI	7.5	10.4	10.0
MDL	1.7	2.1	2.5
500-1999			
No.	25.9	30.2	31.3
WI	15.2	25.3	22.6
MDL	5.7	7.6	10.3
2000-4999			
No.	10.5	11.0	13.8
WI	13.1	17.1	19.8
MDL	6.7	8.8	14.0
5000-9999			
No.	3.3	4.8	5.9
WI	7.0	12.3	14.3
MDL	4.9	8.3	12.9
10,000 +			
No.	5.6	4.9	7.4
WI	55.3	33.2	13.9
MDL	80.8	72.9	60.0

Source: UCD File, 1985.

## The Distribution of Strikes by Size

The data in Table 5 shows that the trend towards an increasing prominence for the medium-sized strike in the total strike picture, as evidenced in the data for the 1960s and 1970s, continues. Strikes at both ends of the strike continuum, in terms of man-days lost, have continued to decline over the 25-year period. Strikes in the middle-range size continue to increase their share of total strike activity and this is true for most strike indices.

Table 6: *Strike Frequency, Breadth and Man-days Lost per 100,000 Workers in the Public and Private Sectors, 1960-84*

Average Annual for	Strikes		Workers Involved [per 100,000 Employees]		Man-days Lost	
	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private
1960-69	8.2	8.4	5,641.9	2,182.0	52,244.8	36,101.4
1970-79	10.6	15.5	4,070.5	2,879.3	85,628.4	45,955.7
1980-84	11.7	12.7	3,148.0	2,326.0	36,086.0	38,740.0

Source: Irish Statistical Bulletins, UCD File, 1985.

## Public and Private Sector Changes

From the data in Table 6, which contains public and private sector strike data controlled for employment levels, we note an improvement in the general strike profile of the public sector. While there is little difference between the two sectors in their strike propensities, there have been sharp falls, particularly in the public sector, in the levels of worker involvement. And the data show a considerable improvement in the public sector man-days lost index. However, as we noted in our previous article, the public sector record for the 1970s contains the largest strike in the history of the State, the Post Office strike of 1979. Nevertheless, man-days lost per person employed in the public sector is at the lowest level in the period under review, and is also lower than the private sector record.

## Distribution and Shape of Strikes by Sector

Looking at the distribution of strikes as between the public and private sectors over the 25-year period (Table 7), we can see once again the indelible mark of the Post Office strike on the record for the public sector. The proportion of man-days lost owing to the public sector has now returned to the persistent levels recorded throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. However, at the same time, this sector has experienced the greatest absolute number of strikes for any 5-year period since 1960.

The private sector has also seen some significant changes in its strike pattern. When we exclude the quoted companies, the proportion of strikes occurring in the private sector is the lowest on record in this data set, and it also represents the lowest absolute total since the 1965-69 period. However, a distinct change in trend reported for the man-days lost index for this sector in our earlier article has reverted to its previous form. Throughout the 1960s the non-quoted private sector companies accounted for between 62% and 70% of total man-days lost. This proportion was reduced to a little over 34% throughout the subsequent decade, and as may be seen from Table 7 it has now climbed back to the levels last recorded in the 1960s.

*Table 7: Percentage Distribution of Strikes, Workers Involved and Man-days Lost by Principal Sector, 1960-1984*

Sector	1960-69	Period 1970-79	1980-84
Public/Semi-State			
No.	17.9	18.3	25.9
WI	36.3	32.5	34.0
MDL	23.3	37.8	26.2
Quoted Companies			
No.	5.2	6.6	8.9
WI	7.6	14.8	14.4
MDL	12.1	28.0	13.9
Private Companies			
No.	77.0	75.1	65.2
WI	56.1	52.7	51.6
MDL	64.6	34.2	60.0

*Source:* UCD File, 1985.

The reasons for these changes in the strike structures are more clear on a review of the data in Table 8. In the public sector, if we exclude the 1970s because of the distortion caused by the Post Office strike, we see that strikes in recent times have been longer drawn-out events when compared with the 1960s period. However, as the mean worker-involvement in these strikes is now only 40% of the level recorded for the 1960s, and the corresponding mean man-days lost has been more than halved in the intervening period, the outcome represents a fundamental change in the shape of the public sector strike. In brief, strikes in this sector now are longer in duration, but as they are considerably narrower in their breadth (worker-involvement) and there has not been a corresponding upsurge in the sector's man-days lost record (as evidenced also in Tables 6 and 7).

Table 8: *Strike Means and Standard Deviations of Numbers of Workers Involved, Man-days Lost and Length for Public and Private Sectors, 1960-1984*

Sector	Workers Involved			Man-days Lost			Length (days)		
	1960-69	1970-79	1980-84	1960-69	1970-79	1980-84	1960-69	1970-79	1980-84
Public									
$\bar{X}$	687	390	271	6,499	8,218	3,151	9.29	11.26	11.6
SD	1,944	1,080	664	21,414	71,326	8,479	12.81	18.93	17.6
Quoted Companies									
$\bar{X}$	402	493	332	7,566	13,690	4,848	11.09	16.73	15.4
SD	638	1,264	318	35,815	79,470	7,981	17.03	23.02	23.4
Private									
$\bar{X}$	235	152	163	3,838	1,702	2,861	11.53	14.02	22.8
SD	1,384	268	308	33,226	4,543	8,983	19.12	21.27	31.2
Total									
$\bar{X}$	333	221	205	4,630	3,891	3,058	11.3	13.9	19.3
SD	1,445	618	431	31,377	38,399	8,203	18.0	21.5	28.1

The private sector (excluding quoted companies) has been experiencing an even more persistent change in the contours of its average strike. The mean duration of this sector's strike has continued to grow over the whole period, to the extent that the 1980-84 duration mean is almost double that for the 1960s. Movements on the other indices (MDL and WI) have been in the opposite direction. Thus, private sector strikes in recent times are significantly longer, but are narrower in their breadth and on the average lead to considerably less loss in man-days as compared with the 1960s. However, we also noted earlier that the man-days volume has not grown out of proportion for this sector; in fact, the rate of man-days lost is slightly up on the 1960s level (Table 6) and the percentage distribution has returned also to near 1960s level — which means that the critical shape change in this sector has been the dramatic and enduring growth in the mean duration of this sector's strike.

### Discussion and Conclusions

As far as the investigation of strikes is concerned, the twenty-five year period examined in this study might reasonably be regarded as a potentially rich basis for detecting marked differences in strike patterns. The 1960s was a period of unprecedented industrial expansion, which saw substantial employment growth in most manufacturing sectors; only clothing, footwear and leather manufacture declined in employment terms and even this was insignificant. The decade has been well documented as one of radical industrial change, and, as might be expected, industrial conflict features prominently in the period's industrial history. McCarthy's aptly titled book, *The Decade of Upheaval*, at once conveys the then unparalleled turbulence in Irish industrial relations (McCarthy, 1973).

The Ensuing decade was one of institutional stability compared with what had gone before. Throughout the decade the employers and trade unions were parties to an unbroken series of national pay agreements, which covered almost all bargaining groups; and towards the end of the decade the Government participated in several agreements, using the budget as a bargaining lever in attempts to influence pay outcomes (O'Brien, 1981). Because of rising inflation during the early years of the decade and the growing instability following the major international oil crises, the trade unions, and employers to a lesser extent, sought to consolidate their positions. In such circumstances it would be reasonable to predict a falling away in the level of strike activity. The first half of the 1980s is different again. The period saw considerable retrenchment in both the private and public sectors, resulting in large numbers of closures. By the end of 1984 unemployment was at its highest for the whole of the twenty-five year



period. Trade union membership also began to fall for the first time in thirty years. Clearly, one would expect a material change in the strike pattern, compared with trends over the previous twenty years.

To what extent do the strike data reflect the quite different developments during the three periods? The findings in this study show that there are indeed many predictable patterns in the evolution of the strike record. However, there is also a somewhat paradoxical outcome when we come to examine the record for the 1970s. First, taking the period as a whole, it is quite clear that irrespective of varying economic conditions, the propensity to strike remains as vigorous and vital as ever. There is no evidence of any substantial decline in strike activity, which might arguably be linked to a decline in the country's economic prospects. On the contrary, the recessionary period of the early 1980s produced a higher rate of strike activity, both in terms of frequency and worker involvement (when the data is averaged annually), than that for the 1960s, a period of sustained economic growth. And the annual rate of loss in man-days is only marginally lower for the 1980s. Thus, while one might reasonably expect a fall-off in strike activity the opposite occurred. We will return later to the consideration for this unusual outcome.

Second, enter the paradox. Again when we view the strike data in average annual terms we see that the record for the 1970s on all three indices exceeds those of both adjacent periods, showing an inverted U pattern. A cursory projection of strike activity for the period might reasonably suggest a downward curve, if somewhat temporary. The 1960s and 1980s were characterised for the most part by periods of free collective bargaining, accompanied by a relatively decentralised bargaining process. Such circumstances are less likely to succeed in containing any emerging groundswells of strike action. By contrast, the intervening period was one during which the trade union freely entered into a succession of national agreements with employers. These agreements precluded the use of strikes as sanctions available to trade unions and one would therefore have expected a considerable decline in the number of strikes and the associated loss in man-days. The outcome as we have shown is quite the opposite.

While there was no material change in the level of strike activity in volume terms over the entire period, this study produced additional evidence which gives us some insights into the changing shape of strikes. The private sector, excluding the quoted companies, presents the most dramatic development. While there were proportionately less strikes during the 1980s the level of loss in mandays almost returned to the high level experienced during the 1960s. However, this recent loss in mandays

was not attributed to a high strike frequency and/or a high level of worker involvement. On the contrary, the outcome is the result of exceptionally long-drawn out strikes which raises the question as to why this should occur during a period of deep recession? It is reasonable to assume that employers have been adopting a tougher stance in their bargaining strategies, mainly because of difficulties in holding on to their markets. Clearly, labour costs assume greater significance in such circumstances and therefore employers are probably much more willing to press their point in negotiations with unions. However, such conjecture does not provide an adequate picture of what is really taking place. We know that strikes have been longer during the 1980s than at any time over the previous twenty years. But why should unions pursue such long drawn-out actions during a period which experienced unprecedented growth in unemployment?

Evidence relating to strike issue provides some of the explanation. Table 9 contains data on the central issues underlying strikes for the 25-year period and Table 10 contains data on average strike duration according to strike issue. This data is interesting for several reasons. First, while pay has always been a dominant issue in strikes, it did not feature as prominently during the 1980s as it did for the 1960s. The 1960s, as one would expect, was a period which experienced considerable strike activity, due to pay, on all three indices, while, as one might expect, there has been a fall-off during the last five years. Second, strike activity arising from dismissals and suspensions has also declined. While we cannot add anything further as far as suspensions are concerned, it is reasonable to explain some of this decline to the introduction of the Unfair Dismissals Act in 1977. This act brought an institutional arrangement for resolving such conflicts, and one would therefore expect a reduction in overt strike actions. Third, working conditions, as direct causes of strikes, have not had the same potency in recent years compared with the 1960s or the 1970s. Fourth, the one issue which has featured with increasing prominence is redundancy. While all other strike causes have remained either stable, or declined in importance, redundancy as a strike issue has assumed greater significance. And when we turn to consider strike duration, when classified by strike issue (Table 10), we see a continuous growth in the average length of strikes which stem from redundancies or lay-offs. It is likely that many of these particularly long drawn-out disputes may be final acts of desperation on the part of employees who seek to maximise their positions in the context of little alternative to employment contraction, or closures in some cases.

To summarise, in recent years the most interesting development has been the distinctive changes which have occurred to the strike profiles of both

Table 9: *Strikes by Major Issue, 1960-1984*

Period	Strike Index	Strike Issue (Percentage)*				
		Pay	Pay-Related Issue	Dismissal/ Suspension	Working Conditions	Redundancy Lay-Off
1960-64	No.	31.1	16.6	20.0	9.7	1.6
	Wt.	26.1	32.9	11.8	18.3	0.9
	MDL	26.3	46.1	5.2	26.0	0.3
1965-69	No.	24.0	20.7	21.0	12.7	4.6
	Wt.	53.5	24.2	7.5	23.5	1.1
	MDL	54.1	35.1	3.8	16.7	0.8
1970-75	No.	18.1	21.1	21.1	9.6	6.7
	Wt.	19.9	20.2	15.4	12.0	5.2
	MDL	49.7	13.8	8.3	5.8	5.7
1975-79	No.	17.9	29.1	16.6	8.2	8.2
	Wt.	21.7	34.5	11.6	7.0	12.1
	MDL	47.0	23.3	5.8	3.2	7.0
1980-84	No.	22.1	24.6	15.5	5.6	10.6
	Wt.	26.4	21.3	8.8	4.6	5.7
	MDL	33.9	26.5	9.7	4.6	5.5

\*It should be noted that the strikes classified in this table are not mutually exclusive as many strikes involve more than one issue. For example in the period 1960-64 31.1% of all strikes involved a *pay* issue and 9.7% involved a *working conditions* issue etc.

Table 10: Average Strike Duration (days) by Strike Issue, 1960-1984

Period	Pay	Pay-Related Issue	Dismissal/ Suspension	Working Conditions	Redundancy Lay-Off
1960-64	15.9	14.7	11.3	20.6	18.2
1965-69	12.4	10.2	9.0	12.2	9.2
1970-74	15.1	11.1	14.4	11.4	16.5
1975-79	24.7	15.7	16.1	14.9	19.3
1980-84	23.7	20.5	17.6	21.1	25.1

the private and public sectors. Both have experienced changes some in common, but some also very different. The two sectors have shown declines in the level of industrial conflict as measured by aggregate man-days lost and worker involvement, an outcome aided undoubtedly by the decline in significance of the exceptionally large strike. Both sectors differ, however, in the direction of their strike frequencies. In the public sector it has increased, while a fall-off is reported for the private sector. Thus, public sector employees have become more strike-prone, and this coupled with the reduction in strike breadth, suggests a fundamental change in the strike strategies on the part of trade unions in the public sector. In the private sector where strike frequency has declined (although it is still

marginally greater than the public sector level) the average duration has doubled, partly, as we have noted, because of the growing importance of redundancy for this sector — an issue which rarely, if ever, becomes a central cause of strikes for public sector employees.

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#### NOTE

- <sup>1</sup>In their article Kelly and Brannick (1985) state that a small number of strike-prone organisations in the public sector were responsible for large proportions of aggregate mandays lost and worker involvement.