STRIKE TRENDS IN THE IRISH PRIVATE SECTOR

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The study of strike activity in Ireland has been confined largely to the analysis of relevant data at the aggregate level. This has been due to the fact that the data base has been very restricted in its detail. However, through the development of a major research study in the Department of Industrial Relations in University College Dublin it has been possible to rectify this situation. This study has provided a comprehensive data base on all strikes that have taken place during the period 1960 to 1986 and the method of compilation allows for various analyses not previously possible. A particular feature of the data base is that all the strikes are recorded by individual company involvement, which means that company-level characteristics may be examined in considerable depth. In this article, we report on strike activity in the private sector and in particular we attempt to elaborate upon the many industrial and commercial subsector variations that are to be found. As will be seen there are many differences in strike trends and patterns within the private sector, many of which are possibly the product of various political, economic and industrial developments experienced by the respective sub-sectors.

Private Sector Strike Profile

The private sector is defined as including all organisations which are outside the direct control of the State. The strike data for this sector is analysed through the use of four strike measures — strike frequency (No.), workers involved (WI), mandays lost (MDL) and strike duration (L). Table 1 shows that in the twenty-seven year period 1960-1986 79% of strikes in Ireland took place in private sector companies; these strikes accounted for 59% of total workers involved and 68% of total mandays lost. These proportions for the private sector were highest during the 1960s and have been on the decline throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, the private sector today is very much less dominant in the overall strike picture, with a noticeable shift in the overall volume of strike activity towards the public sector.

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Table 1: *Private Sector Strike Activity as a Percentage of Total Strikes, 1960-1986*

Time Period	Frequency %	Workers Involved %	Mandays Lost %
1960-1969	82.1	63.5	75.8
1970-1979	81.7	67.4	62.1
1980-1986	72.8	31.2	64.1
1960-1986	79.4	59.3	67.5

Table 2: *Average Annual Strike Rates for the Private Sector, Controlled for Non-Agricultural Labour Force*

Strike Index	Period	Private Sector	All Strikes (Private & Public)
Strike Frequency (per 100,000 Employees)	1960-69	14	13
	1970-79	22	18
	1980-86	15	14
Workers Involved (per 1,000 Employees)	1960-69	36	42
	1970-79	40	41
	1980-86	26	55
Mandays Lost (per 100 Employees)	1960-69	60	58
	1970-79	65	72
	1980-86	42	43
Average Strike duration (days)	1960-69	11.7	11.3
	1970-79	14.6	13.9
	1980-86	21.1	18.5

Employment data compiled from Labour Force Survey, Census of Population of Ireland Vol. 4 and P.C. Humphreys, *Public Service Employment,* 1983, Dublin, Institute of Public Administration.

When the data is controlled for the non-agricultural labour force, it is clear that the 1970s experienced the highest strike rates both for the private sector and also the overall strike pattern (Table 2). As may be seen, the strike frequency rate was marginally higher in the 1980s compared with the 1960s, but the opposite was true for two other strike measures, that is the worker-involvement and mandays lost indeces. Thus, it should be noted that strike activity has undergone a fundamental change in its shape or character. In particular, three changes are evident. First, the level of conflict in terms of numbers of workers involved (WI) and aggregate mandays lost (MDL) has declined. Second, the number of individual strike conflicts, that is strike frequency, has increased marginally in the 1980s as compared with the 1960s. Third, strike duration has increased dramatically in recent years. It is also worth noting that the private sector has experienced a lower level of conflict than the public sector over the last 27 years.

Table 3: *Percentage of Private Sector Strikes in each Industrial Group 1960-1986.*

Industrial Group	Frequency	Workers Involved	Mandays Lost	% Distribution of Private Sector Strikes
	Percentage in Private Sector			
Agriculture, Fishing and Forestry	100	100	100	0.5
Mining, Oil and Turf	63	72	53	3.6
Manufacturing	97	97	97	55.8
Construction	99	99	98	9.5
Energy and Power Conversion	15	36	21	1.4
Commercial and Financial Services	97	97	97	17.2
Communication, Storage and Transport	8	38	16	6.2
Professional and Public Services	37	37	12	5.7
				100

Industrial Distribution of Strike Activity

Strikes which occur in the private sector are found principally in five of the eight industrial groups (Table 3), as might be expected, given the composition of the various industrial groups in Ireland. Three of these groups, manufacturing, construction and commercial and financial services, together are responsible for 80% of all private sector strikes. In two sectors, (i) energy and power conversion and (ii) communications, storage and transport, there is little private sector strike activity, which is due to the fact that those sectors are dominated by public sector organisations.

The absence of a detailed breakdown of private sector employment data by industrial group necessitates a more limited analysis when controlling for employment. Thus, we concentrate on the three industrial groups which account for the overwhelming majority of private sector strike activity. Several characteristics of this strike activity are shown in Table 4.

First, throughout the three decades manufacturing stands out as the most strke-prone sector. Second, during the 1960s the service sector was the least strike-prone, but by the 1980s its level of conflict was similar to that of the construction industry. Third, both the service and manufacturing sectors experienced their highest levels of strike activity in the 1970s but for construction the 1960s was its high conflict period.

Table 4: *Average Annual Strike Rates in the Private Sector by Industrial Group, 1960-1986*

Strike Index	Period	Manufacturing	Construction	Services
Strike Frequency	1960-69	20	9	8
(per 100,000 Employees)	1970-79	34	18	10
	1980-86	30	5	9
Workers Involved	1960-69	42	30	17
(per 1,000 employees)	1970-79	71	30	14
	1980-86	45	12	10
Mandays Lost	1960-69	49	69	36
(per 100 employees)	1970-79	80	23	51
	1980-86	62	22	20
Average Strike	1960-69	12.7	8.9	10.4
Duration (days)	1970-79	15.2	9.2	15.7
	1980-86	20.4	18.4	24.5

Employment data compiled from information provided by D.J. Cogan in "The Services Sector Revisited", *Irish Business and Administrative Research,* 1986, Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 58-69. and by P.C. Humphreys in "The Future role and Potential of the Public Sector in Development". Paper presented at the *Living and Working Environment Programme of Campus Ireland,* University College Dublin, 1987.

Strikes in the Manufacturing Sector

As already pointed out, the majority of private sector strikes occur in manufacturing (Table 3) and we now look at this sector in more detail. Table 5 contains data which outlines the strike performance of this sector since the foundation of the State. Here, we can see several distinctive shifts in strike activity within the sector, many of which reflect structural change in Irish industry and the economy generally over the entire period. Certain industries within manufacturing, such as printing and paper and metal and engineering, which in recent years have been the most strike-prone sub-sectors, were the least strike-prone during the 1920s and 1930s.

Table 5: *Manufacturing Sub-Sector Ranked According to their Level of Strike Activity (average annual mandays lost per 1,000 employee), 1922-1981**

	1922-41	1942-61	1962-1981
Manufacturing Sub-Sector		Rank	
Chemical Products	1	2	3
Textiles	2	6	5
Food, Drink and Tobacco	3	5	4
Furniture and Woodwork	4	3	6
Printing and Paper	5	1	1
Clothing, Boots and Shoe	6	7	7
Metal and Engineering	7	4	2

*(See table 7, p.130, *Industrial Relations in Ireland, Contemporary Issues and Developments*).

Table 6: *Average Annual Strike Rates in Private Manufacturing by Industrial Group, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s.*

Industrial Group	% Strike	1960-1969 No.	1960-1969 WI	1960-1969 MDL	1970-1979 No.	1970-1979 WI	1970-1979 MDL	1980-1989 No.	1980-1989 WI	1980-1989 MDL
Food, Drink and Tobacco	23	13	40	51	30	94	77	32	86	99
Textiles, Clothing Footwear and Leather	17	12	20	12	25	48	42	17	22	35
Wood and Wood Products	5	27	29	79	20	21	18	10	7	10
Paper, Printing and Publishing	4	10	20	77	15	29	30	17	29	96
Chemical, Rubber and Plastic Products	12	34	80	65	57	97	174	46	58	98
Glass, Pottery and Cement	7	36	52	60	52	91	146	16	60	53
Metal, Metal Products, Machinery and Engineering	32	36	68	53	52	100	130	23	34	55
		No. per 100,000 employees								
Other	2.0	WI per 1,000 employees								
Total	100	MDL per 100 employees								

The reverse trend is evident in the textiles sector and to a lesser extent for furniture and woodwork. And other sectors, such as chemical products and the clothing and footwear industries, display more consistent trends, whether they be high or low on the strike prone index over time.

Returning to the 27-year data base (1960-1986) (Table 6) and continuing with the secular trend analysis within manufacturing, we note that four of the sub-sectors show a similar strike trend to the overall private sector pattern, where the level of strike activity increased substantially during the 1970s and declined significantly during the 1980s ((i) textiles, clothing, footwear; (ii) chemical products; (iii) glass, pottery and cement; (iv) metal products and engineering). However, in the food and beverages sector a distinctly different trend is clear; here the level of strike activity increased during the 1970s compared with the previous decade and continued at that high level during the 1980s. A quite different trend is evident when one views the record for the wood products sector.

Finally, within the manufacturing sector it is worth noting that, in addition to the above trend differences over a 60-year time period, there are also certain variations in the level of strike activity between various sub-sectors in the most recent 27-year time period. For example, sectors such as textiles, clothing and footwear and wood and wood products have comparatively *lower levels* of conflict than most other sub-sectors, while the chemical products and metal and engineering sub-sectors have always ranked as highly strike-prone sectors.

Unofficial Strikes in the Private Sector

The prevalence of unofficial strikes in Ireland has been highlighted in various studies (CIR, 1981; Wallace and O'Shea, 1987; Kelly and Brannick, 1988). However, these studies do not focus directly on the private sector. The data contained in Table 7 rectifies this gap in the knowledge of unofficial strike trends. The private sector data for unofficial strikes covers the 20-year period 1967-1986; the year 1967 was selected as the starting point because of the absence of sufficient quantitative data on unofficial actions prior to this time.

From Table 7 it is clear that all sub-sectors experienced high levels of unofficial strikes, with the construction sector experiencing by far the largest proportion and the service sectors being least prone to these types of strikes. Also, within the manufacturing sector, some sub-sectors,

Table 7: *Unofficial Strikes by Major Private Sector Industries, 1967-1986*

Industrial Sector	Percentage Unofficial Strikes
Mining, Oil, Turf	68
Total Manufacturing	62
Food, Beverages and Tobacco	65
Textiles, Clothing and Footwear	61
Furniture, Wood and Wood Products	42
Paper, Printing and Publishing	44
Chemical, Rubber and Plastic	64
Glass, Pottery and Cement	70
Metal, Machinery and Engineering	61
Construction	83
Commercial and Financial Services	45
Communications, Storage and Transport	55
Professional and Public Services	44
TOTAL	60

including glass, pottery and cement and the food and chemicals industries., produce much higher levels of unofficial strikes than others. We will return to discuss these differences in the rates of unofficial strikes later in this article.

It is also worth noting that unofficial strikes differ from their official counterparts in their composition or general shape (Kelly and Brannick, 1988). Official strikes are on the average two and one half times the duration of the unofficial strike and they also have a much higher level of worker involvement. Thus, if we view strikes as having a particular shape we may perceive the official strike as being long and broad as against the unofficial strike shape which is both short and narrow.

Company Strike-Proneness

When considering strike patterns and statistics it is important to recognise that within any sector or sub-sector one usually finds considerable variations between organisations on their strike propensities. That is, some companies often have little or no experience of strikes, while others are continuously involved in conflicts with trade unions and their employees (Kelly and Brannick, 1985). This outcome is also very much in evidence when we consider the private sector data on this strike propensity dimension. From Table 8 it may be seen that 27 companies in the private sector, or 2% of those that experienced at least one strike during the 27-year period (1960-1986), were classified as strike-prone as they each had experienced 10 or more strikes. This very small number of companies was responsible for 14% of strikes, 31% of workers involved and 26% of total mandays lost in the private sector. This shows that there is a very disjointed pattern in the overall distribution of strikes across the companies in the sector and clarifies the tendency towards the concentration of strikes in a relatively few enterprises.

Table 8: *Strike Activity in the Private Sector by Company Strike Proneness, 1960-86*

Level of Strike Proneness	No. of Comps.	Strike Freq.	Workers Involved	M'days Lost	Average % Length	Average % WI	Average % Un-official
	Percentage						
Companies with 10 plus strikes	2.0 (27)	14.0	30.6	25.5	11	435	74%
Companies with 3-9 strikes	17.1 (227)	36.4	41.4	48.9	14	227	64%
Companies with 1, 2 strikes	80.8 (1076)	49.6	28.0	25.6	18	113	52%

A further interesting feature of this analysis is that strikes that occur in strike-prone companies have a much shorter duration than those in less strike-prone companies; they also have a much higher level of worker involvement, and paradoxically with regard to the latter issue, three-quarters of the strikes in these strike-prone companies are unofficial (running against the overall trend for unofficial strikes as a whole in the sector). Finally, as may be seen from Table 9, the two service sectors have very few so-called strike-prone companies (10 or more strikes), while sectors such as mining, construction and glass, pottery and cement have significant proportions of such companies.

Discussion and Conclusions

The data presented in this paper show clearly that within the private sector there are considerable variations in the strike pattern between various industrial sub-sectors. While it is not possible to identify the exact causes for these differences, it is reasonable to suggest that strike propensity will vary with the extent to which particular phases of economic development impinge upon the routine workings of the various sub-sectors. In attempting to understand these variations in strike patterns we believe it is important to consider certain features of the workplace which may be said to either enable or frustrate a particular level of conflict. Referring back to the data in Tables 5-9 it is quite clear that certain workplace features are likely to be associated with particular levels of conflict. For exmple, in the cases of construction, services and

Table 9: *Strike Proneness by Major Private Sector Industries, 1960-1986*

Industrial Group	Percentage Strikes occuring in Strike Prone Companies		
	No.	WI	MDL
Mining, Oil and Turf	38	47	48
Total Manufacturing	13	31	30
Food, Beverages and Tobacco	17	31	36
Textiles, Clothing and Footwear	5	17	12
Furniture, Wood & Wood Products	12	20	25
Paper, Printing and Publishing	17	46	22
Chemical, Rubber and Plastic	13	28	21
Glass, Pottery and Cement	25	35	52
Metal, Machinery & Engineering	13	37	29
Construction	25	18	16
Commercial and Financial Services	6	5	2
Communication, Storage and Transport	15	31	29
Professional and Public Service	—	—	—

Strike prone companies are companies which experienced 10 plus strikes between 1960-1986.

various sub-sectors within manufacturing there are specific features which should be taken into account in explaining their strike performances.

In the case of the construction sector two issues are worth noting. First, the industry has experienced both considerable expansion and contraction in employment levels. Between 1961 and 1971 the numbers employed in construction increased by 42%, while between 1981 and 1986 the labour force fell by 30%. Quite clearly levels of conflict in the construction sector are strongly associated with the periods of employment expansion and contraction. Second, the nature of the work environment in construction may be seen as a factor in explaining the exceptionally high levels of unofficial action. The construction industry differs from other industrial groups in the character of its work: much of the work is casual, or intermittent, and of a contract nature. The physical conditions are often difficult, particularly in bad weather and there is a continuous mobility of workers within the industry. In this type of work environment it would be surprising to find that the normal structured type of strike should prevail. Many construction workers do not have a conventional permanent workplace. On the contrary, it may be described as an itinerant type of environment with little intergroup solidarity. Workers are more likely to be concerned with maximising personal short-term interests, particularly in the final stages of specialist work contracts. In these circumstances it is therefore not surprising, or indeed feasible, that workers should not engage in formal official type disputes. Indeed, the unofficial strike is more likely to prevail in this environment. Long drawn-out official strikes involving large numbers of workers would not be viable in the construction industry because of the itinerant nature of the industry. The short unofficial dispute, involving small numbers of workers, is a more representative and realistic response on the part of workers; this rational response to the unique structural characteristics of this sector is also likely to be the most effective.

As we have already shown, the services sector stands in sharp contrast to construction. In services there is a very low level of conflict, individual companies are not highly strike-prone and where conflict does occur it is for the most part official in character. Two features of service employment probably explain this outcome. First, with regard to the nature of the work, it is more secure, carried out in a more pleasant environment and the employees are more career-oriented. Second, the employees are organised mainly by white-collar trade unions. Such unions represent in the main more highly educated employees, such as teachers, nurses, bank officials and civil servants. Many of these groups of employees are occupationally homogeneous, which means that issues specific to their place of work are less likely to become the focus of individual or small group grievances. Furthermore, the rules of white-collar unions tend to be rigorous on the taking of strike action and given the administrative and managerial characteristics of their membership they are likely to have developed a rational and appropriate set of rules to cover a variety of circumstances.

Finally, the manufacturing sector is one which cannot be regarded as a homogenous one like the construction and services sectors; rather, it is one which displays many different trends in its strike profile. Again, it may be argued that much of the variations may be linked to the nuances of economic and industrial policy developments as they affected the various manufacturing sub-sectors over time. In particular, it is necessary to take heed of two factors, namely the economic health of the various sub-sectors and labour force gender.

The economic health of the various manufacturing sub-sectors has been determined by a series of political and economic developments since the foundation of the State. For example, the protectionist policies of the 1930s and 1940s created an environment which allowed certain sectors to develop free from international competition. Since the 1950s, however, Ireland has gradually moved from an inward to an outward economic orientation with the result that various sub-sectors have been exposed to the rigours of competitive forces. In recent decades the outward orientation has been reflected in the Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement (1965) and entry to the EEC in 1973. These political and economic developments are clearly reflected in the strike data for the period for those sectors most affected by these development. In the case of the food, drinks and tobacco sector the employment level has fallen gradually over the past 20 years, particularly among the British-owned enterprises. This development is a product of a rationalisation of the industry, which experienced technological changes and a reduced demand for labour; this rationalisation imposed considerable pressure in the industrial relations field as evidenced in the continuing deterioration in the level of strike activity (see also Kelly and Brannick, 1988).

A similar set of economic and political pressures was also significant in the textiles, clothing and footwear sector. In this sector the labour force has been almost halved between 1973 and 1985, as a direct result of international competition, again arising from the increasing openess of the Irish economy. An interesting feature of this sector is the fact that the strike profile did not develop a similar shape to that of the food, drinks and tobacco sector. The level of strikes in the textiles, clothing and footwear sector has been one of the lowest in manufacturing, against a background of severe contraction in labour force numbers. One feature which may help explain the differences between the two sectors is that one is predominantly a male industrial labour force (food etc.) while the other has a substantial proportion of female workers, many of whom are not in permanent full-time employment. Some research suggests that there are good reasons as to why female workers are less likely to participate in strike activity (Cronin, 1979) and a cursory analysis of strikes in the various manufacturing sub-sectors would lend some support to this hypothesis.

The metal and engineering sub-sector is a further example of the heterogeneous nature of manufacturing in the context of the analysis of strike trends. It is also a sector whose composition has changed substantially over the last 25 years, a factor which complicates the assessment of strike propensity. In the earlier period of this analysis (1960-1979) this sub-sector's strike activity was dominated by the problems associated with the decline of the motor assembly industry, which is now defunct. During the last 10 years the electronics industry has become a more significant element of this sector and at the same time the strike rate has declined at a rate greater than the national average. An interesting feature of many of the new electronic enterprises is that they pursue the so-called "new human resource management" policies, which in some cases results in a union-free environment. These developments are reflected in the sector's relatively low level of strike activity.

Finally, in the case of the wood and wood products sub-sector, we see a situation which shows an extremely low level of strike activity throughout the entire 25-year period, a pattern which is not to be found in any other sector. In attempting to explain this unique outcome one needs to consider the structural components of this sector. It is a sub-sector which is predominantly a skilled male workforce, has remained numerically stable over time, is almost wholly Irish-owned, is comprised in the main of small enterprises and has not experienced the same environmental turbulance as in the cases of clothing, textiles and footwear. It would appear that this type of environment, which is relatively unique in an open economy, is one which results in low levels of conflict.

This paper has been concerned with the examination of strike trends in the private sector. A considerable range of data has been presented and if we should be asked to pinpoint the central themes or conclusions, our response would be as follows. The aggregate assessment of strikes in the private sectors tells little of the many contradictory tendencies in strike patterns which operate at the sectoral and sub-sectoral levels. In fact, the private sector is composed of a very complex infrastructure and this is reflected in the many variations to be found in the strike patterns. This heterogenity in structure and also in work environment makes it an extremely difficult task to provide a comprehensive theoretical analysis of strikes in the private sector.

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