

**Industrial vigilantism, strikebreaking and patterns of anti-labour violence, 1890s-1930s. A comparative and transnational perspective**

**Veranstalter:** PREWarAs „The Dark Side of Belle Époque. Political violence and Armed Associations in Europe before the First World War“; in association with the Department of Historical and Geographic Sciences, Ancient World of the University of Padua; University of Oxford, Faculty of History and the Oxford Centre for European History (OCEH)

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**Bericht von:** Marco Maria Aterrano / Asumpta Castillo Cañiz, University of Padua

The workshop discussed the latest developments in the field of anti-labour violence between the late 19th and early 20th century. In his introductory remarks MATTEO MILLAN, Principal Investigator in the ERC-funded PREWarAs research project, outlined in broad strokes the relationship between capital and workers in pre-World War I Europe. Highlighting the relevance of strikebreaking in several European countries, he referred to the specific national case studies providing the audience with a framework of reference and laying out common themes for the workshop. Millan argued that the development of private police, armed strikebreaking groups, and counter-unions challenged too deterministic an interpretation of the relationship between the development of economic capitalism and mass society with progress, peace and democracy in the process of modernization. The war froze social conflict, which had been a recurring element in several countries' daily lives. However, this erupted again in 1919, begging questions regarding continuities and discontinuities of civic participation in social conflict before and after the war.

GEOFF ELEY (Michigan) delivered a keynote on the interplay between political civility and the spread of anti-labour violence between the 1860s and 1930s. In his reconstruction of European social conflicts, Eley underscored the considerable differences in the scale and intensity of violence between the pre-war and post-war periods. The

robustness of constitutional liberalism before 1914 led to a significant domestication of violence within Western European societies. At the same time, the progressing consolidation of the State's monopoly of force and its subordination under the rule of law dissolved or restricted private forms of coercion. This process of democratic civilization, according to Eley, was shattered by World War I. The brutalizing effects of the war precipitated a fundamental fracture in political civility and made Fascism a credible political alternative. If in the years before 1914 widening of political civility brought anti-labour violence under constraint, the post-1918 rupture was crucial in the spread of large-scale political violence.

GEORGE GILBERT (Southampton) addressed the topic of strikebreaking in the late Russian Empire, emphasizing the impact of labour conflict on pre-revolutionary political developments. Although vast literature on the subject of the workers' movement is available, much less is known about its opposition. Analysing the process of labour radicalization, Gilbert proposed a new interpretation of the first revolutionary phase: the strong growth of the strike movement around 1905 suggests the adoption a longer periodization including the years 1904–1907. In response to an increase in levels of labour conflict, Russian authorities implemented draconian practices in suppressing strikes. Alongside State repression, autonomous anti-strike forces also started to appear in the form of private vigilantism. Through the adoption of private violence, right-wing combat organizations such as the Union of the Russian People (URP) opposed revolutionary movements and recruited workers to their own cause.

Concentrating on a more limited case-study within the same geographical and chronological confines, VOLODYMYR KULIKOV (Budapest) focused on the repression of labour conflict in Imperial Russia's company towns. Kulikov stressed the peculiarity of the setting – settlements where companies controlled not only the working space but also the workers' living quarters – and the unusually weak results obtained there by anti-labour forces. Despite the enhanced possibilities of control and oppression offered by this context, in fact,

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labour organization was not less intense and violent than in regular public towns, where workers did not have to face the additional threat of eviction. Strikes, deadlocks, and violent social conflict that emerged from company towns, therefore, strongly contributed to the creation of large-scale labour movements throughout the Russian Empire, as already shown by Gilbert.

Addressing the role of violence in strike-breaking across the German-speaking Europe, CLAIRE MORELON and AMERIGO CARUSO (both Padua) presented two papers depicting a transnational story from the early 20th century. Morelon focused her presentation on violence and strikebreaking in late Habsburg Empire, especially dealing with the limits of the rule of law. Before the Great War, Austria-Hungary saw a very active period of social conflict, culminated in a large wave of strikes in 1905–1906, that entailed practices of low-level violence between strikers, replacement workers, and State authorities. These were conflicts that posed a challenge to the Austrian state, which largely relied on police forces for repression. However, a clear difference between the handling of strikes and protests in urban centres and rural peripheries emerged. In rural areas such as Galicia, the support of the army was more frequent and more violent compared to what happened in the Austrian cities, reflecting not only local officials' sympathies for the cause of employers, but also a link between social and national conflict.

Caruso, focusing instead on the rise of mercenary bands of strikebreakers in late Imperial Germany, highlighted the violence perpetrated by blacklegs, whose vast repertoire of repressive practices included elements ranging from provocation, harassment, and intimidation, to brutal repression, mafia-like activities, and even murder. The micro-historical approach adopted, zeroing in on illegal forms of vigilantism and the workers that were killed by strikebreakers in the Kaiserreich before the First World War, shows a systematic lack of prosecution for the strikebreakers' activities. As stressed in Caruso's conclusions, the phenomenon of violent strikebreaking in Germany was not an isolated instance. It partly overlapped with the rise of „yellow“

unions and the formation of strong employers' associations, as also seen in other national cases on a global and transnational scale.

ALESSANDRO SALUPPO (Padua) presented on the British case, characterized by the spread of an unprecedented wave of strikes that prompted employers' associations to emerge. Saluppo analysed methods and practices of industrial vigilantism in a strategic economic sector such as shipping, focusing on the activities of the Shipping Federation. The Federation managed to organize the anti-labour struggle via the recruitment of thousands of non-union workers and strikebreakers. Labour replacement, in combination with active strikebreaking operations, was a successful technique in defeating striking workers and weaken their demands. In the face of State's asserted neutrality in labour disputes, the shipowners advocated and set out to build their own private security forces to quash strikes and unrest on the docks.

In this European framework marked by violent social conflict, Sweden has long been considered an exception, a labour market where bans on union activities were absent, and intervention of authorities against workers very rare. According to ERIK BENGTS-SON (Lund), however, this narrative of Swedish exceptionalism underestimates the rate of labour violence in Sweden in late 19th century. By challenging this traditional interpretation, Bengtsson argued that Sweden shaped its labour market implementing several repressive laws, especially the 1899 Åkarp Law, a strongly anti-labour provision, which prohibited any type of persuasion against strikebreaking activities. The fact that the Prussian conservatives failed to pass a similar piece of legislation at home shows how the British and German labour markets were not as different from the Swedish as previously assumed, stressing the importance of the Swedish employers' achievements.

CHARLES FAWELL (Chicago) presented an understudied aspect of labour conflicts in Belle Époque France: the struggles over labour that involved the mobile proletariat at sea. Focusing on the *Messageries Maritimes*, France's preeminent shipping company operating between Marseille and East Asia, Fawell argued that those major shipping lines did

not necessarily need paramilitary bodies to repress their mobile workers. In their stead, responding to the rising labour militancy, they would use other mechanisms at their disposal, such as „outsourcing“. By recruiting labourers from areas of ambiguous or overlapping imperial sovereignties, they organised ship-labour across racial and cultural divides, and deployed tactics of racialized substitution according to parameters of greater or lesser docility. In addition, the *Messageries* also tried to avoid the established institutional arbiter of maritime labour issues, the *Inscription Maritime*, seeking out French naval vessels where they could count on martial law and more severe punishments.

ROMAIN BONNET (Padua) addressed the strikebreaking violence deployed by the *Fédération Nationale des Jaunes de France* since its creation in 1899. As stated by Bonnet, the empirical analysis of Jaune violence demonstrates that the *Jaunes* had no support among the French workers. Focusing on the policing practices of the Third Republic, he argued that the formal rights reached by workers in earlier years, particularly the right to strike (1864) and the legalisation of trade unions (1884), did not lead to an absence of repression. Indeed, public authority did not constrain the private sector to respect those rights. Yellow violence, which played a major role in industrial strikebreaking, was in fact based on an anti-State ideology opposed to the entire legislation on workers' rights. However, the increasingly violent yellow union never reached significant numbers.

BRUNO SETTIS (Pisa) talked about surveillance services at Fiat Turin, adopting a longer chronological perspective reaching the post-WWII years. The implementation of Taylorism in the production process led to harsher controls over the factory. An internal police force prevented the workers from organising themselves. These methods initially spread during the so-called Biennio Rosso, but their use intensified during the early 1950s and peaked in the labour unrest of the „Hot Autumn“ of 1969. Settis also addressed the twofold identity of the guards, who served as both workers and the armed wing of industrial power.

THANASIS BETAS (Thessaly) focused on the strikes in the cigarette industry in the cities of Cairo, Athens and Salonika at the beginning of the 20th century. The creation of „The Ottoman Monopoly Tobacco's Trade“ in 1883 forced several tobacco firms to move away, many of them opting for the Egyptian market, free after the British invasion. The small tobacco firms, in competition with large corporations, increased labour intensity. Open conflicts between strikers, strikebreakers, and the army spread. In Egypt, the State did not play a neutral role, with the government accused of protecting the Greek tobacco industry owners. In Greece, the obtainment of cigarette-making machines prompted the protests of the workers who tried to destroy them. In Salonika, the employers also focused on the workers' divisions, trying to weaken the collective fight by breaking-up the workforce.

Building on the case of the *sindicatos libres* during the turbulent 1917–23 years in Spain, ARTURO ZOFFMANN RODRIGUEZ (Florence) focused on the complex nature of this conservative, Catholic labour federation. Founded in Barcelona in 1919, it caused a substantial number of murders among the anarchist ranks. Zoffmann argued that the *libres* were not a mere police union, but enjoyed support among sectors of the working class, in particular among those militants who had distanced themselves from the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo*. Although being backed by the State and the employers, they were never fully controlled by them. In any case, their growth was mostly limited to the 1920–22 period, thanks to convenient institutional aid. Therefore, the *libres* can be considered only a blip linked to the peculiar conjuncture of those years, due to structural causes and the absence of a large fascist party supporting them.

VILJA HULDEN (Boulder) and CHAD PEARSON (Plano) addressed the case of the anti-union leagues in the early-twentieth-century United States. In the top-down portion of their joint presentation, they examined the links between the mythology of the Wild West, vigilantism, and the „Citizens' Industrial Association of America's“ anti-labour campaigns. Particularly, they focused on ac-

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counts about individual heroism and vigilante actions that emphasized the idea of „popular justice“. In the bottom-up part of their paper, Hulden and Pearson offered a comprehensive profile of the people who joined these organisations: while some of their leaders originated from a middle-class social background, many of the individual members of these associations had strong ties with the building industry or urban services. The authors concluded that the study of these organisations help to understand the fluidity of the early-twentieth-century urban work milieu and the complexity of working-class people’s aspirations.

PRERNA AGARWAL (London) presented on the so-called „black-flag“ union in Calcutta, which aimed to counteract red propaganda on the docks during the 1930s. This organisation, while encouraged by the colonial government, promoted Muslim Nationalism and was linked to the criminal world. The union found it hard to win concessions to their workers’ advantage, leading the members toward a process of progressive radicalization. Consequently, in the lead-up to World War II there was a revival of volunteer groups in India, with paramilitary organisations appearing at a national and regional level on both sides of the trade-union spectrum. As Agarwal finally stated, this turmoil stimulated a criminalisation of labour politics under the pretext of making it „constitutional“. However, rather than a crystallization of subaltern radicalism, these groups conveyed the desperation of those few who did not have other ways to show dissent.

Building on the case of the International Organisation of Industrial Employers, founded in 1920, PIERRE EICHENBERGER (Zurich) emphasized the association’s role in the history of employers’ transnational networks. In a few years, the IOIE gathered employers from several countries and brought them together in regular conventions. During these encounters, employers highlighted the need to respond to shared problems, focusing especially on the development of the labour movement and the increasing level of the regulation of labour. Across the 1930s, the IOIE made also contacts between employers possible even when other official diplomatic chan-

nels were made unavailable. The association’s final goals were to become part of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and to share knowledge about anti-labour practices across the international arena. This strengthens the thesis according to which the IOIE can be seen as a real Internationale in the employers’ camp.

The two-day event concluded with MARTIN CONWAY (Oxford), who tied together all the single presentations from the conference, highlighting their common themes and innovative contributions. After listing the themes that were left wanting – the sociology of the strikebreakers, the ethnicity of the workers, the lack of knowledge on employers’ associations among others –, Conway drew some broad conclusions. The intensity and practices of labour conflicts in Europe define a transitional period in the process of modernization between the 1890s and 1930s, with a special focus on frontier lands and late-comers, rather than on core territories of the first and second industrial revolutions. There is a proper chronological specificity that emerges from the study of these themes, which once again present the case for a transition between pre-World War I instances and post-war authoritarianisms. Before the war, in fact, the resources and reach of the State appeared to be limited, leaving room to quasi-legal figures and associations, without having the power, or the will, to impose its own monopoly on the use of legitimate violence. In pre-1914 Europe, the co-existence of semi-legal violent practices with a more traditional State control was a specific trait that would be lost after the Great War, when those practices of control-sharing would disappear. Conway pointed out the fact that industrial vigilantism, strikebreaking and private anti-labour violence could only take place in the peculiar circumstances of the transitional years that preceded World War I, and would survive neither it nor the stronger State that would emerge out of it.

### **Conference Overview:**

#### *Opening Remarks*

Matteo Millan (ERC-PREWARAs Principal Investigator, University of Padova)

*Keynote Address*

Geoff Eley (University of Michigan), Normalizing and fracturing civility, 1860–1930: What were the tracks and boundaries of violence?

*First Panel*

Panel Chair: Tom Buchanan (Oxford)

George Gilbert (Southampton), Strike breaking in the late Russian Empire: reaction and revolution

Volodymyr Kulikov (CEU Budapest), Repression of Labor Movement in the Company Towns of Russia

Claire Morelon (Padova), For the protection of willing workers“: Violence and Strikebreaking in Late Habsburg Austria

Amerigo Caruso (Padova), Anti-labor violence and the rise of strikebreakers’ gangs in late Imperial Germany, 1905–1914

*Second Panel*

Panel Chair: Patricia Clavin (Oxford)

Alessandro Saluppo (Padova), Strikebreaking and Maritime Labor in Britain, 1890–1914

Erik Bengtsson (Lund), Sweden: the labour market regime without repression?

An overview with a specific look at the 1899 anti-strike Åkarp Law

Charles Fawell (Chicago), Labour in the In-Between Spaces of Empires: Militancy and Repression Along the Maritime Highways of the French Empire, c. 1880–1930

Romain Bonnet (Padova), Strikebreaking in France, 1870–1914.

*Third Panel*

Panel Chair: Giulia Albanese (Padova)

Bruno Settis (SNS Pisa, CHSP), Security and surveillance services in mass production industries: the case of Fiat

Thanasis Betas (Thessaly), Cairo, Athens, Salonica. Strikebreaking and anti-labour employers’ and state’s practices in the cigarette industry in the earlier twentieth century

Arturo Zoffmann Rodriguez (EUI), An honest worker against the red tyrants’: the dirty war between libres and cenetistas in Spain, 1919–23

*Fourth Panel*

Panel Chair: Marc Mulholland (Oxford)

Vilja Hulden (UCB) & Chad Pearson (Collin College), The Wild West of Employer Anti-Unionism: Individualism, Vigilantism, and the Glorification of Organized Anti-Union Leagues in the Early-Twentieth Century United States

Perna Agarwal (LSE), Countermanding the Red-Flag in the Name of Allah and ‘Constitutionalism’: the Murky World of Labour Politics in Calcutta Docks, 1930s

Pierre Eichenberger (Zurich), Employers of the world, unite! The International Organization of Industrial Employers, 1900–1939

*Final Remarks and Discussion*

Martin Conway (University of Oxford)

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