

The Evolution of Industrial Conflict in Scandinavia

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In one of his early works, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Karl Marx described industrial conflict as a “veritable civil war” in which workers “unite and evolve all the elements for a future battle”. Later, Marx reverts to this idea: industrial action by workers is a proletarian process of education, a school for the class struggle in which workers form themselves into a self-confident class with a social project of its own socialism.

When the works of Marx began to be read again in the 1970s, this idea was adopted by many of those, including myself, who were researching the history of industrial conflict. Industrial action taken by workers was analysed in these terms: how did the experience gained in the course of disputes contribute to the unification and organization of workers? Did these disputes contribute to the development of solidarity between workers and to increased support for socialist ideas? Research focused on the processes of organization and consciousness within the working class.

In his study, *Arbejdskonflikter i Skandinavien 1848–1980*, Flemming Mikkelsen uses many of the findings of this research. However, in terms of method and of approach, he makes a radical break with the (languishing) mainstream approach to research into Danish industrial conflicts.

Mikkelsen does not so much see industrial conflict as an attack on the existing social order, and thus perhaps the seed of a new one; he is far more interested in industrial action as an integral part of the existing social order. He studies conflicts in the labour market and perceives them as an essential part of the existing social order and as an important dynamic in the continuous process of modification of that social order. For inspiration he draws on historical sociology, a branch of research that endeavours to bring together structuralist-oriented analyses with historical studies of such phenomena as changes in consciousness. Mikkelsen’s main theoretical source of inspiration is the American historian and sociologist Charles Tilly; Mikkelsen became thoroughly acquainted with Tilly’s theory on resource mobilization during a stay in the United States in 1981–82.

The author provides a comprehensive introduction to Tilly’s theory and conceptual apparatus. Tilly’s resource mobilization theory is, especially

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when seen through the eyes of a historian, a very general theory. By applying Tilly's theory and concepts to his own study, Mikkelsen places himself at a level of abstraction which emphasizes overall, structural coherence. In such an approach to an extensive subject, details and historical diversity must necessarily be of secondary importance. The reader may find that either a blessing or an irritation.

I value the condensed intensity of detail. Nevertheless, I should like to express my appreciation for Mikkelsen's attempts to identify broad structural and economic trends and explain national singularities. Such an approach is both welcome and needed in present-day Danish and international research into industrial conflict.

Thus Mikkelsen's study continues a worthy Scandinavian tradition of structurally oriented comparative studies of labour history. This tradition began with Edvard Bull in the 1920s, and since then it has been continued primarily by sociologists and social scientists (most notably by Nils Elvander, Walter Galenson and Gøsta Esping-Andersen).

Today, when the number of new studies of individual industrial conflicts is, alas, dwindling, we should welcome Mikkelsen's attempt to utilize the knowledge gained so far to open a discussion of the broader structural and economic factors of coherence in the evolution of industrial action. His primary source material is drawn from existing research in the field for Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. In order to use this research to shed light on broader structural and economic factors, Mikkelsen critically analyses it in a number of ways. In an appendix he explains his critical desiderata and, especially, how he has tried to aggregate historical and statistical material of a highly varying nature in order to be able to make comparisons over time.

In analysing his source material, the author is faced with the problem of providing a comprehensive comparative analysis of his subject. For one thing, the lack of statistics on industrial conflict in Norway before the turn of the century prevents an adequate analysis of the development of industrial conflict in Norway in that period.

Mikkelsen's theoretical and methodological basis being what it is, it is only natural that he should attach crucial importance to the retrospective and contemporary registration of conflicts. However, when he claims that the final chapter of the book "will make much of explaining the transition from one phase to the next" in the evolution of industrial conflict, one does feel more thorough consideration should have been given to the way in which the author has selected the more qualitatively oriented research on which the explanations for these transitions are based.

The author's reservations concerning the source material and its value are admirably integrated into his exposition, although there will, of course, invariably be some assessments which beg contradiction and criticism.

The main hypothesis of Mikkelsen's book is that – with national variations – industrial action evolved during the period 1848–1980, which can

be subdivided into three more closely defined phases. The early phase runs from 1848 to *c.* 1900. During this phase the nature of industrial conflicts was primarily determined by increasing proletarianization, by economic trends, and by growing unionization. Labour market disputes were characterized by the emergence of capitalist modes of production. Not until then did the strike become the preferred weapon of workers in Denmark and Sweden. In other European countries this development had taken place decades before. The author provides new and better systematized documentation to show that in both Denmark and Sweden skilled workers, more than any other group, took advantage of boom periods to strike. At the same time, boom periods were good times to organize workers. Growing unionization meant that, increasingly, workers found strikes worth the risk they involved to improve their living and working conditions. Mikkelsen claims that it was especially those trades in which workers were faced with radical changes in the organization of work, and who were thus exposed to proletarianization, that had the highest propensity to strike. Elsewhere in the book, too, he tries to establish a causal link between changes in the organization of production and the level of industrial conflict.

The analysis of the way in which developments in technology and work organization influenced the patterns of industrial conflict probably requires specific studies of the way in which changes in production technology required a change in the modes of co-operation within a factory and, furthermore, an analysis must be made of the way in which, on the basis of their relative strength, their attitudes, and strategies, employers and workers influenced the social organization of work. Only then does it seem possible to say anything more precise about any causal connection between changes in work organization and the development of industrial conflict.

Such an approach goes beyond what Mikkelsen intended, and is also beyond the limits of his source material. And this raises the question of whether his argument would not have been clearer if he had omitted this aspect altogether – though it does seem likely that a number of important structural determinants of the development of conflicts lie buried here.

However, it is not in its analysis of the period 1848–1900 that the study arrives at its most original conclusions. They appear in the analysis of the second phase, which Mikkelsen sets between 1900 and 1939. According to the author, labour market conflict during that period can best be characterized by the term “organized capitalism”. In using this concept, which originates with the German historian H. A. Winkler, he is referring to the period’s exhaustive organization of both workers and employers in the labour market, and to the institutionalization of the relations between them and thus of their disputes.

The increased organization of employers and workers led to a centralization of conflict mobilization and conflict management. Together with the labour parties, the trade unions grew strong and sufficiently self-assured

to involve themselves in the national struggle for power and social redistribution; it was unskilled workers who particularly benefited from this development. With the growing rate of organization, the number of conflicts in the labour market dropped, but they involved more workers. Mikkelsen shows that trades with a high rate of organization had fewer but more comprehensive industrial disputes than others, and he argues that this trend contributed to a situation in which strikes were used in the struggle for higher real wages. During several periods, industrial action taken by workers nationally for common objectives and to compensate themselves for rising prices became the cause of conflict.

The strength of organized capitalism is also reflected in the fact that the labour parties grew strong enough to have a major influence on parliamentary decisions. Mikkelsen shows how the Scandinavian trade unions were reluctant to call strikes if they feared this could lose the, as yet frail, labour parties' electoral support. Like others before him, he points out that there exists a chronological relationship between a decline in the level of industrial conflict and the labour parties' entry into government in Sweden, Denmark, and Norway.

The differences between the countries primarily relate to the speed and determination with which the labour parties managed to secure power in government. When there is uncertainty over who is to form the government or when their lack of political power within parliament makes it difficult for the trade-union movement to rely on parliament to achieve political results, workers and their organizations have more reason to consider resorting to strikes.

Centralization, the increased unionization of unskilled workers, and the growing strength of the labour parties individually and collectively contributed to elevating labour market conflicts to the national level. Strikes became trials of strength between the organized classes: the 1920s saw a workers' offensive in all the Scandinavian countries, and the 1930s saw compromises being reached by the two most powerfully organized political labour movements.

Mikkelsen says little about the various left-wing oppositional trends; he does not attach much importance to them. In Sweden and Norway the syndicalist-inspired trade-union opposition was identified with certain specific trades, namely those in which workers had a high degree of mobility and where places of work were geographically scattered. He argues that the kind of centralized strike mobilization effected by the national unions might have seemed inefficient and slow for those highly mobile workers. To them the local, militant strike seemed an obvious choice.

In Denmark the syndicalists (and their successor, the DKP, the Danish Communist Party) are dismissed as a phenomenon whose fortunes were entirely dependent on economic trends, growing stronger in times of favourable economic conditions and shielded by the international revolu-

tionary movements of the period 1916–20. However, research into syndicalism in Denmark and the early DKP, research which Mikkelsen has made only limited use of, suggests a rather more complex picture of what it was that made a minority of Danish workers support the syndicalists and later elect members of the DKP as their shop stewards.

The third phase, the period 1945–80, Mikkelsen terms the period of neo-corporatism. This is a reference to the comprehensive research into corporatism which argues that a principal dynamic of post-war Scandinavian societies is the interaction between public institutions and organized political labour movements, and that this interaction is decisively influenced by labour organizations. In this phase the trends characteristic of organized capitalism continued to evolve. Economic developments enabled welfare provisions to be increased, and led to a rise in the number employed and in levels of wages, and the labour movements used their political and organizational strength to force employers' organizations in the three countries to accept such a development in return for the trades unions' active co-operation in increasing productivity.

In Norway and Sweden especially, the labour parties increased their hold on government. To an even greater extent, industrial disputes were affected by the degree of interaction with government. Mikkelsen describes this development as a revision of the trade-union policy of conflict mobilization in the face of a longer-term strategy of economic policy pursued by a labour party government.

In this respect, developments in Scandinavia differed from those in France and Italy, for instance, where industrial conflict often resulted in mass strikes directed against the government. However, Denmark differed slightly, too. In Denmark the post-war years saw a somewhat greater frequency of industrial action than was the case in Norway and Sweden, and the disputes were in part political protests. Mikkelsen shows how the conflicts in Denmark, especially those during the 1970s, were influenced by powerful workers' collectives; these were mainly in large places of work where, frequently, left-wing opposition to the government was also strong.

According to Mikkelsen, the reason for the peculiarities of the Danish situation is that the Danish Social Democratic Party was not as able to secure influence, jobs, and improved living conditions for workers by means of parliamentary measures and without resorting to strikes as its sister parties in other Scandinavian countries were. In many ways, the Social Democratic Party in Denmark was weaker than its Norwegian and Swedish counterparts. Electoral support for the party was lower, partly because of Denmark's lower rate of industrialization. Frequently, the parliamentary basis of the party was weak, and it was forced to relinquish a role in government more often than other social democratic parties in Scandinavia. Furthermore, according to Mikkelsen, because of such factors as Denmark's considerable dependence on international trade, the

Danish Social Democratic Party had few instruments at its disposal to help secure, by political means, better employment and living conditions for the working population.

Much seems to support Mikkelsen's hypotheses. However, he may have overlooked a number of contributory factors. For instance, full employment in the 1960s enabled workers, typically without the need for any industrial action, to win nominal wage increases as well as improved autonomy *vis-à-vis* the internal hierarchical control systems that operated within the factories. Did this experience tell the workers of the 1970s that protests and industrial action paid off? Did it inspire them to expect continued pay rises? Did it make employers' attempts to exploit the threat of redundancy in order to speed up the pace of work all the more unacceptable? Did the experience and mentality of the 1960s determine attitudes during the conflicts of the 1970s?

The strength of Mikkelsen's study is that it perceives industrial action as part and parcel of a functioning social order and as the progenitor of new social structures. One of its, unavoidable, lacunae is that it does not show how the peace (as it seemed from the outside) prevailing in the workplace constituted both a component of a functioning social order and, at the same time, a source of social change; how did industrial peace create the mental and structural basis for conflict?

For all three phases, Mikkelsen maintains that industrial conflict can only be understood in terms of the interaction between organized groups. Workers created their values and formulated their interests on the basis of common struggles and joint learning processes. Throughout these struggles and learning processes, employers and political groupings were both active opponents and supporters.

In order to describe this process, Mikkelsen uses the concept of "interaction" to analyse the struggles and learning processes, and the concept of "constructed interests" to stress that the interests of workers cannot be deduced "objectively" on the basis of their position in a given social formation but must, on the contrary, be seen and understood as interests that are continually formed and reformed.

I find this analytical framework persuasive, and the author does make an important contribution to our understanding of the evolution of industrial conflict as a collective struggle and learning process. However, precisely because of its wide field of interest and its very general theoretical approach, the book must necessarily leave a large number of questions unanswered. It would have been better if the author himself had raised these questions more explicitly. This would have defined the necessary limitations of the approach chosen and, in particular, it would have made the lines of future debate and further research clearer.

Mikkelsen's book will undoubtedly, and deservedly, become a standard work on the evolution of industrial conflict in Scandinavia. But it is less certain that his book will also inspire a debate on the place and importance

of industrial conflict in the development of economic policies in Scandinavian countries, although it deserves to do so.

In places, the book is less than elegantly written. Furthermore, the way the material is presented makes it difficult to read; the author has chosen a form of presentation which forces him to return to the same individual historical periods many times. Neither of these criticisms should prevent anyone from reading the book. On the contrary, the subject of the book and its theoretical ambitions makes it a work of considerable importance for everyone who takes an interest in the history of the labour market or in the emergence and functioning of, and the present crisis in, Scandinavia's welfare states. There is a need for studies of the importance of industrial conflict and the role it plays in "the Scandinavian model", especially at a time when the European process of integration is throwing into clear relief the differences between Scandinavian and other European countries.

For anyone wanting an introduction to Mikkelsen's general hypothesis and to some of the most important statistical background information, the English summary of his study's main conclusions constitutes an excellent short-cut.