Introduction: Revisiting the Great Labour Unrest, 1911–1914[1]

Yann Béliard
Université Paris 3 – Sorbonne Nouvelle
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The invisible mountain

The Great Labour Unrest of 1911–1914 has not been celebrated in the way that the 1926 general strike was for its eightieth anniversary or the miners' strike of 1984–1985 was for its twenty-fifth. Admittedly, its most remarkable episodes (the 1911 transport strike in Liverpool and the 1913 lockout in Dublin) *have* been commemorated, by means of a variety of academic and artistic events.[2] Even some lesser known moments of the strike wave have been rediscovered on the occasion of the centenary.[3] But one cannot help wondering why that prolonged labour agitation, the biggest since the Chartist movement, has not left a deeper imprint on collective memory, especially when the aggregate figures are so striking.[4] The 1911 transport strikes over working conditions and union recognition involved almost half a million railwaymen, seamen and dockers, incurring a loss of three million working days – one third of the year's total. In 1912, forty million working days were lost (a record at the time), three quarters of which were in the mining industry. The number of strikes culminated in 1913, with a total of 1,497 (compared to 903 in 1911 and 857 in 1912): encouraged by the struggles of its largest battalions, many hitherto unorganized sections of the proletariat 'downed tools' for the first time, from hotel workers to taxi drivers, cricket ball makers,

1 I wish to thank Constance Bantman and Peter Gurney for their comments on earlier drafts of this introduction, and all of the colleagues who contributed to this special issue's fruition, in particular Dave Berry, Olivier Coquelin, Michel Cordillot, Malcolm Mansfield, Katrina Navickas, Richard Price, Hélène Quanquin, Michel Rappoport, Jean-Paul Révauger and Lucien van der Walt.

2 To mention but two: 'Near to Revolution? The 1911 Liverpool General Transport Strike Centenary Conference', organised on 8 October 2011 at Liverpool John Moores University; 'The Dublin Lock Out Centenary Conference in London', Conway Hall, organised on 24 August 2013 by CRAIC (Campaign for the Rights and Actions of Irish Communities).

3 On 2 December 2010, the Women's Library celebrated the centenary of the Cradley Heath Chainmakers' Strike, a struggle led by Mary Macarthur and her National Federation of Women Workers over a course of nine weeks to secure a living wage.

4 For strike statistics, see Kenneth G.J.C. Knowles, *Strikes: A Study in Industrial Conflict, with Special Reference to British Experience between 1911 and 1947* (Oxford, 1952) and Hugh Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889, vol. 2: 1911–1933* (Oxford, 1985). For comparisons between Britain and other industrialised countries, see Leopold H. Haimson and Charles Tilly (eds), *Strikes, Wars, and Revolutions in an International Perspective: Strike Waves in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1989).

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and even newspaper boys. The first half of 1914 was no less strike-prone. The labour unrest of 1911–1914 also came to be called 'great' because of its unusual violence:[5] on the side of the protesters, who occasionally resorted to sabotage and riots but also on the side of the state, as pointed out in Sam Davies and Ron Noon's article. Gunboats were sent to the Mersey and Humber estuaries and, though they did not open fire, the infantry did. Two workmen (John Sutcliffe and Michael Prendergast) were killed in Liverpool on 15 August 1911 and two others (John 'Jac' John and Leonard Worsell) in Llanelli, South Wales, two days later. How is it that such an intense social and political moment has not inspired more works of fiction and has become what one might call an invisible mountain? Five factors stand out as crucial.

First, contrary to the commemoration of insurrections, of party or trade-union foundations, the commemoration of simmering social conflict is relatively difficult. To celebrate anniversaries, dates are preferable to a continuum and the Great Unrest offers too few, or too many, of them. Having studied the shape it took in the city of Hull between 1911 and 1914, I can testify that hardly a week went by without one category of workers or another going on strike – and Hull was no exception.[6] Similarly it is very difficult to spot either a clear-cut beginning or an undisputable end to the unrest. Did the labour upsurge take off with the railwaymen's strike in February 1911, or in the months before? Did it cease in August 1914, or was it already dwindling before the 'industrial truce' was declared? The fact is that the unrest cannot be reduced to any climactic episode, which has impeded its inscription within the collective imagination.

Second, the 1911–1914 revolt was overtaken in magnitude by the 1919–1923 strikes, which means that it held the record of 'the greatest labour rebellion ever in British history' for less than a decade. The forty million working days lost in 1912 have become overshadowed by the eighty-five million days of 1921, though they still tower over the figures for 1979 (thirty million) and 1984 (twenty-seven million). The closeness of the two waves means that the pre-war unrest, perceived at the time as volcanic, has since been dwarfed and tends to be considered merely as the first episode in a longer 'radical decade' that ended in 1923 (if not in 1926). One may argue quite convincingly that the unrest did not expire in 1914, that it was merely

5 A lexical observation made by Ken Coates and Tony Topham in *The Making of the Transport and General Workers' Union, vol. 1: The Emergence of the Labour Movement (1870–1922), part 1:From Forerunners to Federation (1870–1911)* (Oxford, 1991), 335–36.

6 Yann Béliard, 'When Hull refuses its working-class past. Aspects of a strange ostracism', in Logie Barrow, François Poirier and Susan Trouvé-Finding (eds), *Keeping the Lid On. Urban Eruptions and Social Control since the Nineteenth Century* (Newcastle, 2010), 65–75.

frozen and was reborn after 1916 through the shop stewards' movement. All in all, the Great Labour Unrest is to Britain in 1919 – the year when the country arguably stood on the brink of revolution – what the 1905 Russian Revolution is to 1917 in that country: a small rehearsal, hardly worthy of specific inquest.

Third, the 1911–1914 proletarian effervescence coincided with other spectacular fights, for women's suffrage and Irish Home Rule. Though some historians have seen them as complementary, highlighting what they had in common, they were juxtaposed more than coordinated and somehow competed for the headlines. A century later, with analyses in terms of gender and ethnicity having gained prominence over class, it seems that the preferred focus is now on the Irish nationalist and above all on the feminist dimension of the pre-war unrest rather than on its working-class component. That bias is striking in the field of mainstream entertainment, for example in Downton Abbey's season 1 (ITV, 2010), which features one character who embodies the cause of Irish independence (chauffeur Tom Branson) and another who represents the cause of women (Lady Sibyl Crawley) but no character specifically standing for the cause of the workers. The contemporary 'demonization of the working-class' pinpointed by Owen Jones can probably be seen as partly responsible for that neglect of its initiatives and achievements in the past.[7]

Fourth, the catastrophe of the Great War has come to eclipse the preceding decade, reducing it to a 'march to war', plunging all previous events into insignificance. In its January 2014 issue, *BBC History* published an article in which Mark Bostridge writes of 'a country so distracted by its domestic woes that the outbreak of the First World War came as a terrible surprise'.[8] But, he adds, what he calls 'the sex war, the class war and the civil war' were suddenly 'put into the shade' on 4 August 1914. Since then it has indeed become extremely difficult to cast an innocent eye on the Edwardian era and on the first four years in George V's reign, that is, to explore them pretending not to know 'the end of the story'. In the field of labour history itself, the emphasis has been on a search for the roots of the 1914 'bankruptcy' (the pro-war alignment of the Trades Union Congress and Labour Party leaders on the one hand, the masses' apparent patriotism if not bellicosity on the other) rather than on the working-class achievements and perspectives of the pre-war period. Yet 'the 1889 to 1914 years were the only time that Labour matched capitalism in its internationalism', Emmet O'Connor reminds us in

7 Owen Jones, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (London, 2011).
8 Mark Bostridge, '1914: why Britain caught cold', *BBC History*, January 2014, 22–27.

his article, and hindsight should not lead to an underestimation of this aspect, however real the influences of nationalism, imperialism and racism on the labour movement. It is a safe guess that this year's Great War commemorations, in which the uncritical tone is set by public commentators such as Max Hastings and Jeremy Paxman, are not likely to bring back the fertile cross-national activism and anti-capitalism of the 1911–1914 period under the spotlight.

Fifth, the descendents of the labour organizations with the largest following before 1914 (the TUC and the unions it comprised, the Labour Party and its local branches) have generally shied away from cultivating the memory of the Great Unrest. Both the infant Labour Party and the mature TUC were disturbed, at the time, by the spontaneity of the revolt, denouncing the recourse to unofficial action as irresponsible and distancing themselves from it more often than not. In fact, even the leaders of the more radical British Socialist Party and the Independent Labour Party were reluctant to get involved in the strikes, although their members were often in the vanguard. So one century later, given the mutations undergone since the 1980s by both the Labour Party and the TUC, it would have been surprising, to say the least, for either of them to heartily celebrate the memory of the movement. In the years 1911 to 1914, they were seldom in the lead, holding close to the Liberals in Parliament while trying to keep the lid on working-class agitation. In rejoicing over the growth of syndicalism, Keir Hardie was a solitary figure, while Arthur Henderson expressed the conviction of a majority of labour officials when he spoke out in favour of making strikes illegal without a thirty day notice.[9] As a consequence, the events honouring the Great Unrest were not orchestrated from the TUC or Labour Party national headquarters, but sprang mostly from regional or local trade-union bodies, from unions now disaffiliated from the 'New' Labour Party, or from groupings on their left.

The primary purpose of this special issue is therefore to help rescue the 1911–1914 strike wave, that invisible mountain, from oblivion. The contributors are united by the belief that the Great Unrest needs to be rediscovered from new perspectives and have sought to do so in the articles that follow – pieces written with empathy but indulging, we hope, neither in naïve celebration nor in hagiography, since the collection is meant, first and foremost, as a scientific endeavour.

9 Yann Béliard, 'The Lib-Lab roots of New Labour' in Catherine Marshall and Stéphane Guy (eds), *The Victorian Legacy in British Contemporary Thought* (forthcoming, 2014).

A century of reconstructions

In many ways the Great Labour Unrest defies analysis. Those who witnessed it directly were often incapable of finding explanations for it, assimilating it to a mysterious physical illness or an undecipherable mental disorder. As shown by James Thompson in his article, even left-wing intellectuals who sympathized with the upheaval, such as H.G. Wells or Annie Besant, felt compelled to refer to it, over and over again, as a 'fever'.[10]

It was not until the 1930s that the first historical monographs were published, two of which have remained compulsory reading ever since, for their content as much as for their flamboyant style: Elie Halévy's *History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century: The Rule of Democracy (1905–1914)*, and George Dangerfield's *Strange Death of Liberal England*.[11] Both authors underlined the apocalyptic character of the 1911–1914 period, arguing that the conjunction of three rebellions (by workers, women and Irish nationalists) had shaken the Victorian order to its foundations and brought about the doom of British liberalism. The Great Unrest they saw as a sign that, economically and politically, the British heyday had passed – a 'catastrophist' interpretation that was separable neither from their ideological convictions (both were Liberals) nor from the context in which they were writing (the rise of fascism and Nazism, and the imminent World War). Unsurprisingly, the Halévy-Dangerfield thesis was broadly shared, or more precisely recycled from a materialist point of view, by inter-war Marxists, for example by Andrew Morton in his *People's History of England*, in which he contended:

> The movement was cut short by the outbreak of war before it had time to reach its full height, but there are indications at least that it was developing towards a conscious struggle for power. It is probable that only the war prevented a general strike which would have raised directly the question of revolution.[12]

The next historian to offer a comprehensive interpretation of the events was Henry Pelling, in his *Popular Politics and Society in Late-Victorian Britain*, a collection of essays originally published in the 1950s and 1960s.[13] As opposed

10 H.G. Wells, *The Labour Unrest* (London, 1912); Annie Besant, 'The Labour Unrest', *Daily Graphic*, 5 September 1912.

11 Elie Halévy, *A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century, VI: The Rule of Democracy, 1905–1914, Book II* (London, 1952); first French edition, *Histoire du peuple anglais au dix-neuvième siècle. Epilogue (1895–1914). 2. Vers la démocratie sociale et vers la guerre (1905–1914)* (Paris, 1932); George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (New York, 1935).

12 Andrew Leslie Morton, *A People's History of England* (London, 1938).

13 Henry Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society in Late-Victorian Britain* (London, 1968).

to his predecessors in the 'bleak' 1930s, Pelling claimed that Britain had never been on the verge of revolution. The Liberal governments, thanks to their individual talents, had never been in danger of losing control; the impact of the syndicalist propaganda on the labouring classes had been grossly overestimated; and the tripartite rebellion identified by Halévy and Dangerfield was an artificial construct, since the three revolts had remained separate from each other and terminated in dead ends long before August 1914. Here again, both the author's personality and the historical context shaped this interpretation. Pelling, a right-winger inside the Labour Party, was attempting to provide the labour movement with an alternative to the immensely influential history of labour produced by the Communist Party Historians Group. Besides, the political atmosphere had changed: the parliamentary regimes had survived the Second World War and the establishment of the Welfare State by the first majority Labour government had made the reformist varieties of socialism more credible than the revolutionary. Historical episodes marked by intense class struggle seemed of little relevance at a moment when strike activity was hitting an all-time low and sociologists were heralding the advent of a 'classless society'.[14]

However mechanical the assertion may seem, the 1970s renewal in industrial disputes did provoke a renewed interest in the Great Unrest, the most compelling rediscoveries being produced between the two strike peaks of 1972 and 1979. As Bob Holton explained in his introduction to *British Syndicalism, 1910–1914. Myths and Realities*:

> In recent years the revival of industrial unrest and extra-parliamentary politics in Britain has raised considerable doubts about the long-term survival of capitalism as a social system ... In this situation, the experience of previous generations during similar periods of social unrest is of great relevance, both to those who wish to interpret the world and to those who also wish to transform it.[15]

But the striking feature about his work and others' is, perhaps unexpectedly, a sense of nuance that borrowed from Pelling to revisit the Halévy-Dangerfield script. 'The inroads made into Labourism, let alone Liberal or Conservative support among working-men, were only limited', Holton admitted;[16] a judgement shared by Tony Lane, who agreed that the growth in membership of the trade unions had not led to the building of a revolutionary party on

14 This gradualist approach has met with success in France. See Roland Marx, *Histoire de la Grande-Bretagne* (Paris, 1990) and Peter Morris, *Histoire du Royaume-Uni* (Paris, 1992).

15 Bob Holton, *British Syndicalism, 1900–1914. Myths and Realities* (London, 1976), 7.

16 *Ibid.* 202.

the left, reinforcing instead the bureaucratic aspects of the union machinery:

> The lesson of this period – for ruling-class conservative and for working-class revolutionary alike – was that trade unionism could amount to a considerable weapon of social control. It had been used as such and not found wanting.[17]

That lucidity about the limits of the Great Unrest owes a lot to the direct involvement of that generation of labour historians in the conflicts of their time, as socialist activists of one creed or another. Indeed the 1970s, though they were characterized, in Britain as in most industrialized countries, by a renaissance of 'direct action' in the workplace, ended in disillusionment, not with a turn left or a march forward of Labour, but with the Thatcher-Reagan backlash and working-class retreat. However sympathetic towards their subject, the wealth of local studies on the Great Unrest published after the 1970s could simply not afford to be triumphalist.[18]

The debates around the Great Unrest were revived in 1989 by a provocative article published by Jonathan Zeitlin in the *International Review of Social History*: 'Rank-and-filism in British labour history: a critique'.[19] Zeitlin's attack on what he termed 'rank-and-filist' historians looked beyond interpretations of the Great Unrest but used many examples taken from that phase to demonstrate that too much had been made of conflicts between employer and employee on the one hand, and between trade-union leadership and trade-union grassroots on the other. Had not union membership increased from two and a half to four million between 1911 and 1914? Had not the central claim during the strike wave been union recognition? According to Zeitlin, British workers' flirtation with syndicalism had been all about means, not ends, as they were above all committed, in harmony with their leaders, to obtaining a bigger slice of the cake within the existing capitalist system, not to 'overthrowing the system'. His broader argument was that labour history should give way to a history of industrial relations set free from the Marxist concept of the class struggle – which echoed the proclamations about Marxism's irrelevance which accompanied the fall of the Berlin Wall and, soon after, the disintegration of the USSR. Richard Hyman's response

17 Tony Lane, *The Union Makes Us Strong. The British Working Class, Its Politics and Trade Unionism* (London, 1974), 129.

18 See Edmund and Ruth Frow, *The General Strike in Salford in 1911* (Salford, 1990); Yann Béliard, 'Worse than the Paris Commune? Trois semaines de grève dans le port de Hull, 14 juin–4 juillet 1911', *Cahiers du CICC*, 15 (2003); Matt Vaughan Wilson, 'The 1911 Waterfront Strikes in Glasgow: Trade Unions and Rank-and-File Militancy in the Labour Unrest of 1910–1914', *International Review of Social History*, 53 (2008).

19 Jonathan Zeitlin, 'Rank-and-Filism in British Labour History: A Critique', *International Review of Social History*, 34 (1989), 42–61.

was twofold.[20] He first discarded the validity of the 'rank-and-filist' label: no labour historian stood for the simplistic theses that Zeitlin attributed to him and others, that is that the working masses are always and everywhere spontaneously militant, or that trade-unionists are always and everywhere agents of the ruling class in charge of containing the grassroots' revolutionary instincts. Secondly, he noted:

> The tendency for a social and at times ideological divide to develop between full-time officials and their members ... is so extensively documented as to be regarded as self-evident by virtually every historian of trade unions ... In certain historical contexts rank-and-file militancy *is* a reality.[21]

Zeitlin's 'crude anti-"rank-and-filism"', like the contemporaneous 'linguistic turn', presented historians of labour in general, and of the Great Unrest in particular, with a challenge that was transformed into an opportunity to sharpen their intellectual tools.

The latest rediscovery of the Great Unrest started four years ago, in 2010–2011, with its centenary, and could go on for another few months – though the First World War commemorations seem at present all-engulfing. One of the most stimulating events was the conference on the 1911 Liverpool General Transport Strike held on 8 October 2011 at Liverpool John Moores University.[22] Indeed the convenors made a point of inviting specialists from different disciplines (history, sociology, and political science) as well as speakers not belonging to the academic world (for example, RMT general secretary Bob Crow and ex-city councillor Tony Mulhearn, from the Militant Tendency). The final panel, '1911 and the Labour Movement Today', asked whether the Great Unrest contained any 'Lessons for the Present Crisis?', highlighting some bemusing similarities: the presence in office of the Liberals; the Labour Party's lack of credibility; the decline in purchasing power; the widening rich-poor divide; the resort to extra-parliamentary forms of action. Clearly, the most recent explorations of the 1911–1914 social conflicts seem united by an empathetic approach that emphasizes the positive legacies of the movement, both in the short and in the long term. Once again we see confirmed E.J. Hobsbawm's intuition that our revisiting of the past is necessarily informed by present-day concerns, as today's vision of the Great Unrest appears to be coloured, for better and for worse, by several recent eruptions

20 Richard Hyman, 'The Sound of One Hand Clapping: A Comment on the 'Rank and Filism' Debate', *International Review of Social History*, 34 (1989), 309–36.

21 *Ibid.* 324–25.

22 Most of the papers given on that day have since been published in volume 33 of *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* (2012), edited by Dave Lyddon, Paul Smith, Roger Seifert and Carole Thornley.

from below, both in Britain (the students' demonstrations against tuition fees in November 2010, the August 2011 riots in London, the Occupy the City of London operations in 2012) and in the rest of the world (the Arab Spring and Indignados revolts of 2011).

From special conference to special issue – and beyond

The present volume gathers together papers that were given at the 'Revisiting the Great Labour Unrest, 1911–1914' conference held on 15 September 2011 at Paris 13 University's Villetaneuse Campus, and on 16 September 2011 at the Sorbonne Nouvelle's Anglophone World Institute, Paris 3 University.[23] Funded by the CRIDAF (Paris 13) and CREW (Paris 3) research centres, and supported by the Society for the Study of Labour History, the event was conceived as a follow-up to the Society for the Study of Labour History conference on transnational labour movements held in Coleraine in September 2008. Out of the twelve papers actually presented at the conference, some had been or were about to be published elsewhere.[24] Regarding the five papers selected for this volume, their common denominator is simply their ambition to re-examine the Great Unrest from new perspectives, in particular (in three of the five articles) from the transnational one

Emmet O' Connor's article sums up the keynote speech that opened the conference's final panel, 'The Syndicalist Impact: Old Questions, New Answers?'. O'Connor refutes the Dangerfield-inspired cliché of an irrational and circumscribed outburst, revealing on the contrary everything that connected the 1911–1914 initiatives to the conflicts during the two previous decades in the British Isles and beyond. Without claiming that the impact of syndicalism provoked the effervescence, he uses the concept to 'cut to the core of the historiographical debate', arguing that 'syndicalism [coloured] events like a drop of ink in a glass of water'. The momentary success of syndicalism, he states, was linked above all to its practical appeal as a method of

23 For a summary of the conference in French, see Marie Terrier, 'Redécouvrir la Grande Fièvre Ouvrière', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 114 (2012), 210–12.

24 John Belchem, 'Radical prelude: 1911', in John Belchem and Bryan Biggs, *Liverpool, City of Radicals* (Liverpool, 2011); Lewis H. Mates, 'The Syndicalist Challenge in the Durham coalfield before 1914', in Dave Berry, Ruth Kinna, Saku Pinta and Alex Pritchard, *Libertarian Socialism: Politics in Black and Red* (Basingstoke, 2012); William Kenefick, 'An Effervescence of Youth: Female Textile-Workers' Strike Activity in Dundee, 1911–1912', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 33 (2012), 189–221; Lydia Redman, 'State Intervention in Industrial Disputes in the Age of the New Liberalism: The London Docks Strikes of 1911–12', *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 34 (2013), 29–48.

struggle. The resort to direct and sometimes violent action did not come from out of the blue, but was a logical response to both employer pressure and state repression, and an option only made more tempting by the Labour Party's and the TUC's failings. Understandably, it was perceived as a menace of the highest order by the capitalist class, since 'the sympathetic strike threatened to revolutionise industrial warfare by putting a deadly weapon into the hands of the unskilled'.

But O'Connor also points to the limits of the unrest. Contrary to what Halévy suggested, it could not coalesce with the military crisis in Ulster, 'a crisis within the Establishment' that was 'not part of a general malaise'. Above all, Tom Mann's disciples failed to reshape the labour movement in depth and prevent the rise of 'fakirism'. The limitations of the 'boring from within' strategy were visible as early as June 1912, when the National Transport Workers' Federation failed to organize a national dock strike, and were confirmed in 1913–1914, when the TUC did not even attempt to aid the locked-out Dublin dockers. One essential factor in the unions' bureaucratization was the effort made 'from above' to incorporate them into the state, through the multiplication of conciliation boards and the introduction of the National Insurance Act. What if 'dual unionism', that is, the creation of revolutionary unions outside of the existing ones, had been adopted instead? The author explains that this strategy was only feasible in territories such as South Africa, Western Columbia or Ireland, where vast sectors of the proletariat were still unorganized, but stood little chance in Britain, the country where trade unions were possibly the oldest, the strongest and the most 'fakirised'.

The second article, by James Thompson, considers an often-neglected aspect of the Great Unrest: the wide-ranging debates it generated among intellectuals, including professional politicians (such as James Ramsay MacDonald or Philip Snowden) and journalists and historians (such as J.A. Hobson or R.H. Tawney). Taking examples from across the political spectrum, the author compares the Fabians' point of view with the lesser known analyses provided by Liberal and Conservative thinkers. 'One obvious contrast', Thompson notes, 'is between those ... who regarded the unrest as a hopeful sign presaging fundamental change, and those who saw strikes as revolts against society and disruptions of public order that needed to be dealt with firmly and if necessary by force'. But he also observes that the Great Unrest was far from being unanimously supported on the left, or unanimously condemned on the right: moderate Labour leaders were none too indulgent with the syndicalist mood, while some Tory commentators took the opportunity of the strike wave to criticize and modernize their own programme.

Thompson scrutinizes in turn the discussions about the causes of the agitation, the cures that were envisaged, and the deeper, quasi-philosophical questions raised by the Great Unrest. Whatever their ideological sensibility, most of the commentators agreed that the decline in real wages was the crucial factor behind the workers' mobilization. The question of a minimum wage became inescapable, just like the larger question of justice in the distribution of national wealth. The impact of syndicalist propaganda was usually played down, but the influence of disillusionment with parliamentary politics was acknowledged, as was that of the labourers' growing literacy and political awareness. As for remedies, though the intelligentsia did not rally around the banner of compulsory arbitration to settle industrial disputes, the need for more systematic conciliation between representatives of the employers and of the wage-earners imposed itself in most circles. Finally, Thompson shows how 'the disputes of 1911–1914 raised serious questions about the role of the state, the control of industry and the nature of democracy'. No short-term solutions, in fact, came without such grander visions of how society should work. Was industry to be controlled by private owners, the state, or the workers themselves? Did syndicalism provide an alternative model for the whole of the national community, as socialism claimed to be doing, or was it merely a class movement, ready to hurt the consumers' interests so as long as the producers' were saved? The 1911–1914 wave of industrial militancy led to discussions which reflected 'both modish concerns and established motifs', to a 'a full-scale "condition-of-England" debate, in which class relations and the state of morality, public and private, figured prominently, as they had in the 1840s and 1880s'.

The article by Sam Davies and Ron Noon is a fruitful attempt at shedding new light on what is probably the single most iconic episode of the Great Unrest, Liverpool's 'Bloody Sunday' (13 August 1911) and the tumultuous week that followed – a week when 'the whole of Britain was poised on the edge of catastrophe'. For a change, attention is not directed to the strikers nor to their leaders, but to 'the ordinary rank-and-file citizens of Liverpool ... caught up in the accompanying civil disturbances', in particular the wounded and the arrested. The authors' research into the local archives has allowed them to produce seven tables that provide an amazingly precise picture of the demonstrators, from the point of view of gender, age, occupation and residence. What their exploration reveals is the sheer diversity of the Liverpudlians involved: 'the crowd on Bloody Sunday was drawn from a wide cross-section of the working class as a whole, rather than confined to any particular group according to occupation, status, or religion'. That finding

belies the assumption that the protesters were mostly 'gangs of rowdies' from 'the Irish district ... where disorder is a chronic feature' – an assumption that 'served to justify the actions of the authorities and at the same time marginalise the "unEnglish" protests'. Those observations are usefully complemented by the individual portraits of the two workers killed on Tuesday 15 August, John Sutcliffe and Michael Prendergast.

The other feature exposed by Davies and Noon is the disproportionately brutal repression used by the state, on the streets and in the tribunals. The violence used, 'the speed and the severity of the judicial response to Bloody Sunday', contradict the common vision of the Establishment as wholly in control of the situation, revealing the panic that contaminated both the Liberal majority and the Conservative opposition during that long hot summer. Although no public enquiry was held after Sutcliffe and Prendergast were shot, and no compensation was ever granted to their families, the 'whitewash operation' was not enough to erase the killing from the workers' minds in the following months. Overall, the article adds significantly to Eric Taplin's classic study of the events and to Sam Davies's and Ron Noon's own earlier work on Liverpool labour.[25] Adopting the Thompsonian 'view from below', the authors demonstrate that 'the crowd in 1911 was a varied and complicated entity, with complex causes and motivations, rather than a simple "mob" deserving to be maligned in the press for its "criminality", and crushed by the armed and judicial forces of the state'.

Constance Bantman, like O'Connor, stresses continuities with the late Victorian age and the cosmopolitan character of the Great Unrest, with special emphasis on France. Seeing it not only as 'one of the climaxes of the first globalisation in the labour movement', but also as 'one of those rare periods when the British gave the French a revolutionary lesson', she insists that syndicalism was not just a French import, not just the transplantation of French anarchism from one arena to another. Its elaboration was a two-way street, involving cross-national contacts, networks and influences; it consisted in 'a constant interplay where ideas travelled back and forth and were adapted and reinterpreted in different national contexts'. The author shows that the pivotal role played by Tom Mann in the circulation of experiences and ideas was matched by the activities of several French accomplices, such as Alfred Rosmer and Antoinette Sorgue. She also defends the counter-intuitive

25 Eric Taplin, *Near to Revolution. The Liverpool General Transport Strike of 1911* (Liverpool, 1994); Sam Davies, *Liverpool Labour: Social and Political Influences on the Development of the Labour Party in Liverpool, 1900–1939* (Keele, 1996); Sam Davies, Ron Noon et al., *Genuinely Seeking Work: Mass Unemployment on Merseyside in the Thirties* (Liverpool, 1992).

but very apt idea that 'le syndicalisme révolutionnaire' was the offspring of the British experience of New Unionism from 1889. The cross-Channel interplay, Bantman reminds us, was also productive because it could lean on 'a revival of Britain's own revolutionary heritage'.

For all the sharing and exchanging, the British and the French brands of syndicalism did retain national specificities. The article ends with an analysis of how and why British and French activists differed particularly on the question of the state and of antimilitarism. The British brand of syndicalism did not exclude a form of 'militant parliamentarianism' and, paradoxical as it may seem, a call for greater state intervention in industrial life, while its French version, more deeply rooted in anarchism, rejected political action quite bluntly. In the end, though Bantman admits that 'the connection between theories disseminated in rather small militant circles and masses of strikers is often difficult to evidence', she nonetheless agrees with those historians who consider the transnational emergence of syndicalism as 'a model of globalisation from below' and 'a significant element in the ideological and symbolical make up of the unrest'. The paradox is that the British started putting 'French methods' into practice at a moment when the Confédération Générale du Travail was on the decline, torn between its radical rhetoric and its much more consensual praxis.

Jonathan Hyslop's article is adapted from the keynote he gave to introduce the session entitled 'A British Strike Wave in Transnational Perspective'. Audaciously, Hyslop links 'the strange death of Liberal England' with what he terms 'the strange birth of Illiberal South Africa', suggesting that the Dangerfield model of a country close to revolution ultimately saved by the outbreak of war describes the South African case better than the English one. He examines how the Great Unrest in the British Isles was echoed by and interacted with three South African upheavals: 'the general strikes of British immigrant workers on the Witwatersrand in 1913 and 1914, the protests of Indian indentured labourers in Natal led by Gandhi in late 1913, and the armed Afrikaner Rebellion in 1914–1915' – three crises that were 'linked with each other' and are 'only comprehensible in their connections with transnational forces'.

First, the author patiently reconstructs the expansion of syndicalism 'along an arc of migrant, economic and political connections that linked the British Isles, Southern Africa and Australasia' – underlining how the recycled doctrine, 'linking intense anti-capitalism to a discourse of the rights of free born Britons', more or less overtly excluded both Boer and black workers. He then shows how an Indian strike in Natal took its inspiration from the

British miners' syndicalist methods, and how Gandhi turned his back on 'a potential moment of solidarity between the Indian and white labour movements'. His third and final point concentrates on the difficulties the authorities encountered in using commandoes of Boer farmers to suppress the miners' revolts on the Rand, as many impoverished peasants had by then become proletarians themselves. An anti-war alliance of Afrikaner and British workers might have crystallized in August 1914, had the latter not succumbed to the propaganda of imperial loyalism. In his article, Hyslop makes a notable contribution to the methodology of transnational labour history, pleading for four guidelines: national labour movements cannot be understood without tracing global labour networks; 'the history of labour cannot be separated from the history of territorial empires'; subalterns do not exist in 'a hermetically-sealed conceptual world'; the history of labour 'must also be linked to the history of global warfare'. His text reads as an enticing invitation to look at the Great Unrest through a wider spatial lens, avoiding the twin pitfalls of Eurocentrism and methodological nationalism.

★★★

This special issue makes no claim to exhaustiveness. Many fields would surely have deserved greater attention: the role of public opinion, locally and nationally, in the success or failure of strike movements (here Thompson's paper might serve as a fine starting-point); the way children and teenagers participated in making the Great Labour Unrest such a joyfully unpredictable moment; the part played by women workers in labour mobilization, as well as the feminists' perception of it. Fully aware of those shortcomings, the editors of this volume hope it will nonetheless encourage further research on the unrest, and that it will be of interest to historians exploring other times and places.

Where can the study of the Great Unrest go from here? Dave Lyddon has rightly affirmed that most of the 1911–1914 strikes 'have not been written about', or have only been studied superficially.[26] An MA student in search of a stimulating subject could find food for thought in that period and, emulating Davies and Noon's enterprise, fruitfully combine the exploration of electronic sources with that of local archival material. The multiplication of such forages would help shatter the mirage of Clegg's 'great disputes' and replace it with a more realistic representation of industrial disputes in their horizontality and

26 Dave Lyddon, 'Postscript: The Labour Unrest in Great Britain and Ireland, 1910–1914: Still Uncharted Territory?' *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 33 (2012), 241–265.

mushrooming diversity. We also need to know more about the transnational and imperial character of the movement. As Emmet O'Connor observes: 'The years of the Great Unrest in Britain also saw a peak of industrial conflict in Ireland, the Netherlands, Russia, and Spain, major strikes of Italian and French railwaymen, a massacre of miners in Siberia's Lena goldfields in 1912, and a virtual general strike in St Petersburg in July 1914'. Does that not ring as an incitation to start searching for more of those hidden cross-national threads untangled by Bantman and Hyslop? A study of how social conflicts in the white dominions were reported upon in the metropole, and vice-versa, could constitute a ground-breaking topic for a PhD dissertation.

The most promising path to refresh our understanding of the Great Unrest could be the 'glocal' one: a return to the local scale, but freed from localism or folklore, and informed by a global vision. Reconstructing the biographies of workers who took part in the 1911–1914 movements, many of whom did not spend all of their lives in the British Isles though they may have stayed within the sphere of the British world, could be one way, among others, of stepping in that direction. Few labour historians today would disagree with that agenda, which is broadly defended by the recently created International Association 'Strikes and Social Conflicts', not to mention our colleagues of 'Mundos do Trabalho' in Brazil or the Association of Indian Labour Historians.[27] Hopefully the pages that follow will do more than proclaim our faith in new ways of practicing social history, and provide readers with vivid illustration of an ongoing, and indeed transnational, dynamic.

A tribute to François Poirier (1947–2010)

This introduction would be incomplete if homage was not paid to the person who initially proposed that a conference be organized by French scholars, some time in 2011, to celebrate the 1911 explosion: the late Professor François Poirier, who in the microcosm of French academia was 'Mr British Labour History'.[28] Why was our mentor so keen on the project? Possibly because, as a fervent Liverpool lover, he cherished the August 1911 legend and its heroes – not only Tom Mann, but also the not-quite-so-heroic James

27 Marcel van der Linden, 'Enjeux pour une histoire mondiale du travail', *Le Mouvement Social*, 241 (2012), 4–29.

28 Constance Bantman and I were among the students who had the pleasure of working under his supervision for our PhDs. His collection of books and documents on British labour history (the future 'Fonds François Poirier') should be made available to new generations of students at the Paris 13 University Library in the near future.

Sexton. Possibly also because, as a former 'Parti Communiste' militant who had served as a translator on international congresses, he had an intimate grasp of what cross-Channel activism entailed. Another related reason is of course that, once François Poirier drifted away from the CP, he did not relinquish his internationalism but instead ignited his academic (hyper-)activity with his enduring taste for cross-cultural confrontations. The kaleidoscopic Great Unrest therefore suited him in more ways than one. He relished the story of those readers of *L'Humanité* (the official organ of the French socialist party) who, in 1911, had won a trip to Britain, only to find themselves thrown into the turmoil of the transport strikes. This was exactly the kind of internationalism that he believed in and practised – what he called 'grassroots internationalism' as opposed to 'platform internationalism', with its stereotyped and worn-out words.

The appeal of the Great Unrest in the eyes of François Poirier owed a lot to its uncontrollable character and its wide-ranging repertoire of protest, features which could only perturb the French view of British history as quintessentially smooth and peaceful. As a teacher, one of François's priorities was always to question his students' adherence to the Whig interpretation of British history – a concern reflected in his writings, which made a point of searching for traces of class conflict where official histories saw consensus.[29] However fond he might have been of the 1911–1914 strikes as an object of study, they did confront him with a linguistic problem: how do you translate 'unrest' into French? 'Malaise', 'trouble', 'agitation'? Eventually his preference went to the expression 'grande fièvre ouvrière' (literally 'Great Labour Fever'). Admittedly, the label had a derogatory implication, when words such as 'movement' or 'mobilisation' would have connoted a sense of agency and autonomy. But precisely because the label reflected the ruling classes' fear of conflicts which they could not make sense of without evoking the image of an epidemic, he believed it to be rather appropriate – and we stuck to his choice in the call for papers.

François was not able to attend the conference he had launched but he would surely have been glad to note that labour history is not yet ready to be buried and remains a sub-discipline with potential, whose practitioners are capable of blending 'from above' and 'from below' approaches, can demonstrate sensitivity to material conditions *and* cultural trends, and suffer neither from insularity nor from gender or ethnicity blindness. Our 'feverish' yet

29 François Poirier (ed.), *Londres, 1939–1945. Riches et pauvres dans le même élan patriotique: derrière la légende* (Paris, 1995). See also his interview on Arte TV, 'Une histoire en discontinu?' February 2007.

healthy debates he would have thoroughly enjoyed. This collection is dedicated to his memory.

Notes on contributor

Yann Béliard is a senior lecturer in British studies at Paris 3 (Sorbonne Nouvelle) University. He belongs to the Centre for Research on the English-speaking World (CREW). His research focuses on British labour in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, with particular emphasis on workplace struggles, empire and race, transnational activism and biography. He has published in the following journals: *Labour History Review*, *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, *Cahiers d'Histoire*, *Labour / Le Travail*.
Correspondence to: yann.beliard@univ-paris3.fr