

International conference

Trade unions, conflict and direct action

in the Americas and in Europe, from the end of the 19th century to the 1980s



Paris 27-28 May 2021

University Paris 8 / Campus Condorcet (Aubervilliers-Paris)

Call for papers

Trade unionism can be defined, in general, as a collective tool to defend the material and moral interests of groups of wage labourers, organised by trade, sector of the economy or, increasingly throughout the 20th century, on an intersectoral basis. Trade unionism may organise workers in the manufacturing and service industries, white-collar workers, agricultural workers and trainees (as in the case of student trade unionism).

Very early on, from the end of the 19th century, and independently of the political regimes amongst which they were evolving, trade unionists posed the question of how to organise collective action to defend the moral and material interests of what can generally be termed the workers' movement. In Europe and in the Americas trade unions developed differently and adopted distinct forms of action depending on the historical period, the governments in power, economic cycles, and according to the various political trends existing amongst the working class. In the course of several industrial conflicts, some trade unionists (often a minority section) began to see the need for forms of industrial action other than corporatist negotiation and legal struggle. The alternative courses of action they adopted can *provisionally* be called "class" or "radical" trade unionism.

The events of May 1886 in Chicago, and the subsequent massacre at Haymarket Square on May 4th are, in this respect, the opening moments of the period which this Conference will discuss. It is a

period which ranges from the anarcho-syndicalist movement of the end of the 19th Century and the formation in the USA of the Industrial Workers of the World, to the crystallization of new structures tending towards self-organization (and even autonomy) as opposed to the trade union structures of the 1960s and 1970s, in Europe and in the Americas, including the great moments of social conflict that delimit the “short 20th Century”. Using the vast amount of literature which already exists in this field of research, the conference will aim to reflect on movements of resistance and long drawn-out strikes organised to defend working conditions, and trade union action which focused strongly and more directly on political demands – such as opposition to war and regimes considered authoritarian, or hostile to the interests of the working class. The conference will also discuss industrial action which demanded (through discourse and action) “revolutionary transformation” – thereby confronting the state apparatus directly.

The issue of popular violence and the (demanded or rejected) legitimacy of direct action continued to arise throughout the 20th Century, not only in Europe, but also in the Americas and the Caribbean. After the Second World War it returned to the fore in western countries, the Global South and on the other side of the Iron Curtain, most notably in the context of the various social uprisings that came to characterise the “1968 years” (“Mai 1968” in France, the “Maggio rampante” in Italy, waves of protest in Eastern Europe, “setentismo” in Latin America, “rank and file labour militancy” in the United States). This lengthy period of struggle came to an end in the 1980s, with the last movements of collective resistance to the “conservative revolution” and the imposing of neoliberalism. Notable examples include the great steelworkers’ strikes in Lorraine between 1978 and 1979, the protests of the Bolivian miners against the privatising of COMIBOL in 1984, and, of course, the UK miners’ strike of 1984-85.

The conference will include many different approaches, be it specific case studies (or conversely, analyses conducted over the long term), research focusing on individual militants (or else on workers’ collectives), and work based on oral sources or archive material which have not yet been used. These tools will necessarily generate a fresh look at historical periods which are often saturated in terms of historiographical production.

The organisers intend to favour transversal approaches, focusing on the exchange of practices, ideas, and the experiences of militants. The conference will stress comparative analyses, both between different cultural areas and between different historical periods. Likewise, the organisers welcome points of view from a variety of fields – history and social sciences, the arts (visual, cinema, music), law and literature. Finally, the conference firmly aims to create dialogue and debate between academics and researchers at doctoral or post-doctoral level (from France, elsewhere in Europe and the Americas), as well as hearing “eye-witness accounts” from actors outside academia who wish to participate.

The suggested main themes are as follows:

- A. The ideological and political matrices of direct action
- B. Trade unions, self-organisation and conflicts
- C. War(s) and peace
- D. Migrations, transmission of ideas, and the circulation of militants
- E. Women, feminism and trade unionism

- F. Militant trade unionism, and racial and national issues
- G. trade unionism and violence in rural areas
- H. Young people – between sounding board and militant renewal
- I. State response to insubordination
- J. Challenging trade unions and autonomous organisations

Papers may be in **French, English, Spanish, Italian** or **Portuguese**.

Abstract proposals (max. 250 words) together with a short bio-note should be sent to the organisers at the following site: <https://actiondirecte.sciencesconf.org/>. The submission deadline is **November 30**. Acceptance will be notified by **December 20**. We welcome proposals for both individual papers and collective panels. Applicants should mention the theme in which their paper could fit. Applicants are also kindly asked to specify the language of their presentations as well as the languages they speak so as to allow the organisers to provide a consistent structure to each panel.

Conference organizing and scientific committee

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