

Explaining the outbreak and dynamics of the 1911 school strike wave in Britain

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the dynamics of school strikes during September 1911. It argues that the rapidly expanding strike ‘wave’ can best be explained by analyzing processes endogenous to the strikes themselves; this requires connecting micro-level interactions to aggregate level outcomes. This work utilizes both the analytical concepts associated with threshold models of collective behaviour and the study of social networks in relation to strike activity. Extensive biographical data reveals the interdependence of decisions to engage in strike activity. Initial preferences for striking are shown to be heterogeneous amongst the student population. The accounts demonstrate that the networks within which students were located, information about striking gained through media sources, and the presence of trade union activity were all important mechanisms in the spread of strikes within and between locations.

INTRODUCTION

In September 1911 thousands of children across wide areas of England, Scotland and Wales became embroiled in a series of strike waves. The first strike occurred on the morning of September 5, 1911, when children left their classrooms of Bigyn School, Llanelli, protesting at the physical punishment of one of their classmates. During the next three weeks, school strikes spread in a rapidly accelerating ‘wave’, affecting at least 62 town and cities, stretching as far north as Montrose in Scotland and as far south as Portsmouth, involving thousands of children. Reasons for striking ranged from a desire to abolish the cane, less school work, more holidays and payment for school monitors. School strike ‘waves’ are very rare events, with the exception of similar strikes in 1889, the scale of the 1911 strike represents a unique example of collective action by mainly working class school children. Despite the uniqueness of the 1911 strikes, research in this area remains fragmentary, brief and incomplete (Marson, 1973; Humphries, 1981; Adams, 1991).

The purpose of this article is not only to describe the experiences of the children involved but to explain how these strikes spread as rapidly and as far as they did. This event allows us to explore the mechanisms that facilitate the spread of protest, and why children decided to participate in the strikes, despite a weak bargaining position, and the threat of sanctioning. This requires focussing on the ‘dynamics of strike waves rather than the general conditions under which they occur’ (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2004: 312). The analytical and theoretical tools often associated with diffusion processes, network analysis and threshold models of collective action are utilised in analysing the strikes. The discussion will build on the biographical data and newspaper coverage found in existing research but will draw very different conclusions.

In section one, the historical background of the strikes are explored, focussing particularly on the school strikes links to wider social unrest and trade union activity. Section two evaluates existing interpretations for the school strikes; it is argued that they offer a necessary but not sufficient explanation of the strikes. It is further argued that recent developments in analysing collective action and sociological theory offers a more robust means of explaining the strikes. Thirdly, biographical data is analysed, exploring both exogenous and endogenous processes relevant to the school strikes. The article concludes by arguing that the theories and analysis offered provide a fruitful way of explaining collective action for historians and sociologists of education.

THE STRIKES IN HISTORICAL AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVE

The occurrence of school strikes in both 1889 and 1911 was coterminous with a large expansion of trade union membership and activity. A particular feature of the trade union movement during the period was the growth of what became known as New Unionism. As a group, the New Unions arose in the course of a series of massive strikes in 1889 and 1890. Among them was Will Thorne's Gas Workers' and General Labourers' Union, formed in March 1889, initially around the demand for a reduction in shift hours at gas works from twelve to eight. These events shaped the possibilities of action for the children and influenced their attitude to striking. Many of the children involved in the strikes came from areas affected by industrial unrest and some students were from families heavily involved in the trade union movement (Marson, 1973; Humphries, 1981). The years preceding the school strikes saw a dramatic upsurge in membership of trade unions, rising from 2,250,000 in 1901 to 3,139,000 in 1911 (Marsh, 1980: 8). The number of days lost to strike action in 1911 surged upwards to 10.115 million days (Office of National Statistics, 2002).

New Unionism saw the increasing representation of unskilled workers who had previously been excluded from the more traditional labour movements. Organisations such as the Gasworkers Unions became particularly active in fields of education. The T.U.C also developed policies towards education, seeing education as potentially playing a key part in the labour movement (Simon 1965: 253). Education is a political and contested field, it is impossible to interpret the strikes without recourse to the role played by the emergent Labour Party and the trade union movement for several reasons. Firstly, it exposed students to notions of collective bargaining, protest and political representation. Secondly, it would have affected the material circumstances of many working class children. Thirdly, it provided a channel through which information about striking could spread.

The emergent leaders of these unions played a part in the general milieu of the organised labour movement. For example, Will Thorne organised the National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers, when the notion of a 'general union was almost entirely novel' (Radice and Radice, 1974: 14). Thorne claimed that this played a key role in developing New Unionism, offering a channel of action for working class people:

We offered them something tangible, a definite, clearly lighted road out of their misery, a trade union that would improve their wages and conditions; that would protect them from the petty tyranny of employers. (Radice and Radice, 1974: 13)

Other key figures also emerged, Ben Tillet formed the National Transport Workers Federation which gained wage concessions for unskilled workers (Schaner, 1982); and Tom Mann, influenced by French Syndicalism and notions of militant direct action, encouraged the creation of 'One Big Union' (Reid, 2004: 228).

It should not be assumed that there was a sense of collective unity or purpose amongst the various trade-union movements. Many groups often held opposing opinions and sought to distinguish themselves in relation to issues of public policy. Education, however, is an exception. Whilst there may have been disagreements over details the key trade unions and their leaders were united in the belief in the significance of education. The Liberal Party won the 1906 General Election by a landslide but, importantly, the Labour Party successfully returned 29 MPs to Parliament; four years later, in December 1910, 42 Labour M.P.s were returned (Pugh, 2002: 132) The interests of 'working-class' people and trade unions were becoming increasingly vocal and represented politically and socially, despite Labour still being a small minority in Parliament. During the period education policy also underwent rapid change.

The early twentieth century saw the restructuring of education provision following the abolition of the directly elected school boards who had responsibility for organising elementary education in their local area. The Education Acts of 1899 and 1902 saw the creation of the Board of Education, who would now work with local education authorities responsible for maintained elementary and secondary schools (Sharp 2002: 98). These reforms were significant because they were seen as a retrograde step in increasing educational opportunities for working class children, despite the increase in pupil numbers: by '1911, over 82,000 former elementary school pupils were at secondary school' (McCulloch, 2002: 36). Educational opportunities were still severely limited and school conditions were often shocking; this was especially the case in Voluntary Schools which had not felt the influence of the often pioneering school boards. The T.U.C campaigned for the 'full popular control of all state aided schools' (Simon, 1965: 253). Dilapidated buildings, huge classes, poor teaching, a lack of provision and physical violence were all common experiences for many children and well attested to by historians of education (Simon, 1965; Hurt, 1979; Cunningham, 2004).

The historical and political changes preceding 1911 affected attitudes, beliefs and the fields of opportunities for working class people to challenge their social and political position. The summer of 1911 had seen nationwide strikes, particularly amongst transport workers, dockers and the miners of South Wales, the starting place of the school strike. The South Wales Miners Federation was particularly active in the period of 1910-11, engaging in industrial pay over limiting working hours and negotiating increases in pay (Evans, 1961). The growth and structure of trade unions provided a framework of action and influence that the school children could draw on, without this necessarily representing a commitment to the wider industrial unrest.

EVALUATING EXISTING APPROACHES TO THE SCHOOL STRIKES

One approach to the historical analysis education is Brian Simon's notion that education is 'best seen as a site of struggle' (Simon, 1994: 14). Within this explanatory framework, the school strikes are interpreted as an outcome between conflicting or antagonistic social classes. Drawing heavily on Marx, but also influenced by Enlightenment ideals of the need for individual liberation and autonomy, Simon retains the notion of education as a vehicle for emancipatory social change whilst recognising the centrality of struggle between different groups (Simon 1994). This offers a way of avoiding overly deterministic, neo-Marxist accounts of education and liberal explanations that see education as an essentially benign, liberating force. Simon's approach, influenced by Gramsci and his notion of hegemony, focused on political and social factors rather than economic causes (Simon, 1994: 44).

How useful then is the claim of 'education as a site of struggle' in helping explain the school strikes of 1911? Although this heuristic device appears to explicate some very general patterns of collective action, it struggles to explain particular cases such as the 1911 school strikes. The logic of Simon's (1994) argument rests on the notion that social classes are acting collectively to achieve certain goals; this, if applied to the school strikes, makes a number of unwarranted inferences about the children involved. Whilst not denying that in certain cases this model can be valid, it homogenises preferences to fit into a theoretical framework and obfuscates the importance of the dynamics of social interactions, a key feature in explaining the school strikes.

Research into the school strikes remains relatively sparse. There are however some very notable exceptions. Some systematic research into the strikes has been conducted over the last three decades (Marson, 1973; Humphries, 1981 and Adams, 1991). These researchers provide an invaluable foundation on which an analysis of the strike waves can be built and possible explanations developed. The data that they use form the major source of evidence in what follows. Marson's research is an invaluable source of information about the strikes, including newspaper excerpts, photographic evidence and biographical data, providing details of the scope, number, and firsthand accounts of those involved. It also provides an invaluable list of all the cities and towns involved in the strikes. Marson stumbled upon the school strikes whilst researching the Hull Dock Strikes, the focus of his research falls largely, but not exclusively, on this area. Marson's research provides accounts about the violent treatment of pupils, oppressive school conditions and explores how the schools were linked to the trade unions movement in general and New Unionism in particular. Marson also draws extensively on the print media to show how the striking children were represented and the role played by the media in spreading news of the strikes. The strikes are explained as a 'vehicle' through which they could reveal their feelings in an 'energetic and physical way' about their mistreatment (Marson, 1973: 33).

Building on these foundations, Humphries (1981) further contributed to the study of the school strikes. As well as utilising the biographical data from Marson, Humphries has drawn on interviews and data from the Bristol People's Oral History Project to shed light on the extent of the strike, seeking to establish that the students were involved in purposeful acts of resistance and were not the pathologised 'hooligans' that the popular press had

presented them as. Instead they are represented as rebelling against the harshness of conditions and treatment. The initial triggers such as corporal punishment, school hours, holidays, the payment of monitors and education organisation generally provide useful insights into the possible motivating factors for those involved. However, Humphries subsumes these factors under the more general explanation that the strikes were ‘an expression of resistance of the local community to the abuse of fundamental rights by authoritarian and bureaucratic organization of state schooling’ (Humphries, 1981: 120). Working within a Marxist framework, Humphries postulates a direct relation between the school strikes, the organised labour movement and resistance.

More recently Adams (1991) has focused on why protests by pupils have remained a largely obscured from the history of schooling in Britain. His aim is to explore the significance of pupil protest in both the nineteenth and twentieth century. The 1911 strike waves are described but are subsumed under a general explanatory framework of protest. Adams argues that rather than seeing protests as deviant they are ‘normal part of childhood (Adams, 1991: 195). He also shares with Humphries and Marson the belief student protest should be interpreted as ‘an expression of the critical awareness of young people’ and essentially an act of resistance (Adams, 1991: 196). So whilst offering in some parts a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the protest and the students motivations, Adams fails to look at process endogenous to the strikes themselves.

These pieces of social history sought to detail the events of the school strikes and came to similar conclusions, although Humphries is more overtly polemical in tone, explaining the strikes as being inherently subversive and ‘related to deep-rooted class conflict’ (Humphries, 1981: 97). The explanation of the school strikes put forward by Marson and Humphries is problematic; they tend to obscure or downplay influences that cannot be traced back to the idea of class struggle or resistance. This line of reasoning encourages unwarranted, simplistic assertions on Humphries part, where theory does the reading and leads to a systematic myopia concerning competing explanations. In explaining the strikes in this way Humphries’ argument encounters several difficulties. He fails to define class precisely, encouraging vague generalisations and failing to explicate the link between class identity and class action (Bennett, 1983). This, as Bennett rightly argues, leads to a rather circular argument, whereby his analysis of class becomes ‘merely an application of the definition that opposes working and middle classes, the criterion of selection of an object of study being repeated as an apparent interpretation’ (Bennett, 1983: 117). By claiming that class conflict is the main mechanism of social change, Humphries, in his interpretation of the school strikes, resorts to a ‘piece of sophistry’ (Boudon, 1991: 127). That is ‘saying in effect that classes are by definition mutually antagonistic and that therefore there can be no classes without a class struggle at the same time’ (Boudon, 1991: 127). If class does play a role in the strikes it must be demonstrated in the available evidence, not taken for granted in the content of the terms applied or it becomes tautological. I will show that the available biographical data at times undermines Humphries’ analysis, and suggests it is in the dynamics of the situation rather than the general conditions of social class where the most fruitful and compelling level of explanation is to be found.

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

Advances in social science research have demonstrated the importance of analysing the processes endogenous to strike activity and have demonstrated the various mechanisms and channels that affect the extent and pace of diffusion. Diffusion occurs when an ‘innovation is communicated through certain channels amongst the members of a social system over time’ (Rogers, 1995). What is central to the literature on the diffusion of protest is that people protest because others have done so, which entails a rapid change in preferences amongst the usually quiescent, and rapid changes in beliefs about the likelihood of success (Biggs, 2003). Actors do not necessarily begin with the same preferences and beliefs about the value of strike action; these are updated as events unfold.

The necessary emphasis on the heterogeneity of actors in collective outcomes was first explored by Granovetter who concluded that it was ‘hazardous to infer individual dispositions from aggregate outcomes to assume that behaviour was directed by ultimately agreed-upon norms’ (Granovetter, 1983: 1420). Granovetter, rather than looking at collective norms and values in explaining collective behaviour, takes the variation of norms and preferences within groups to be of significance (Granovetter, 1978). He uses the example of a potential ‘riot’ scenario to underline his point:

Imagine 100 people milling around in a square—a potential riot situation. Suppose their riot thresholds are distributed as follows: there is one individual with threshold 1, one with threshold 2 and so on up to the last individual with threshold 99. This is a uniform distribution of thresholds. The outcome is clear and could be described as a ‘bandwagon’ or ‘domino’ effect: the person with threshold 0, the ‘instigator’, engages in ‘riot’ behaviour—breaks a window, say. This activates the person with threshold 1; the activity of these two people then activates the person with threshold 2, and so on, until all one people have joined (Granovetter, 1978: 1432)

Granovetter’s theoretical and empirical research raises several important issues. Firstly, it shows that even if people with different preferences can end up in acting in the *same* way without initially having the same preferences. When seeking to explain the school strikes it is necessary to avoid inferring that all the children involved in the strikes began with the same beliefs, norms or values, rather it should be assumed that the children had different ‘thresholds’ for deciding to go on strike. In a threshold process, action incites further action as actors with lower thresholds combine in numbers that induce actors with higher thresholds to participate, and those actors induce others still, so that a bandwagoning process ensues.

A secondary factor is also that small changes in threshold distributions can have a huge impact on the unfolding of social processes. Even a small shift in these distributions could be the difference between a strike occurring and not. Such an approach allows us to unpack some of the mechanisms at work when collective action occurs suggesting that it is the ‘dynamics of situations’ (Granovetter, 1978: 1442) that often explains collective action. It again underlines the approach used in this article: the way people behave is contingent on those around them.

Underlying this process is the interdependence of actors. The outcome of collective action such as strikes or protest is a function of the numbers participating. If there are too few participating, they are simply punished, yet on the other hand, if there are many participants, an individual who does not participate will be punished by their reference group (Karklins and Peterson, 1993; Biggs 2003). The expectations of success or failure change as events unfold. Beliefs about success are inferred from the actions of those who participate, so that beliefs themselves can be causal, even when they do not reflect the reality. For example, in his analysis of the explosive growth of the membership of the Order of the Knights of Labour during the 1886 strike wave in Chicago, Biggs (2003) describes the rise and fall of what was briefly the largest trade union in the history of the world in terms of ‘spiralling optimism’, whereby growth in membership gave rise to changed beliefs about the possibility of change through collective action, new members joined, which gave rise to yet greater expectations. Yet that the movement was unsuccessful demonstrates the importance of subjective beliefs even if objectively there was no opportunity for success.

That social structure is causal in its own right for the rapidity and extent of diffusion is well established in the sociological literature on strikes. To cite one example, Hedström, Sandell and Stern (1994), in their analysis of the diffusion of trade unionism across Sweden in the nineteenth century, argue that individuals in close proximity are more likely to be aware of each others’ actions, and that the rapidity of diffusion is a function of that proximity. Therefore, it is not enough to merely claim that ‘agents are significantly connected to others, each of whom has similar connections to further agents’ (Scott and Griff, 1984: 9). Whilst not incorrect, what is missing is an account of the actual structure of the networks in which people are embedded and how this can affect aggregate outcomes. Relations between individuals enable actors to gain information about the likelihood of success, the more they are exposed to and influenced by the actions of those around them (Connell and Cohn, 1995). Where individuals are not directly connected, local news media communicates information to further away places. Biggs and Andrews, (2006) when analyzing the American 1960 Sit-in movement found that strikes were more likely to occur in cities where a nearby sit in was reported in the local news media. Information and the channels through which they spread are key determinants in the spreading of strikes, as is network density.

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF COLLECTIVE ACTION

The literature on strikes and collective action demonstrates the possible importance of trade union activity; media channels, network structure, and that people are often heterogeneous in their attitudes towards striking. These factors will be explored in the following analysis. Prior to this some clarifications are required. The term strike will be used in a broad unrestrictive fashion, applicable to actions which involved a group of students absenting themselves from the school in a response to collective grievances with the school and education system.

The school strikes of 1911 saw differing types of strikes, ranging from a few children to hundreds being involved; some were largely peaceful, light-hearted affairs, others were

violent and destructive; some lasted a few hours, others days; for the purposes of this article all will be taken as constitutive of strike action. Working class children will be defined as those children whose parents were engaged in the unskilled or skilled manual labour markets but this does not presuppose that they were always fully employed. The analysis of the data will explicate the notion that children were influenced by those around them and went on strike because others were doing so, this process of interaction led to increased optimism about the benefits of striking and helps explain why the strikes, in the words of one newspaper, spread like a 'plague' or 'epidemic'. The flow of information about the strikes will also be investigated, this means analysing the networks within the children were embedded and how the media and 'flying pickets' facilitated the diffusion of protest by spreading information about it.

The years preceding the school strikes of 1911 had seen a dramatic increase in the number of industrial strikes. The area of Hull studied by Marson was active, a local newspaper reported that:

Hull has thus been involved in practically every phase of unrest which has troubled the country in the last few months. For weeks there has been a feeling of anxiety as to what might happen next. First, the sailors and dockers; then the millers, cement workers, timber workers, railway men news-boys, factory girls and now the school boys (Marson, 1973: 3).

Strikes spread from trade to trade before finally affecting school boys. Newspaper articles and biographical data suggest that the children involved in the strikes borrowed the methods and language of the strike movement to articulate their claims of mistreatment. As one boy stated, 'our fathers starved to get what they wanted; what our fathers have done we can do' (Marson, 1973: 7). Strike committees were formed and demands articulated to the teachers, the most common demands were the abolition of the cane, more time off and pay for the monitors. One young striker from Bristol claimed:

Well, there's was a lot of fathers out on strike in 1911. And on my way to school I saw on the content bill outside the newspaper shop: 'The London School Children on Strike for No Cane.' I run down the lane into the playground an' started it. 'Come on, out on strike! Come on up the top an' see the bill.' And they all see'd it an' there was forth or fifty of us, and we all marched out of St. Silas round the other schools to get the others out, singing an' shouting (Humphries, 1981: 97).

Trade Union activity acted as a source of inspiration, providing 'repertoires of action' (Tilly, 1986) that the children at times appropriated; many children would have had firsthand experience of their father's experience of striking in the summer of 1911. The claim that 'we strike because our father do' was a common epithet. The children involved in the school strikes borrowed, mimicked and expressed their demands in the language of the resurgent trade union movement.

The wave of strikes can be explained by exploring processes endogenous to the strikes themselves. The networks the students were located in provide the answer to how information about the strikes was communicated rapidly, altering student's attitude to

striking and thus spreading strike activity. Many of the students were located in dense networks, close together both socially and geographically and even emotionally. This applies to both their school life and the fact that many were drawn from tight knit communities. Take the following account:

Once it was known they were on strike, the news quickly spread around the school. And by the time the afternoon lessons should have started the strike news had reached several other schools in the East End of Hull (Marson, 1973: 3).

This statement is revealing for several reasons. It implies that students paid close attention to the behaviour of other schools and individuals, that news spread quickly around the school and that it also spread information to other schools about the strikes. The density of school networks should not be ignored; they facilitated the rapid diffusion of information about the school strikes of protest from class to class and school to school.

Far from being homogenous in their beliefs, students had radically different attitudes. Each student involved was faced with a dilemma: to go on strike was a risk; if only a few students went on strike then the students were in a weak position, they could easily be sanctioned by the teachers or school authorities. It was remarked that: 'In some places the strikers found it difficult to gain the support of their friends and this meant that the teachers were able to isolate and identify ring leaders (Marson, 1973: 7). But, if a high proportion of the student's class mates were striking, then a shift occurs. The threat of sanctioning moves from the teachers to the sanctioning of non-participants on the part of the students. This may involve some kind of physical reprisal or being ostracised socially. One reluctant striker commented that:

'My brothers and I went to school in the morning, but on going back at twenty past one, four of the older big lads were standing at the top end of Prynne Street and threatened to punch our faces in if we dared go back to school (Humphries, 1981: 103).

Marson also noted that 'several of the loyal pupils were attacked and beaten with sticks when they refused to join in (Marson, 1973: 6). Another child commented on the varying levels of commitment to striking, 'We had to go back, as there were very few of us out for the principle of the thing, and it is no use only a few of us declaring that we would not attend school (Marson, 1973: 12). This data shows that students were putting themselves at risk from a variety of sources and that individual students had different propensities for striking. In one school the ringleaders were severely punished, 'My brother said they were held over a desk by their outstretched hands and caned on their bottoms' (Humphries, 1981: 90). The interdependence of students helps us explain how strikes expand rapidly in a wave. Initially only those committed to striking would take part, but as more children joined, the process become self reinforcing as the objective costs, such as the threat of sanctioning by teachers were reduced.

SOURCES AND INTERPRETATIONS

Local and regional newspapers provided an invaluable source of information about the strike, although they were often hostile and derisive about the motivation involved. What they infer is that the school strikes are part of a wider movement of strike action:

The strike epidemic now prevalent has infected the rising generation at Llanelly, and, in order to be in fashion, the school boys decided upon a down tools policy (Marson, 1973: 5)

The strikes are presented as being imitative, to do with following trends rather than being something originating from the students. Charlie Dallimore, from St Jude's School in Bristol stated that at his school, 'Sam Brick, he was the ring leader... He was a quiet chap, must have had trade unionism in his blood, got it from his father, I suppose (Humphries, 1983: 109). Bristol was particularly prominent in the early labour movement, with many episodes of strikes by men and women, the Gas Workers Union also agitated there. Ringleaders of the school strikes often had family connections to the trade union movement and it is undeniable that many of the demands were articulated in the language of the union movement. A local newspaper argued that the strikes were imitative:

'Striking conversations are meanwhile carried on in their homes to the detriment of all else. Naturally, children are possessed of powers... imitation, waiting only to be called into play... Hence 'strikes', being the fashion with adults became likewise that of the juveniles (Humphries, 1981: 97).

What should be avoided in analysing this process is both of attributing it to mindless imitation as the popular press did, or necessarily embodying a commitment to the wider trade union movement (Marson, 1973; Humphries, 1981). Rather, I would claim that the presence of trade unions provided 'repertoires of action' that the children deliberately drew on because in some cases such strategies had been successful in achieving certain goals. This does not presuppose a high level of commitment, although it does not rule it out, between the strikers and trade unions but emphasises the pragmatic nature of the decisions taken by the school children. The national scope of the trade union facilitated the fast spreading of strikes across a wide area because it had established networks of communication about striking that the school strikes could 'plug' into.

In order for the strikes to have spread as rapidly and as far as they did, information about their occurrence must have played a key role in the process of diffusion across the country. Thus, as news of the strike spread, the process became self reinforcing. As the scale of the strikes became known, optimism about the probability of success and desire for striking would have increased amongst the student population. The role of the unstamped press in the 19th century in the spreading of working class movements is well known (Johnson, 1979). The mainstream media actually blamed the local and regional press for spreading ideas about the strikes and influencing young people, 'As the strikes began to spread all over the country these same authorities began to blame the popular half penny press for giving the school boys ideas' (Marson, 1973: 7). Multiple sources of information meant that news about the strike would have been easy for students to come across. The half

penny press, local and regional newspapers informed the young students about strikes occurring in other parts of the country. Joseph Proctor of St Paul's School in Lancashire claimed that:

We read about the strike of schoolboys in the paper, so at dinnertime the elder boys amongst us decided to strike in sympathy. After dinner about twenty of us went parading in the streets with a home made banner that we made out of a placard from a newspaper shop fastened to a broom handle we borrowed from a hardware shop (Humphries, 1983: 107).

What is ironic about the role of the media in the school strikes is that it was the less politically radical, national and regional newspapers that played a wider role in spreading information about the strikes. It was not necessarily their interpretation that was accepted, but rather, that the strikes were mentioned at all that gave inspiration to students. Whilst not discounting the smaller, more radical press all together, it seems unlikely that they would have been able to communicate the scale of the strikes as quickly as the larger newspapers that could publish and disseminate reports on the strikes more rapidly. Information about the strikes played a key role in them spreading as far and as quickly as they did. It provided the students with vital information about the numbers of others striking, and chances of success or sanctioning.

It was not only the media which spread news of the strikes 'flying pickets' sprung up in many towns and cities. Flying pickets helped to spread news of the strikes. At Manchester where juvenile strikers were very numerous, organisation was one of their strong points:

Pickets were appointed and provided with rough tickets to wear on their coats as they went round to various schools to endeavour to get the boys to strike in sympathy carrying out their operation with great seriousness (Marson, 1973: 10).

Whilst the newspapers may have provided a vital pathway by which the strikes may have spread over wide geographical distances, flying pickets played a central role in rapidly spreading news to students within smaller, geographic locales. Despite the simplicity of tactics, flying pickets and students parading outside neighbouring schools proved a potent method through which the students would have been able to evaluate the number of other schools and students taking part. This further demonstrates the interdependence of the strikers.

The 'wave' of school strikes ended, but why? The first thing that must be recognised is that the children involved were in much weaker bargaining positions than their fathers involved in collective industrial action. The strikes of the summer of 1911 had brought vast areas of industry to a standstill and were highly organised, therefore they were in a position to extract some concessions and minor victories. The children, obviously, were not in this position. Realistically they could not negotiate with the teachers or school authorities. The relative weakness of their position was demonstrated in many schools when the strikes collapsed with the appearance of a figure of authority. The children also lacked a wider support base outside of other students. Mothers of children involved in strikes were

amongst the most strident in marching their children back to school and against them engaging in strike activity:

Several women, including my mother, were out in the street talking about the strike, and they asked me if I'd been one of the strikers. I said 'No'. My mother said, I thought he wouldn't be a striker.' It seemed I was safe because my mother could give a good hiding if necessary (Humphries, 1981: 105).

The school children could not rely on parental support. Thus, the strikes quickly died down, once the exuberance had begun to dissipate and the realisation set in that they could not achieve their initial aims.

CONCLUSION

Clearly the 1911 school strike waves were highly unusual events. This does not mean they were simply aberrations, idiosyncratic events that are not connected to their social and political context. On the contrary, it reveals that they were intimately connected to the social and political movements of the time. The early years of the twentieth century were momentous for the evolution of a national education system in England and Wales but the journey to this system was marked by periods of conflict and advance, retreat and resistance. Clearly the school strikes can only be fully understood by carefully dissecting these complex processes.

The school strike waves can only be explained through a careful analysis of the internal dynamics of the strikes themselves, the seemingly contagious spread of strikes, which occurred over a very limited period, were a result of several key factors. The networks within which students were embedded, various media outlets, and the presence of trade union movements facilitated a process of diffusion. This is significant because it shifts focus away from general social, economic and political conditions towards a more detailed focus on the internal dynamics of collective protest. Analyzing collective action, utilising the theoretical models developed in this paper, has great explanatory potential but has so far not been taken up by sociologists and historians of education.

This paper has also demonstrated the key role that can be played using biographical data in representing the experiences of the children involved, especially when other sources are sadly lacking because the participants are beyond living memory. In order to confirm the robustness of the explanations offered here it would be necessary to gather detailed data on trade union membership and the presence of various media outlets. This would enable quantitative analysis in conjunction with biographical analysis, providing a more detailed explanation about the pace and spread of the school strikes.

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