

Strikes in Canada, 1891-1950

II. Methods and Sources

Dogulas Cruikshank et Gregory S. Kealey

Volume 20, 1987

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t20rr03>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Cruikshank, D. & Kealey, G. S. (1987). Strikes in Canada, 1891-1950: II. Methods and Sources. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 20, 123-132.

Strikes in Canada, 1891-1950

II. Methods and Sources

Douglas Cruikshank and Gregory S. Kealey

NOW THAT THE STRIKES AND LOCKOUTS files of the Department of Labour have been microfilmed, they are likely to be consulted more than ever by labour historians and other researchers. If these records and the statistics derived from them are to be used effectively, it is important to know how they were compiled.

Soon after it was founded in 1900, the Department of Labour established a procedure for systematically gathering information on Canadian labour disputes, a procedure that was to remain essentially the same throughout the period covered in this report. When the department first received news of a strike, either from the correspondents of *The Labour Gazette* or through the regular press, it sent strike inquiry forms to representatives of the employers and employees involved in the dispute. Initially, a single form was mailed asking for the beginning and end dates of the dispute, the "cause or object" and "result," and the number of establishments and number of male and female workers directly and indirectly involved. In 1918 the department began sending two forms — one to be returned immediately and the other after settlement — which requested more detailed information regarding the usual working day and week. The department also asked for monthly reports from participants in longer strikes. These questionnaires sometimes provided all of the data needed to complete the various lists and statistical series, but because they were often not returned or contained conflicting responses, the department also relied on newspaper coverage and supplementary reports from fair wage and conciliation officers, *Labour Gazette* correspondents, Royal Canadian Mounted Police informants, and Employment Service of Canada/Unemployment Insurance Commission officials.

Once all of the documents relating to a strike were gathered into a single file and given a separate reference number, estimates of the number of establishments and workers involved, duration in working days, and duration in "man days lost" were made, and the causes, methods of settlement, and results were classified.¹ These data, as well as basic qualitative information, were then entered into a Trade Dispute Record register (1904-1916),² onto a separate Trade Dispute Record sheet (1917?-1944),³ or onto a sheet of paper at the beginning of the file (1945-1950). In turn, the sheets provided the data base for annual reviews of strike activity which were published in *The Labour Gazette* beginning (for 1901 and 1902) in January 1903.⁴ In 1913 the department published a separate report which included statistics for two five-year periods, 1901-05 and 1906-10, and a complete list of known strikes from 1901 to 1912.⁵ A similar report dealing with the period up to 1916 was published in 1918.⁶ The department began preparing a third report early in the 1920s but never published it.⁷

The third report was not published partly because of changes occurring in the system used to classify strikes by industry. In 1917 the department stopped categorizing strikes according to the occupation or trade of the majority of workers involved and instead began classifying them according to the product of the industry affected. This new system was still undergoing changes and was revised again in 1922. Thus, while it appears from the records that the department began to reclassify pre-1917 strikes according to the 1917 system, its efforts were soon made redundant.

By the early 1920s it was also clear that the strikes and lockouts series was in need of much more fundamental revisions. Despite the claim in the 1913 Report that regarding the stated number of strikes "the margin of uncertainty is practically nil," the department had simply missed a large number of disputes.⁸ When comprehensive revisions were finally undertaken in the late 1920s, 455 more strikes were discovered and incorporated into a new

¹ The surviving strikes and lockouts files date from March 1907 which is the same month that the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act was passed. It is unclear how the records were kept before this.

² Public Archives of Canada (hereafter PAC), Records of the Department of Labour, RG 27, vol. 599.

³ It appears that Trade Dispute Record sheets were subsequently prepared for the period 1901-16 according to the industrial classification system adopted in 1917. All of the sheets completed before 1927 were then revised in the late 1920s. The original and revised sheets are filed together in PAC, RG 27, vols. 2332-42, microfilm reels T6212-7 and T6663-6.

⁴ *The Labour Gazette*, 3(January 1903), 533-45.

⁵ Canada, Department of Labour, *Report on Strikes and Lockouts in Canada from 1901 to 1912* (Ottawa 1913).

⁶ Canada, Department of Labour, *Report on Strikes and Lockouts in Canada 1901-1916* (Ottawa 1918).

⁷ Parts of the draft report are located in PAC, RG 27, vol. 2342, microfilm reel T6666.

⁸ *Report on Strikes and Lockouts 1901-1912*, 9.

series covering the period between 1901 and 1929. The vast majority of these new strikes occurred before 1921.

Some of the additional disputes had been intentionally omitted from the original statistics because of a policy of removing "minor" strikes from the record. Although the department maintained this policy in preparing the revisions, a number of strikes originally deleted were reinserted because of various changes in the definition of minor strikes. In 1900 strikes "affecting less than ten work people, and those lasting less than one day" were to be excluded;⁹ beginning in 1903 "disputes involving less than six employees or of less duration than 24 hours" were to be omitted;¹⁰ between 1919 and 1921 strikes were to be left off unless they involved "six or more employees and were of not less than forty-eight hours duration;"¹¹ and, finally, after returning to the six workers/one day rule until 1923, a proviso was added which stated that such strikes were to be included if they involved a time loss of ten person days or more.¹² This last rule was adopted for the revisions completed in 1930 and remained in effect through 1950.

Small and short strikes involving ten or more person days lost, however, made up a very small percentage of the new strikes included in the revised totals. A larger portion had been left off the original record either because they had been incorrectly combined with other strikes or because sufficient information about them was lacking. And the majority were strikes that had, for various reasons, including censorship during the War, simply escaped the attention of the department. New evidence about these kinds of strikes, as well as about those already recorded, was discovered by means of a thorough search of all of the major labour newspapers published between 1901 and 1929.¹³

This evidence was used in preparing new Trade Dispute Record sheets for all of the strikes. In many instances the original estimates of workers involved, duration, and person days lost were amended to make them more consistent over the 29 year period.¹⁴ Causation was reclassified to conform with a more detailed system first used in the 1924 annual report. Methods of settlement and results were classified using the same system as before, but many strikes were reinterpreted. The amended Trade Dispute Record sheets were filed by year and industry, along with the original sheets and

⁹ This rule was not followed for very long: in the monthly report for December 1900 a strike involving three bakers was included. *The Labour Gazette*, 1(November 1900), 117; 1(January 1901), 250.

¹⁰ *The Labour Gazette*, 3(March 1903), 709.

¹¹ *The Labour Gazette*, 20(March 1920), 267.

¹² *The Labour Gazette*, 24(February 1924), 109.

¹³ From the notes contained in the Trade Dispute Record sheet files, it appears that almost all of the newspapers held by the department were surveyed.

¹⁴ The total number of workers involved, 1901-29, was increased by 29,262 and the time loss was reduced by 2,944,064 person days.

the notes from the survey of labour newspapers.¹⁵ Researchers interested in compiling local strike statistics should refer to these files as well as to the published record for 1901-29.

Summary tables showing the revised number of strikes, workers involved, and person days lost by major industrial classes and by result were published in *The Labour Gazette* in 1931.¹⁶ A similar industrial table, with minor revisions, more detailed breakdowns, and statistics for 1931-50, was published in 1951.¹⁷ Draft tables showing the annual totals by province, cause, method of settlement, and by revised orders of magnitude of workers involved, duration, and time loss were never published, but are still available in manuscript form.¹⁸ Together, the published and manuscript tables make the revised estimates for 1901-29 completely compatible with those published annually between 1930-50. And because it is so complete, this series remains very useful for researchers interested in national trends over extended periods. Nevertheless, it still has a number of serious deficiencies.

Some of the problems are evident in the three basic units of measurement: the number of strikes, the number of workers involved, and the duration in person days lost.¹⁹ In determining the number of strikes, both definition and coverage are important. Generally, the department adhered to the definitions contained in the Industrial Disputes Investigation Act, 1907 (IDI Act).²⁰ A strike was deemed a "cessation of work by a body of employees acting in combination, or a concerted refusal or a refusal under a common understanding of any number of employees to continue to work for an employer, in consequence of a dispute, done as a means of compelling their employer, or to aid other employees in compelling their employer, to accept terms of employment," and a lockout "a closing of a place of employment, or a suspension of work, or a refusal by an employer to continue

¹⁵ PAC, RG 27, vols. 2332-42, microfilm reels T6212-7 and T6663-6.

¹⁶ *The Labour Gazette*, 31(February 1931), 133-41.

¹⁷ Canada, Department of Labour, *Strikes and Lockouts in Canada During 1950*, supplement to *The Labour Gazette*, 51(April 1951), 8-23.

¹⁸ PAC, RG 27, vols. 2342-3, microfilm reel T6666-7.

¹⁹ Arguments about the reliability of official strike statistics are almost as old and as plentiful as the statistics themselves. For an excellent summary of the principal points of view concerning these three measurements and also the systems used to classify issues and settlement, see P.K. Edwards, *Strikes in the United States, 1881-1974* (Oxford 1981), 284-301.

²⁰ Although the department did not explicitly define the terms "strike" or "lockout" in any of its published reports until 1957, there are frequent references to the IDI Act in the strikes and lockouts files. See, for example, William Edgar's arguments in favour of counting a 1909 strike of survey workers in Prince Rupert, PAC, RG 27, vol. 296, file 3110, microfilm reel T2685, Memo. for Mr. Acland, 19 March 1909. In 1957 a strike was defined as "a stoppage of work by a group of employees to press for a settlement of a demand or a grievance," and a lockout "a suspension of work initiated by an employer or a group of employers as a result of failure to reach agreement in the course of a dispute over terms of employment." Canada, Department of Labour, *Strikes and Lockouts in Canada 1957* (Ottawa 1958), 26.

to employ any number of his employees in consequence of a dispute, done with a view to compelling his employees, or to aid another employer in compelling his employees, to accept terms of employment."²¹ Since strikes were often impossible to distinguish from lockouts, the two terms were either used interchangeably or the phrases "trade dispute," "industrial dispute," or "work stoppage" were used instead.

The definition was open to interpretation in at least three areas. The department interpreted the meaning of "cessation" or "suspension" of work fairly uniformly. Although sitdowns were counted, slowdowns and other actions involving less than a complete stoppage of work were not. Group desertions by workers who did not want to return to work, and plant closures by owners who did not intend to start up again were also excluded. For the most part, each stoppage in a rotating or recurring strike was counted separately, provided it ended before the next one began. Although the department began to bend this rule in 1939, the regularity of the statistics was not seriously affected until the 1950s when rotating strikes gained greater popularity.²² In 1951, for example, eighty-two stoppages at the Sydney steel works, many of which did not overlap, were counted as a single strike. Finally, strikes occurring simultaneously at more than one establishment were combined if they were centrally directed and the issues were the same. Sympathy strikes were counted separately because this last criterion did not apply.

The department also interpreted the phrase "terms of employment" consistently. Grievances did not have to be expressed specifically in terms of a particular employment relationship, but they did have to affect such a relationship. Strikes over union jurisdiction, for example, were included. Some political strikes, such as two work "holidays" held in Nova Scotia in 1943 to protest closures at the Trenton Steel Works, were counted, while others, such as one held in British Columbia in 1918 to protest the shooting of Albert Goodwin, were not. The line between political strikes that were related to employment and those that were not must have been difficult to draw, but since these kinds of strikes were relatively rare in Canada, any mistakes in this area would not have altered the record significantly.

Arbitrary readings of the words "employee" and "employer" had a greater impact. In the revised statistics for 1901-29, for example, strikes by independent teamsters were counted, but in subsequent statistics disputes involving truck driver-owners were omitted. In the late 1940s, the department also considered excluding strikes by most fishers because, like truck driver-owners, they were not considered to be employees.²³ After including

²¹ *Statutes of Canada*, 1907, 6-7 Edward VIII, c. 20.

²² Between 1939 and 1950, fourteen stoppages which did not overlap were counted as five strikes.

²³ The department eventually decided to continue counting fishing strikes. See PAC, RG 27, vol. 2275, microfilm reel T6183.

relief worker strikes in the reports for 1931-3, the department began excluding them because relief agencies were not thought of as employers. Strikes by teachers, nurses, and other "professional" occupations were omitted from both the 1901-29 revisions and subsequent annual reports. Finally, strikes involving part-time workers, mostly women and children, were excluded from the record.

The second element in determining the accuracy of the strike count is the coverage provided by the statistics. Although in this respect the revised totals for 1901-29 are definitely better than the originals, they still underestimate the actual number of strikes. It is difficult to judge the severity of this problem, but in a recent survey of newspapers and other sources, Ian McKay found reference to 411 strikes in the Maritime provinces between 1901 and 1914.²⁴ This is more than twice as many as the department included in the revised statistics. The Maritimes might be an exceptional case because of the relatively poor coverage provided there by labour newspapers, but since McKay's statistics are the only comprehensive independent test available, there is no way of assessing this.

Some of the difference between the official and McKay's totals can be attributed to the department's exclusion of strikes involving less than ten person days lost. Those who favoured this practice argued that since a large number of small strikes were inevitably going to escape the attention of the department anyway, it was better to admit this weakness in the statistics beforehand. Moreover, given that the immediate purpose of the official statistics was to measure the economic impact of strikes, these minor strikes were not really of much consequence. But for more recent analysts, who are often concerned about the social implications of strike activity, these minor, often spontaneous strikes are just as critical as the longer, well-orchestrated ones. Present researchers might also be more interested in obtaining a representative sample of the strikes occurring in a particular occupation, location, or period than in ensuring that they have all of the strikes involving more than some arbitrary number of person days lost. Although the department might have increased the accuracy of the statistics by limiting their coverage, at the same time it distorted the story that they told.

In any event, only a few of the strikes added by McKay were excluded by the department because they were considered to be too small. The rest were either missed entirely or ignored because of insufficient information. While these kinds of omissions probably did not affect the national trends significantly, McKay's statistics show that they do matter at the provincial and regional levels. The logging industry in 1919 and 1920 provides a good example of why they also matter at the level of individual industries. For these two years the department left as many (50) logging strikes off the re-

²⁴ Ian McKay, "Strikes in the Maritimes, 1901-1914," *Acadiensis*, 13(Autumn 1983), 3-46.

vised record as it recorded (47) because it lacked complete information. Again, this might be an exceptional case, since logging strikes are difficult to track down, but even so, our research shows that trends in the number of strikes in nearly every industry were at one time or another affected by the exclusion of minor and incomplete disputes.²⁵ Until further research is completed at the industrial and provincial levels, we can only guess at how much more the trends would be changed by the addition of strikes that were missed altogether.

The main problem in calculating the second major unit of measurement, the number of workers involved, was conflicting information. The department attempted to gauge the total number of workers directly involved in the strike. Whenever possible, the number indirectly involved was also estimated and published as a footnote to the annual list of strikes. Because strike leaders and employers often disputed the number of workers who were active participants, it was usually necessary to consult a number of independent sources before making final estimates. In doing so the department made many mistakes but does not appear to have exhibited any clear bias toward reports submitted by either employers or strikers.

Some bias, however, was evident in enumerating person days lost, the third principal unit of measurement.²⁶ In theory the calculation of person days lost was simple enough: the number of workers involved was multiplied by the duration of the strike in working days. But, in practice, since many strikes were effectively resolved by the full replacement of strikers and since many strikers often returned to work before strikes were officially declared over, applying the definition was difficult. Early in the original record, the department decided to consider strikes terminated once production was no longer affected.²⁷ This policy was also suggested in a report on strike statistics published by the International Labour Office in 1926, the argument being that the calculation of person days lost from the workers' perspective (or "striker days") was impractical.²⁸ But for obvious political reasons, it was even more impractical to ignore completely the viewpoint of workers. This would have meant considering strikes over once a full complement of strikebreakers had been hired, even though the strikers might still be actively pursuing their objectives or state conciliation proceedings might still be underway.

Therefore, in the revised and subsequent statistics, the department would

²⁵ This shows up most clearly in our detailed industrial tables, which for reasons of space we are unable to publish here.

²⁶ For reasons why the term itself might be a loaded one, see H.A. Turner, G. Clack, and G. Roberts, *Labour Relations in the Motor Industry* (London 1967), 54.

²⁷ *The Labour Gazette*, 3(February 1903), 626. This principle was not applied religiously.

²⁸ International Labour Office, *Methods of Compiling Statistics of Industrial Disputes*, Studies and Reports, Series N (Statistics), No. 10 (Geneva 1926), 33-4.

have preferred to compute a hybrid person days lost/striker days statistic. Ideally, when production was resumed through some combination of returning strikers and strikebreakers, strikes would be considered finished only after the vast majority of strikers had stopped actively participating (by removing pickets, cancelling strike benefits, and obtaining work elsewhere). Some strikes would remain on the record long after the employer had considered them over, while others would be removed well before the strikers (despite working elsewhere, etc.) had surrendered. The problem with this approach, however, was that the data needed to calculate such a statistic was rarely available. And since it was generally easier to obtain information about production than about picketing, strike pay, and the employment status of long-time strikers, it was usually the workers' perspective that was sacrificed. When forced to choose between the date that strikers were replaced and the date that strikers officially surrendered, the department most often selected the former.

One final difficulty in estimating person days lost was encountered when some but not all workers returned during a strike or when a strike was settled at some but not all of the establishments involved. In these cases the department multiplied the maximum number of workers involved during each month by the duration in working days. If the normal working day and week were unknown, they were estimated on the basis of an eight to nine hour day and a five-and-a-half to six day week. The department also tried to subtract days when the establishment would not normally be in operation. This explains why the revised person days lost totals for many longshoring and coal mining strikes occurring before 1929 were so much lower than the original estimates.

At the provincial and industrial levels, the person days lost statistics suffer from the same deficiency as the estimates showing the number of strikes: they often fail to incorporate enough of the strikes that actually occurred. In determining whether or not this is the case, tables C and E should be of some assistance. Prepared for volume III of the *Historical Atlas of Canada*, these statistics include estimates for 1581 strikes that came to the attention of the department but were not included in the official statistics for one of the reasons discussed earlier. They also include estimates for 114 of the additional strikes found by McKay.²⁹ Also on table C, interprovincial coal mining strikes have been disaggregated by province in order to reflect activity in Alberta, British Columbia, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia more accurately. Ideally, the same should have been done for all interprovincial strikes, but the necessary data was simply unavailable. Finally, we have corrected a number of mistakes made by the department in tabulating the offi-

²⁹ Our research was completed before McKay had found all 181 of the extra strikes included in his published statistics.

cial statistics. The majority of these errors were made in the statistics covering the period before 1929. A couple of metal mining strikes occurring in 1919 and 1920, for example, were incorrectly added to the coal mining totals. Of the many more mistakes in the unpublished provincial statistics, the most serious occurred in the table for 1911 when a huge B.C. construction strike was incorrectly attributed to Alberta. In a few instances, we were unable to determine why the tabulated statistics did not exactly match the sum of the data on the Trade Dispute Record sheets.

It should be emphasized that tables C and E are not intended to replace the official statistics. Rather, they are meant to provide as large a sample as possible with which to gauge both the accuracy of the official statistics and the actual amount and character of strike activity at the provincial and industrial levels. It is hoped that they will provide a sound starting point for further research.

Tables B and D show our estimates of strike activity in the 1890s. In compiling these statistics, a preliminary list of strikes was prepared after surveying *The Globe* (1891-1900), Ian McKay's notes from the *Acadian Recorder* (1891-1900), labour newspapers, union proceedings, and all relevant secondary literature, including Hamelin, Larocque, and Rouillard's report on strikes in Quebec.³⁰ Local newspapers were then checked in an attempt to round out the data and new strikes encountered during this second search were added to the list.

We have tried to calculate the statistics in a way that would make them comparable with those available for the years after 1901. But since our data base was often smaller than the department's, we have resorted to estimates much more frequently. The person days lost statistics do not accurately account for reductions in the number of workers involved during the course of strikes and, consequently, are probably too high. Because of the sources used, the statistics are clearly biased toward central Canada.³¹ Nevertheless, if considered as a sample, the annual totals for the entire country and the ten year totals by industry and province should be useful.

In portraying the strikes graphically, we have adopted a method used by Shorter and Tilly in their work on strikes in France.³² The graphs are three dimensional and show the average annual "shape" of strikes by province and major industrial classes over a ten year period. The height of each cube

³⁰ Jean Hamelin, Paul Larocque, and Jacques Rouillard, *Répertoire des grèves dans la province de Québec au XIXe siècle* (Montréal 1970).

³¹ The sources were not considered adequate to include estimates for the North West Territories. It also appears from ongoing research that at least twice as many strikes occurred in British Columbia. Most of the strikes missed in the *Atlas* survey, however, tend to emphasize rather than alter the general pattern of strike activity over the decade. Certainly, they extend British Columbia's lead as the most strike prone province of the 1890s.

³² Edward Shorter and Charles Tilly, "The Shape of Strikes in France, 1830-1960," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 13(1971), 60-86.

represents the average size of strikes (that is, the average number of workers involved); the width represents the mean duration; and the depth is a measure of the frequency of strikes (the number of strikes per million non-agricultural employees). In determining size and duration, we have only included strikes for which complete information was available, but for frequency we have included all strikes. (See Tables F and G and Figure A)

The methods used to calculate these dimensions are all, of course, debatable.³³ It might be argued, for example, that the frequency of strikes would be better measured against union membership than non-agricultural work force. To respond that this would be inappropriate for Canada because of the large number of "unorganized" strikes is not to suggest that non-agricultural work force provides a perfect base. It ignores the fact that farm labourers occasionally went on strike and, more important, that the work force statistics themselves are very incomplete. While Marvin McNnis has provided us with standardized estimates by industry and province for the census years 1911-51, we have been forced to assume constant growth between these years.³⁴ This, of course, was not always or even usually the case. The comparative depths of the cubes, therefore, should be assessed cautiously not only because of the problems with the strike statistics but because of the absence of a fully compatible common denominator. Despite these qualifications, however, the cubes are still a useful device for showing a number of longer-term trends that might otherwise be overlooked.

In preparing these statistics we would like to acknowledge the assistance of Peter DeLottinville who began the research, and Ian McKay, who gave us complete access to his notes on strikes in the Maritimes. We would also like to thank our Historical Atlas colleagues for useful comments, statistical help, and design aid.

³³ See Robert N. Stern, "Methodological Issues in Quantitative Strike Analysis," *Industrial Relations*, 17(February 1978), 32-42.

³⁴ We are grateful to Marvin McNnis for allowing us to use his revised work force estimates. Provincial work force estimates for 1891 and 1901 were taken from the 1891 census and 1951 census.