

## Article

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# Strikes as Safety-Valve Institutions

Ran Chermesh

*The present study argues for the usefulness of searching for factors outside of the sub-system of industrial relations as partial causes of strike activity. It treats the industrial relations sub-system as an internal part of the overall social system, in which strikes are regarded as expressions of generalized social tension, i.e., as safety-valve institutions.*

“A strike is defined as a temporary stoppage of work by a group of employees (not necessarily members of a union) to express a grievance or enforce a demand.” (U.S., 1968)<sup>1</sup>

This definition was adopted by the Bureau of Labor and Statistics in the U.S. Similar definitions are used by most statistical agencies in the world. Implicitly they include two basic assumptions: (1) The strike is embedded in the employer-employee relationships; (2) It is a means, used by the employees, to express dissatisfaction and pressure for improvements *within the framework of the work place.*

This article will attempt to demonstrate the limitations of such an approach. It is argued that the above definition of strike and its underlying assumptions may be useful in formulating a working definition for the purposes of data collection; but is inadequate in explaining the phenomenon of strikes, since it fails to incorporate other than work-related factors.

Rather than treat strikes as isolated, labor relations linked patterns of behavior, a system approach is suggested. A system may be defined as “a complex of

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<sup>1</sup> A similar definition is used by the Central Agency of Statistics in Israel. See: Israel (1968: 11)

elements or components directly or indirectly related in a causal network, such that each component is related to at least some others in a more or less stable way within any particular period of time." (Buckley, 1967: 41) This approach may allow us to introduce extra-labor-relations factors as determinants of strike activity.

An important effort towards analyzing labor relations in the framework of a system approach was made by J.T. Dunlop in his book "Industrial Relation Systems." (Dunlop, 1958) Dunlop argues for the fruitfulness of assuming the existence of an Industrial Relations Sub-system, as a distinctive analytical and theoretical subject matter. "The industrial-relations system is not coterminus with the economic system; in some respects the two overlap and in other respects both have different scopes." (Dunlop, 1958: 5) Dunlop is interested in three main relations: Those between (1) the industrial relation sub-system and society; (2) between the industrial relations sub-system and the economic sub-system, and (3) within the industrial relation system itself. (Dunlop, 1958: 7) Dunlop's systems approach will be applied in the present study to the relations between the industrial relations and the political sub-systems. D. Easton, in his article, "A System Analysis of Political Life," (Easton, 1968) as well as in his other writings, presents the relations between the political sub-system and its environment (the other sub-system of a given society and other extra-societal units) in terms of inputs and outputs. One unit's input is the other's output. He divides the inputs into the political sub-system into two main categories: (1) Support; and (2) Demands. These two kinds of inputs are transformed through a conversion process into the political sub-system's output, i.e., authority decisions. Being a study of the political aspects of labor relations this essay will try to show the existence of another set of demands-support, the one in which demands are referred to the employers, who hold positions in the industrial relations sub-system, while the support remains an input into the political sub-system.

Strikes may be conceived as political weapons. In order to be a political tool, utilized in a class conflict context, the organizers of strikes may be expected to be members of opposition parties or fractions. Intra-party disagreements, in general, and splits between trade-unions and the labor party's leadership in particular, may provoke strike activity. The relationships between the government and the General Federation of Labour (Histadrut) leadership in Israel have been continually cooperative. The Zionist ideology served as an integrative mechanism. The interests of the state and its biggest voluntary organization were believed to be identical, at least in the long run. This cooper-

ation was nourished by the fact that coalition parties succeeded in maintaining a constant majority in the Histadrut all along independence years. The united front of government and trade union movement was enforced by the Histadrut majority continually held by the main labor party. Table 1 shows the results for five General Federation of Labour national conventions. The information presented covers all the elections which took place during Israel's years of independence.

TABLE 1

**General Federation of Labour in Israel: Elections Results of Five National Conventions (1949-1969)**

	<i>CONVENTION</i>				
	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI
Year	1949	1955	1959	1965	1969
Government coalition parties	97%	65%	94%	83%	71%
Main party	57%	58%	55%	51%	62%
Number of votes (-000)	139	410	481	655	621

Source: HaHistadrut (1971: 93)

In this context, strikes can hardly be expected to function as premeditated political means.

The corporation of intra-industrial relations sub-system's demands and political support in the same model is derived from Coser's system's approach. (Coser, 1957, 1964) Coser develops the idea that the real determinant of conflict in a given situation is not necessarily rooted in the relationship between interacting partners. Conflict may sometimes reflect tension originating from *outside* the limited range of relations. It may serve as a safety valve institution. "We propose to use the term safety-valve institutions to denote institutions which serve to divert feelings of hostility into substitute objects (or which provide substitute means for such diversion), or which function as channels for cathartic release, and not to use it to denote institutions which provide the carrying out of direct conflict." (Coser, 1964: 164).

In Merton's (Merton, 1963: 51) terms, safety valve institutions may have a latent functions of tension-release.

Speaking of safety valve institutions in the plural and not in the singular implies the adoption of another Mertonian concept, i.e., the concept of functional alternatives. (Merton, 1964: 34) Social tension may originate in many friction or frustration contexts and may be expressed

through many channels, each serving functionally as a safety valve institution.

Adopting the above general definition of safety valve institution, a working definition is to be developed and a set of hypotheses to be tested.

The two following hypotheses focus at two different aspects of the functional approach. The first hypothesis tests the implications of imputing a latent function of tension release to strike activity, while the second hypothesis is derived from the assumption of functional alternatives.

*Working definition* Safety Valve Institutions express tensions originally generated in spheres other than those directly involved in conflict situation. *Assumption 1:* Strikes function as safety valve institutions. They serve to channel tensions originating outside of the industrial relations sub-system of a society.

*Hypothesis 1:* Changes in the tension level outside of the industrial relation sphere will be expressed as changes in the levels of strike activity. A relative increase (decrease) in the level of social tension will lead to a consequent increase (decrease) of strike activity.

*Hypothesis 2:* The observed *pattern*<sup>2</sup> of strike activity is dependent on the *level* of social tension, through the intervening factor of alternative safety valve institutions existing in a given society.

The more exclusive strike activity is as a safety valve institution, the more extreme will be the deviations from a given strike pattern.

This latter strike pattern is conceptually independent of social tension, since it is defined by factors within the industrial relations sub-systems.

## THE STUDY

The testing of the two hypotheses was divided into two stages. In the first one, which is based on Israeli data only, strike activity and social tension were measured independently. After controlling for the secular trend for strike activity, under the assumption that it is

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<sup>2</sup> The term *pattern* is used here following Kerr and Siegel. Their patterns are combinations of two basic ratios—the membership involvement ratio and the strike duration ratio. See KERR, C. (1954).

predominately determined by intra-industrial relations sub-system factors, the correlation between strike activity and social tension was computed. This correlation coefficient is regarded here as a measure of the co-variation of the two social processes. Strike related issues were excluded from measures of social tension. By so doing, possible spurious relationships between strike activity and social tension was avoided.<sup>3</sup> Three sets of regression equations, based on different time lags were used in order to test the hypothesis of true causal relationship between the above two social phenomena and show its direction.

The second stage is a tentative and incomplete attempt to test hypothesis 2. It is based on data collected in nine countries over the period between 1958 and 1967. An adequate research design for testing this hypothesis should incorporate measures of at least three variables:

1. Availability of safety valve institutions
2. Social tension
3. Strike activity.

The Israeli data bank is the only one which incorporates crude measures of variables 1 and 2 and a detailed one for 3. For the other countries only strike activity measures were available.

#### STAGE 1: STRIKES AND NEWSPAPER HEADLINES

Two sets of data were collected independently for the years 1960-1962 in Israel:<sup>4</sup>

1. The number of workers going on strikes in a given month.
2. Topics, by months, of the editorials published in Israel's most popular evening newspaper — Ma'ariv.

<sup>3</sup> None of the issues included in the analysis had a face appearance of a dispute between the Government and the Histadrut.

<sup>4</sup> The period of three years covered by this study, is as typical and as a typical as any other possible time sample. Politically, three main events overshadow public discussions: general elections, devaluation of the Israeli Lira (IL) and «The Affair». The first two issues occur almost regularly more than once in each decade, the first de-jure and the other de-facto. The third issue is unique in its causes and results, but is not a labour relations issue.

Strike statistics show an almost perfect secular trend of increase in the years 1957-1965, three of which precede the time period under study, and the other three follow it. The number of workers who took part in strikes or lockouts which lasted a day or longer were: 1957-3, 692; 1958-6, 050; 1959-5, 873; 1960-10, 006; 1961-21, 444; 1962-25, 816; 1963-62, 086; 1964-37, 723; 1965-78, 844, Source: HAMACHON (1971).

### Strike Activity Analysis

A linear regression line was computed for the number of workers engaged in strikes (WES) over a period of time. The regression line was found to be  $WES' = 793.79 + 74.32t$  where  $WES'$  is the expected number of workers engaged in strikes, and  $t$  is a given month in the above period of time. Assuming that the trend of strike activity is determined mostly by intra-industrial relation factors, and that the linear regression line is a good approximation of these factors,<sup>5</sup> a new set of data was figured out by subtracting the observed figure of WES in a given month from the expected one:

$$DFT_t = WES_t - WES'_t$$

where  $DFT_t$  is the deviation from the trend for the month  $t$  and  $WES_t$  is the observed number of workers engaged in strikes for month  $t$ . See Table 2.

### Social Tension Measure

The editorial headlines of the newspaper *Ma'ariv* were classified by their main topics.<sup>6</sup> The modal topic or each month was regarded as the single most popular issue of that month. Each of these topics was coded as expressing either solidarity, conflict or neutrality toward the institutional stability of the Israeli society. In cases of ambivalence, the editorials and not only their headlines, were read and coded according to their contents.

What are the topics which were defined as indicating a certain degree of social tension? It is felt that for the purposes of the present essay, the discussion of the coding of Israeli-specific issues is not vital. In general, social tension topics led to or seemed to have the potential to lead to government crises. For example, they criticized the government for not having a clear economic policy or reliable leadership.

Clean cut policy, supported by the public was regarded as a solidaristic topic.

<sup>5</sup> The linearity assumption is adopted mainly because of expediency reasons. Britt and Galle's statement may apply perfectly to our case: «(learly, there is no established, integrated theory of union-management conflict from which these relationships could be deducted». The linear regression model is adopted here, implying a preference for simple models when no theoretical reasons lead to more complicated ones. See BRITT, D. and GALLE, O. R. (1972: 52).

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed report of the coding procedure see: R. CHERMESH (1970).

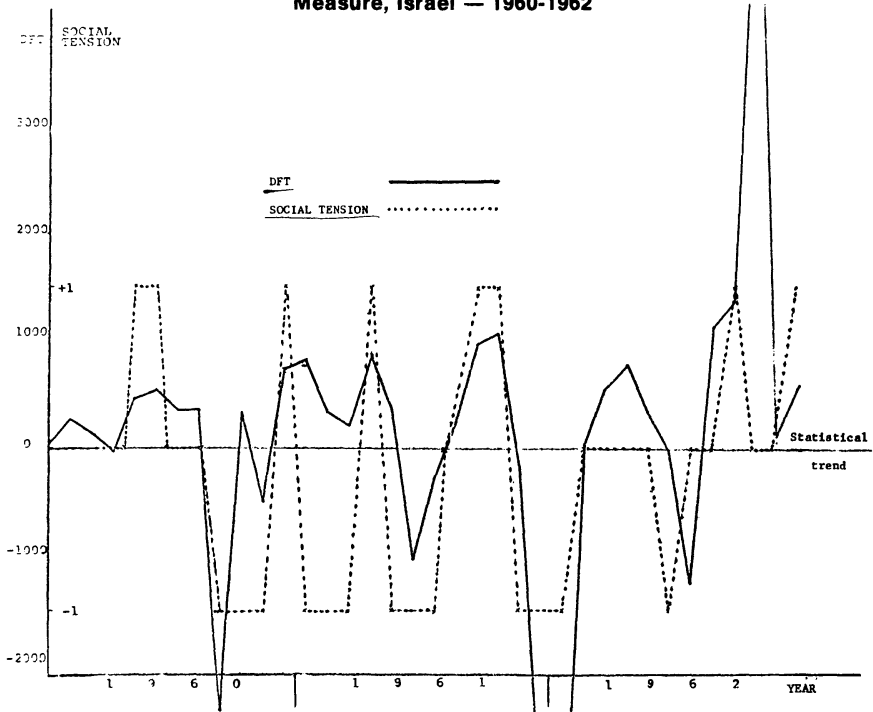
**TABLE 2**  
**Deviation from the Trend (DFT) of the Number of Workers Engaged in Strikes in Israel in (1960-1962) Per Month**

Month Year	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII
1960	88.1	587.4	327.7	-9.0	971.3	1097.7	747.0	782.3	-4868.4	672.9	-1009.7	1532.6
1961	1663.9	683.2	440.5	1772.8	754.2	-2045.5	-587.2	508.1	1984.4	2175.8	-288.9	-6201.6
1962	-10139.3	32.0	1115.4	1587.7	703.0	-28.7	-2495.4	2229.0	2799.3	11879.6	213.9	1204.2



CHART 1

**Deviation from the Trend of the Number of Workers  
Involved in Strikes (DFT) and Social Tension  
Measure, Israël — 1960-1962**



### Findings

Chart 1 shows the relationships between the social tension measure and the deviation from the trend of the number of workers involved in strikes (DFT).

As we can see strikes are more frequent in times of extra-industrial stress. The correlation between DFT and the social tension measure\* is .50 (Pearson product-moment correlation-r), which means that 25% of the variance in the deviations from strike trend is explained by the measure of social tension.

\*\* The social tension measure was coded as follows:

- 1 low tension, solidaristic issues
- 0 no clear public issues or neutral issues
- + 1 high tension, conflict issues

The correlation between strike activity may be interpreted in one of three ways:

- (1) A deviation from the expected level of strike activity raises the level of social tension.
- (2) Strike activity and social tension, as measured by the contents of editorial headlines, expresses the same type of social phenomenon, i.e., social tension.
- (3) Social tensions, as measured by the editorial, finds its relief in deviations from the patterns of strike activity.

Interpretation (1) may be deduced from these logical statements:

- a. Strikes interfere with routine.
- b. Strikes threaten to curtail the supply of services.
- c. Each interference with routine or threatening of services curtailment increases tension.

Interpretation (2) is self-evident. Its theoretical implication is the redundancy of the safety valve institutions concept for explaining changes in strike activity.

Interpretation (3) follows out of our model.

Testing the three alternative interpretations was done using regression analysis.

If interpretation (1) is the correct one, then *past* deviations from trend (DFT) should be better predictors of the current social tension level than current DFT.

If interpretation (3) is the better one, then *past social tension* should be better predictors of the current DFT than current social tension.

If neither interpretation (1) nor interpretation (3) predict better than the simple correlation of DFT and social tension, then interpretation (2) is to be preferred.

**TABLE 3**

**Multiple Correlation (R), R<sup>2</sup>, F Coefficients and Significance Levels for Testing the Direction of Causality Between Strikes and Social Tension**

<i>Interpretation</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>R<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Significance</i>
(1) Strikes → Social tension	.57	.33	3.538	< .05
(2) Strikes = Social tension	.50	.25	10.775	> .01
(3) Social tension → Strikes	.79	.62	10.775	> .01

Table 3 shows the results of testing the three alternative interpretations. For the purpose of testing interpretation (1) four sets of DFT series were defined as the independent variables. These series represented DFT preceding social tension by 1,2,3, and 4 weeks.<sup>7</sup> The dependent variable was social tension. This proved to be non-significant, though it explained an extra 8% of the variance, as compared with interpretation (2).

For testing interpretation (3), 4 sets of social tension scores were computed having a time lag of 1, 2, 3 and 4 weeks.<sup>8</sup> This interpretation explained 62% of the variance, i.e., 37% more than interpretation (2). Explaining the largest proportion of the variance, and being significant in the 1% level, makes the hypothesis that strikes in Israel were safety valve institutions the best supported interpretation.<sup>9</sup>

#### STAGE 2: STABILITY OF STRIKE PATTERNS AND STRIKES AS SAFETY VALVE INSTITUTIONS

The more isolated is an institutional sphere the more can we expect its pattern to be stable. This assumption doesn't contradict the open system approach which says that "open systems also share the characteristics of negative entropy... The law of negative entropy states that systems survive and maintain their characteristic internal order only so long as they import from the environment more energy than they expend in the process of transformation and exportation." (Katz and Kahn, 1966: 2)

This latter approach deals more with consequences of the long run and with transactions of mutual interest. We are dealing with the stability of patterns in the short run and with the implications of tensions in the environment upon the stability of a pattern in a system. We may define the short run of an industrial relations sub-system as the period in which only minor changes occur in the economic sub-system, in its technological potential, and in the internal organization of its power relations.

A period of 10 years may be regarded as a relatively "short run" for the industrial sub-system. No major structural changes have occur-

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<sup>7</sup> The time-lag series were reproduced assuming an even distribution of DFT in each month.

<sup>8</sup> The time-lag series were reproduced assuming an even distribution of social tension in each month.

<sup>9</sup> For objections to the use of cross-lagged regression see PELZ (1964) and BOHRNSTEDT (1969).

red between 1958 and 1967 in any of the 9 countries covered by our study. In the absence of such radical intra-sub-system changes, we may expect changes in the strike patterns to be incremental and to follow quite a simple trend. It may be expected that unstable strike activity patterns will exist in countries where the strike is an important safety valve institution, while the change in the patterns will be less pronounced and ordered in societies which have many other alternative safety valve institutions.

Two main variables are assumed to determine the stability of strike patterns:

1. The level of social tension.
2. The availability of alternative safety valve institutions. The higher the social tension and the fewer the alternative channels for cathartic release of tension, the less can strike patterns be expected to be stable.

Measuring the stability of a pattern requires both measuring the pattern itself and its level of stability.

Measuring the pattern may be pursued by undimensional techniques (number of days lost per year per salaried worker, percent of the salaried workers who took part in strikes in a given year, etc.), or by multidimensional techniques. (Knowles, 1952; Knowles, 1954; Rimlinge, 1959; Ross, 1960; Ross, 1951; Spielman, 1944; Britt, 1972). A bi-dimensional approach is adopted here. The number of working days lost per year per 1,000 salaried workers and the number of workers involved in strikes per 1,000 salaried workers were chosen as measures of a pattern. A unified Measure of Strike Activity (MSA) was computed using the following formula:

$$MSA_i = \sqrt{NSSW_i^2 + NDLW_i^2}$$

where  $MSA_i$  is the level of strike activity for country  $i$ ,  $NSSW_i$  is the number of workers involved in strikes per 1,000 salaried workers and  $NDLW_i$  — the number of days lost in strikes per 1,000 salaried workers.

MSA is a distance metric. It serves as a measure of strike patterns, incorporating simultaneously the intensity (NDLW) and the spread (NSSW) of strike activity.

MSA may be used for measuring the level of strike activity. (See Table 5, col. 4). For the years 1958-1967, Italy's average score is the highest (353), while West Germany's is the lowest (20). The ten countries may be divided conveniently into 4 groups:

TABLE 4

## Combined Measure of Strike Activity (MSA) by Country and Year

Country	Year	1958	1959	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
Australia		171.00	138.12	290.19	202.05	185.94	215.13	306.93	261.95	218.69	219.10
Canada		152.95	34.78	252.20	135.77	121.67	225.28	111.42	5.46	435.58	223.32
France		115.64	82.15	121.87	51.00	55.70	261.81	42.91	127.21	96.82	135.68
G. Britain		25.60	106.73	14.33	17.64	195.25	76.30	50.29	24.46	52.76	33.12
Israel		59.70	155.32	115.59	33.11	233.75	79.31	47.63	134.39	75.24	116.41
Italy		578.24	114.53	431.46	80.82	1110.62	132.61	210.48	331.83	339.13	199.96
Japan		101.63	90.10	33.58	80.98	35.56	75.44	63.32	19.74	90.59	125.77
Sweden		10.79	7.37	9.82	16.32	15.22	7.99	4.77	15.66	104.86	16.98
U. S.		16.24	791.50	120.95	172.05	142.76	190.65	88.24	111.24	90.19	137.01
W. Germany		21.07	15.26	16.37	15.28	3.92	71.22	17.58	16.13	17.27	1.68

1. Low strike activity: West Germany, Sweden.
2. Medium-low strike activity: Great Britain, Japan, France and Israel.
3. Medium-high strike activity: Australia, United States, and Canada.
4. High strike activity: Italy.

The focus of this study, though, is not the level of strike activity per se. It is the stability of strike patterns which is our main point of interest. As a measure of the pattern stability a Pearson correlation coefficient was computed between MSA and time-pass. We may expect this Correlation to be higher in those countries that fulfill either or both conditions, i. e., where the level of social tension is low and/or many alternative safety-valve institutions are available. In these countries the change in strike patterns would not be abrupt, and the deviations from the time trend should not be high. On the other hand, strike

TABLE 5

## Mean MSA, correlation coefficients and coefficients of determination for MSA with time by country

Country	$\bar{MSA}_t$	$r^2_{MSA_t}$	$\bar{MSA}$
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Sweden	-.447	.28	21
Australia	.419	.18	221
U. S.	-.342	.12	186
Italy	-.173	.03	353
France	.143	.02	86
Canada	.108	.01	170
Great Britain	-.092	.01	60
West Germany	-.083	.01	20
Japan	.077	.01	72
Israel	-.020	.00	105

activity may behave as a barometer of social tension in those societies where few alternative release channels are available. Table 5 shows the figures for the ten countries. Nations differ in their level of social tension and the availability of release channels. More information is needed in order to distinguish between the two factors which may explain the higher correlations in Sweden, Australia, and the U. S. It can, however, be said quite safely that in these countries a relatively high percentage of the strike pattern variance may be explained in terms of intra-industrial relation system's factors. It should be emphasised that this conclusion is independent of the *level* of strike activity. Sweden\* has one of the lowest scores in strike activity, while Australia and the U. S. exhibit almost the highest\*\*. For the other countries, the correlation coefficients between MSA and time are very low, and they explain no more than 2% of the variance. The industrial systems of these countries may be regarded as tied intensively into their political subsystems. Strike patterns in Israel, Japan, West Germany, Great Britain, Canada, France, and Italy are most probably indicative of industrial unrest serving as safety-valve institutions.

Israel has the lowest correlation coefficient ( $r = .02$ ). The results of the first stage of the study showed a relatively high correlation ( $r = .50$ ) between social tension and deviations from strike patterns. The conclusions of the first stage emphasized the importance of social tension in explaining instability of strike patterns in Israel.

#### EXPLANATION

Which normative and institutional factors in the Israeli society may yield findings like the above?

1. *Israel has a very stable political establishment.* For the 25 years of independence, and for at least 25 years before then, the Jewish community has has the same political leadership. Any direct political activity has been ineffective in expressing social dissent. Such political establishment stability calls for the need for safety valve institutions.

\*  $r_{NSA,t}$  approaches 0 when there is no change in the level of strike activity over time. For the purpose of this paper no change is a case of perfect stability. Sweden is the only example which approaches this kind of stability. Its strike pattern, though, is of some tranquil years, followed by one year of high to moderate strike activity. I would like to thank Professor P. Bonacich for indicating this limitation of my procedure.

\*\* Kendall's Tau rank order correlation between  $r_{MSA,t}$  and  $\bar{x}_{MSA}$  is  $-.244$ .  $Z(\text{Tau} = -.224, n = 10) = .984$ , which is not significant.

2. *Israel is a country under constant siege.* Military issues are regarded as taboos. Any use of defense issues for the expression of internal conflict is normatively condemned.
3. *The Israeli society emphasized the ideal of ingathering.* Any ethnic conflict is regarded as illegitimate.
4. *Israel legitimized its economic dependency upon the Jews in the Diaspora.* The relationships between the State of Israel and the Jews all over the world are believed to be based upon mutual interest. Israel supplies the Jews with pride of being a Jew and with a feeling of security, while the Jews abroad have the obligation to support Israel economically. Such values relieve the average Israeli from the need for an intensive pursuit of collective self-sufficiency.

The first characteristic of the Israeli society, its political stability, is meaningful in two ways:

1. The level of social tension in Israel seems to be relatively low. Nonrealistic conflict (Coser, 1956: 48-55) cannot keep a political subsystem forever from changing. The changes which took place in the Israeli society before and after its independence are very radical. The political establishment could not have withstood a constant high social pressure.
2. Such a society may be expected to use intensively safety valve institutions. «The need for safety-valve institutions increases with the rigidity of social structure, i. e., with the degree to which it disallows direct expression of antagonistic claims.» (Coser, 1956: 156)

The second and the third characteristics of the Israeli society — the taboo on using military adventures for internal political purposes, and the disapproval of ethnic conflict — point to a selection process of safety valve institutions. Potential channels are defined as illegitimate. Their use becomes unpopular.

The fourth characteristic, on the other hand, sheds some light on the question why strikes are a primary safety valve institution in Israel. Realistic conflicts «arise from frustrations of specific demands within a relationship and from estimates of gains of the participants» (Coser, 1956: 156). A conflict situation may or may not be a zero sum game. Industrial strikes are zero sum games as long as the burden is not transferred to the public. Form and Miller, (1960) Chamberlain and Schilling (1954) and others showed that no easy transfer of burden can be assumed. The social system of the industrial setting includes the general public and its agents. As long as the public functions as

counterbalancing power, strikes cannot be an effective safety valve institution. In a social setting where no such counterbalance exists, i. e., where one side can win without forcing the other to lose, strike could be employed as a popular safety valve institution. Any strike in local products' prices is a defeat of the economic independence goal. It threatens the competitory position of the Israeli product in the world markets. Normatively this is not regarded as a disloyal act. Economic survival is to be reached through the efforts of the Jewish nation all around the world, and not just be the Israelis themselves. Satisfying social tension pressure requires a price. An economic price is the least worst solution according to this approach. This attitude seemed to have been true for Israel of the early 1960's.

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## La grève : une soupe de sécurité

On étudie généralement les grèves en tant que phénomènes se rattachant au système des relations industrielles. N'y aurait-il pas lieu de se demander si, jusqu'à un certain point, les grèves ne seraient pas l'expression d'un état de tension sociale plus généralisé et si elles n'agiraient pas à la manière d'une soupe de sécurité.

On définit généralement la grève comme un arrêt temporaire du travail par un groupe d'employés afin d'exprimer leurs griefs et de faire valoir leurs revendications. Ainsi considérée, la grève fait partie du système des relations de travail. Mais cette définition, fort valable en matière de statistiques, suffit-elle à expliquer ce phénomène à l'intérieur de la société?

L'étude porte sur l'analyse des statistiques relatives aux grèves dans dix pays sur une période de dix ans: Australie, Canada, France, Grande-Bretagne, Israël, Italie, Japon, Suède, États-Unis sont identifiés comme des sociétés dans lesquelles l'agitation ouvrière est principalement due à des facteurs reliés au système des relations de travail

lui-même. En d'autres pays, cependant, les conflits de travail ont tendance à être dépendants de facteurs externes. La tension sociale peut exercer une importance déterminante dans la fluctuation des grèves dans ce deuxième groupe.

La tension sociale peut provenir de frictions ou de frustrations et s'extérioriser de plusieurs façons. Le concept de soupape de sécurité institutionnel exprime des tensions dans des sphères autres que celles du conflit proprement dit, la grève se présentant comme une soupape de sécurité pour relâcher des tensions qui se font sentir à l'extérieur du système des relations du travail.

Selon une première hypothèse, des modifications dans le niveau de la tension hors des relations de travail se manifestent par des changements dans le nombre et l'importance des grèves. Une augmentation ou une diminution du niveau de tension sociale donnera lieu conséquemment à une augmentation ou à une diminution des grèves. En deuxième hypothèse, la grève est dépendante du niveau de tension sociale compte tenu des soupapes de sécurité qui existent dans une société donnée.

La vérification de ces deux hypothèses s'est faite en deux étapes. Dans la première, qui se fonde uniquement sur les statistiques d'Israël, l'action de grève et la tension sociale furent mesurées indépendamment l'une de l'autre. La deuxième étape a consisté en une tentative pour vérifier la deuxième hypothèse fondée sur les données des neuf autres pays entre 1958 et 1967 au moyen de trois variables: la présence d'institutions agissant comme soupapes de sécurité, le degré de tension sociale et l'action de grève.

Pour Israël, on a fait l'analyse de l'activité de grève, puis on s'est basé sur les thèmes des éditoriaux d'un journal populaire pour mesurer le degré de tension sociale, en retenant, en particulier, les critiques contre le gouvernement.

Par cette analyse, on a découvert que les grèves deviennent plus fréquentes dans un climat de tension sociale d'où l'on peut s'attendre à ce que le nombre des grèves soit plus grand là où la grève constitue une soupape de sécurité importante alors qu'il en sera autrement dans les sociétés où il existe d'autres institutions aptes à relâcher la tension sociale.

Le résultat des recherches s'explique, pour Israël, par les caractéristiques suivantes: un niveau de tension sociale relativement bas, le non recours à l'appareil militaire pour le règlement des conflits politiques internes, l'existence de soupapes de sécurité efficaces et, parmi celles-ci, le recours à la grève qui paraît jouer un rôle majeur.