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Effects of Strike Participation on the Political Consciousness of Canadian Postal Workers

TOM LANGFORD

Marxists have long argued that major strikes produce an explosion of workers' class consciousness. This article discusses some weaknesses of the explosion-of-consciousness thesis, and tests research hypotheses using data from a case study of the 1987 strike by the Hamilton local of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers. A major finding is that an increase in a postal worker's negative attitudes toward out-groups did not necessarily go hand in hand with an increase in that striker's positive identifications with in-groups such as fellow workers, the local union and the labour movement. This supports treating the in-group and out-group dimensions of class consciousness as distinct. A second finding supports the hypothesis that an explosion of in-group consciousness due to inter-group conflict is more likely to occur among workers who are already identified with the in-group.

According to writings by Marxists, major strike struggles produce an explosion of workers' class consciousness. A strike disrupts everyday routines: it thrusts workers into intense inter-group conflict against management, owner(s) and different branches of the state; and it forces close cooperation among strikers, thus building camaraderie and relations of solidarity. Marxists posit that workers' consciousness will be transformed in a

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number of ways during a strike struggle. Specifically, workers will learn about the class character of economic and political relations; they will experience the exhilaration of collectively standing up for their rights and dignity; their sense of positive in-group identification will increase; and, during the course of the struggle, they will develop a new collectivist rationality which contrasts sharply with the individualist rationality learned as the norm in capitalist society.¹

Given that Marxist writings on the explosion of strikers' class consciousness have existed for over a century, and given that the notion of consciousness change through collective action is a central tenet of many theories of radical social change, we might expect to find numerous empirical studies on the topic. However, as John Kelly recently noted, "It is an extraordinary fact that the amount of systematic and reliable evidence on the effects of strike involvement is almost nil" (1988:116). What accounts for the dearth of research? Those interested in dismissing the historical trajectory projected by Marx have been far too willing to offer sweeping appraisals of the explosion-of-consciousness thesis based upon very sketchy evidence (e.g., Mann 1973:45-54; Smith 1978). And those sympathetic to Marxism have been far too willing to celebrate any sign of class consciousness which emerges during strike struggles as confirmation of working-class radicalism (e.g., Blackburn 1967; Fantasia 1988). A new approach is called for — one that uses carefully designed research on strike struggles to test the explosion-of-consciousness thesis and, where necessary, develop new theoretical insights into the effects of strike struggles on workers' consciousness.

This suggested new approach requires that many case studies be undertaken, including strikes of different types and strikers with different histories. This article presents one such case study — an examination of the changes in consciousness produced among members of the Hamilton local of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW) as a consequence of their participation in the 1987 inside postal workers' strike. The article proceeds by first outlining the history of the strike and the union local so as to provide a context for interpreting the findings on consciousness change. This is followed by a brief theoretical discussion of some weaknesses in

1. This description of workers' explosion of consciousness is based on a number of sources. Peter Archibald has systematically identified the psychological postulates underlying Marx's views of intergroup relations (1989: chapters 6 and 7). Lenin's famous discussion of strikes as a "school of war" ([1899]1960) and Luxemburg's writings on strikes ([1900]1970; [1906]1970) are invaluable. Michael Mann has outlined the Marxist theory of the explosion of consciousness as he constructed it from different sources (1973: 46-47). A contemporary work which employs an explosion-of-consciousness framework is Rick Fantasia's *Cultures of Solidarity* (1988).

the explosion-of-consciousness thesis and the presentation of research hypotheses derived from that discussion. The next two sections outline the study's methods and analyze the research results. The conclusion considers the theoretical implications of the case study.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Brief History of the 1987 Strike of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers

In 1987, CUPW represented over 20,000 inside postal workers (mail handlers, sorters and machine operators, and postal clerks) employed by Canada Post, a crown corporation which reports directly to a cabinet minister in the federal government. The collective agreement between Canada Post Corporation and CUPW expired on September 30, 1986. Although negotiations for a new contract had begun in the summer of 1986, the unsuccessful process of negotiation and government-run conciliation extended to September 22, 1987. CUPW began rotating walkouts on September 30. The strike became nation-wide on October 9, the day after back-to-work legislation was introduced in the federal parliament. The union complied with the back-to-work legislation and ended the strike on October 17. The legal penalties for defying the legislation included *minimum* fines of \$500 per day for union members and \$10,000 per day for union officials, as well as a five-year ban on union officials holding a job with Canada Post or an office in CUPW. An extended discussion of the legislation and the limitations of the union leadership's legalistic response to it can be found in M.D. Wright (1989).

The strike was a defensive action by the union. CUPW struggled to maintain job security clauses secured in previous collective agreements, to limit the employer's rights to use part-time and temporary workers, and to stop Canada Post from privatizing the wicket service jobs held by 4,200 workers across the country.

The impetus for Canada Post's demands for contract rollbacks and its refusal to consider alternatives to privatization of wicket services came from the election of Brian Mulroney and the Progressive Conservative (PC) Party in September, 1984. After taking power, the Mulroney cabinet moved to impose its political priorities on Canada Post. This resulted in the resignation of Canada Post President Michael Warren in August, 1985; the exclusion of the Canada Post Board of Directors from any role in corporate planning (Stewart-Patterson 1987:272); and the adoption, in late 1986, of a five-year business plan which instructed the corporation to begin a process that would see most retail postal services in both rural and urban areas

closed or contracted out to the private sector. This is the context for the fruitless negotiations between CUPW and Canada Post which ran from August, 1986 until the summer of 1987. It also explains why Canada Post was willing to spend an estimated \$60 million in security, transportation and wage costs to employ strikebreakers during the CUPW strike (*Toronto Globe & Mail*, February 19, 1988:A9).

The employment of strikebreakers provoked picket-line clashes across Canada. For instance, in Hamilton, Ontario, the national office of CUPW called inside postal workers out on strike at about 1 a.m. on October 1. The first confrontation between police and strikers occurred at 4 A.M. that morning. Using a level of force which severely bruised some strikers, about a dozen police officers attacked the CUPW picket line in order to allow mail transport trucks to unload at the main branch of the Hamilton Post Office. Such confrontations were a regular feature of the strike in Hamilton. An extended description of one such confrontation is supplied in the next section in order to provide some context for understanding changes in workers' political consciousness.

The legislation which ended the strike required a compulsory mediation-arbitration process. A new contract for the period from October 1, 1986 to July 31, 1989 was imposed on July 6, 1988. It preserved workers' job security (in the event of cutbacks or closures, workers were guaranteed a job assignment within a 40-kilometre radius of the old location) but rolled back restrictions on the use of part-time employees and included no new impediments to the Corporation's privatization plans.

The Struggle on the Picket Line

It was early evening on October 14, 1987. A convoy of three buses carrying strikebreakers had just pulled into the loading area behind the Main Post Office in downtown Hamilton. Police had halted the buses just before they reached the Post Office so that union representatives could climb aboard and talk briefly to the scabs. In exchange, striking members of the Canadian Union of Postal Workers had let the buses cross their picket line with a minimum of resistance — lots of yelling, an egg or two splattered against a window, and a little banging on the buses as they went by. The old school buses contained 100 strikebreakers recruited by Canada Post to process mail during the strike. After these people hurried into the Post Office through a loading dock door, about thirty other strikebreakers hustled out of the building onto the buses, having just completed a twelve-hour shift. As soon as the scabs were on board, the buses moved off Post Office property via a side entrance. As they did, battle lines were reforming at the main entrance.

Fifty picketers, mostly workers who handled and processed mail on the afternoon shift, linked arms and slowly circled, blocking the entrance to the loading docks. The strikers' spirits were buoyant and determined. A small mail van, which had tried to sneak across the picket line behind the buses, had just been turned away. At 9:30 the previous evening many of the same people had been on the line when a transport truck had been turned back — the first such success at the Main Post Office during the strike. Now a convoy of tractor trailers carrying mail from other cities was scheduled to arrive. Confronting the strikers, however, was an intimidating sight. Thirty-five uniformed police stood shoulder to shoulder on the street side of the picket line, waiting for the order to charge the strikers' line.

The tail end of the evening rush hour was still crawling by when the transport trucks arrived. The police quickly moved on the strikers. They split the line in the centre and drove picketers back and towards either side. When picketers tried to break free and circle around to the front of the skirmish they were grabbed and thrown back. To one observer, who had witnessed a similar assault earlier in the strike, at a distance of 30 metres it looked like the police were just smoothly rolling up a snowball. Poetic images were, however, the luxury of those who kept their distance. In the centre of the melee picketers had been smashed into each other, stepped on, and had to fight to keep their balance. Picketers were shoved or thrown against the walls bordering the driveway. Some fell. A few strikers suffered bruises or sprains in the confrontation. In addition, a few of the police officers made a special effort to grab women by the breasts when pushing them aside. A union member reported that in a picket line skirmish earlier in the strike a cop had grabbed her by the shirt close to her breast by putting his hand underneath the coat she was wearing. She immediately complained about his action. His response was to shove his hand even higher. The sexual assaults on women strikers therefore did not seem to be accidental.

With the help of the thirty-five police officers the three transports were successful in cracking the strikers' line. After they left, a group of trucks used to shuttle mail within Hamilton were marshalled to cross the picket line. Using a tactic which postal workers in nearby London, Ontario had effectively employed the previous day, the picketers decided to sit down when the police moved on them a second time. After a brief moment of hesitation, the police started dragging picketers out of the way. Some of the women strikers were handled very roughly, and one striker narrowly missed being struck by a truck tire while she lay on the ground, dazed after having been dragged roughly by the police.

The Hamilton Local of CUPW

At the time of the 1987 strike there were about 350 CUPW members in Hamilton. According to union records, 58% of the union members were women. In terms of years of service, 21% of the membership had been hired since the last strike in 1981, 60% had started to work for Canada Post between January 1970 and June 1981, and the remaining 19% had started employment in the 1950s or 1960s. These workers were distributed between two main sorting depots (each running three shifts) and a number of postal substations and branch post offices. This meant that workplace relations often had a small-shop character. Furthermore, management in Hamilton in the pre-1987 period actively tried to maintain a spirit of cooperation with workers. These factors meant that approximately 100 of the 350 employees in the pre-strike period were conciliatory in orientation. In this circle of workers, the Hamilton Post Office was regarded as an oasis in a desert of bad Canada Post workplaces. As late as 1986 a number of workers demonstrated their allegiance to the Hamilton Post Office by wearing a button which stated "We're not the biggest, but we're the best".

However, there was also a strong history of collective struggle in the Hamilton local. Hamilton postal workers had been in the forefront of the pathbreaking 1965 postal strike, and had a record of independent militancy, as illustrated by the extra strike days logged during the summer of 1970 "to deal with local problems" (Davidson and Deverell 1978:73,117). Some of the leaders of the Hamilton local from the 1960s were still active in 1987, and rank-and-file members widely regarded their primary local union leaders to be very bright and trustworthy.

Therefore, inside postal workers did not enter the 1987 strike as a uniform group. Only about 50 of the 350 union members were union activists (those who were presently serving or had served in the past on the Hamilton local's executive or as a steward). And a large percentage of the workforce were relatively new employees and/or had a history of conciliatory attitudes towards management.

THEORETICAL DISCUSSION AND HYPOTHESES

The explosion of consciousness has been presented in some Marxist writing as a general process, applying to all major strike struggles. Critics (including both those sympathetic and unsympathetic to Marxism) have replied that whether an explosion of consciousness occurs, or at least the extent to which consciousness explodes, is conditional upon the political-economic context of the strike, the development and outcome of the strike, and the characteristics of the workers on strike.

In "On Strikes" Lenin argued that a strike demonstrates to workers that all branches of the state, including the police, military, factory inspectors and legal system, are on the side of the capitalist class ([1899]1960:316–317). The liberal democratic states found in present-day advanced capitalist countries, however, are of a much different character than the Tsarist state referred to by Lenin in 1899, or the strong German state which served as the reference point for many other Marxists at the same time. Kelly has thus proposed the following modification to the explosion-of-consciousness thesis: "With the development of parliamentary democracy and universal suffrage, State intervention in disputes is likely to call into question the authority of the particular government in parliament, rather than the *whole* of the State apparatus, and to lead to calls for a change of government rather than the overthrow of the State" (1988:39). [Hypothesis 1]

A second contextual factor is whether the strike is a relatively isolated struggle, enjoys widespread community support or is a part of a wave of collective protest. Luxemburg argued that while class consciousness might develop to some extent in isolated struggles, it could undergo a major explosion only during a period characterized by political-economic crisis and widespread mass action. Only at such times could a provident pater familias be transformed into a revolutionary romanticist ([1906]1970:189).² Smith has proposed a different argument on the same theme. In his view, the context of most strikes may produce the reverse of an explosion of consciousness, at least insofar as in-group identification goes. Specifically, he hypothesized that when workers engaged in a confrontational strike do not receive support from other unions and the community, they are likely to become embittered and to experience a reduction in their sense of working-class identity (1978:460). [Hypothesis 2]

Whether the explosion-of-consciousness thesis applies equally to victorious and defeated strikes is perhaps the most contentious issue in the literature. Marx and Engels maintained that the development of working class consciousness and organization proceeded relentlessly despite the fact that most workers' struggles were unsuccessful ([1848]1967:90). Archibald has highlighted this contention as "a major problem with Marx's analysis" since unsuccessful attempts by workers to change their situation should increase their sense of powerlessness and make it less likely that they will engage in subsequent collective action. Furthermore, failure will decrease workers' perceived in-group cohesion unless "they have already committed themselves

2. Data from a case study of an isolated strike struggle are not sufficient to test this hypothesis. However, Kelly employed British data on consciousness change during strike waves and found considerable support for Luxemburg's idea (1988: chapter 5). His research needs to be extended to other countries.

to the group” or “the circumstances leading to failure are either obviously external or ambiguous” (p. 282).³

Hartley, Kelly and Nicholson have advanced a complementary argument. In their view, workers will experience less change in political consciousness after a defeated strike than a victorious strike [Hypothesis 3a], and will be less likely to engage in militant behaviour after a defeated strike (1983:157–158). [Hypothesis 3b] These outcomes happen because participation in a defeated strike both enhances workers’ awareness of the power relations in society and strengthens their sense of powerlessness. Research on an autoworkers’ wildcat strike that was defeated supports this notion (Wells 1986:327–328).

It has also been argued that characteristics of individuals should affect an explosion of consciousness. One obvious individual-level factor is the degree to which workers participate in the strike. To the extent that positive in-group identification and out-group hostility are a simple function of the social and psychological interdependence produced by group involvement, then the change in workers’ consciousness should vary directly with the degree of strike participation. [Hypothesis 4] This hypothesis has some research support (Lane and Roberts 1971:104–106) and is in line with Rosa Luxemburg’s conviction that participation in collective struggle is the foundation for the development of class consciousness (Geras 1976:119–120; Luxemburg [1900]1970:88 and [1906]1970:172).

A second individual-level factor which may affect the extent of consciousness change is struggle experience. One suggestion is that “amongst hardened veterans of industrial action, ... the effects of individual strikes may be less because their sense of class identity and consciousness of conflict or antagonism towards the employer has already been formed and reproduced through countless incidents and experiences” (Kelly 1988:118). [Hypothesis 5] It should be noted that the general logic of this hypothesis can also be applied to analyses at the sectoral/union level. For instance, Jackson hypothesized that workers “in areas of industry that have no history of militancy and where trade unionism has been weakest,” will experience more change in political attitudes during a strike than workers in areas of industry with extensive histories of militancy and union involvement (1987:191).

Hypothesis 5 assumes that all workers will experience an expansion of class consciousness due to a strike, with the exception of those who already have a highly developed class consciousness. Recent experimental research calls this assumption into question. For instance, Brown et al. (1992) found that in-group identification is only strongly correlated with in-group favoritism

3. Experimental support for this argument can be found in Turner et al. (1984).

among individuals who are collectivist rather than individualist in orientation and see their experimental problem-solving group in a relational rather than autonomous framework. Furthermore, Wagner and Ward discovered that "an increase in in-group salience heightens in-group attraction and similarity only for those group members who were *a priori* identified with the group and not for less identified persons" (1993:249). Both of these experimental studies suggest, therefore, that an explosion of in-group consciousness in a strike is more likely to occur among workers who are already identified with the in-group (i.e., workers with considerable struggle experience). [Hypothesis 6] This hypothesis directly contradicts Hypothesis 5 which posits that consciousness change will be greater among strikers with less struggle experience.

SAMPLE AND METHODS OF RESEARCH

The data reported in this article come from three sources. First, structured interviews were conducted with a stratified quota sample of forty-five inside postal workers on two separate occasions: (1) just before, during or just after the strike in October 1987; and (2) in January 1988, about three months after the strike's conclusion. The main objective of the sampling was to include enough union activists so as to allow for comparisons between activists and rank-and-file (40% of the sample were presently serving or had previously served on the Hamilton local's executive or as a steward). In addition, a conscious effort was made to include workers from different work sites and shifts, and workers who professed weak or middling support for their union. The distribution of the sample parallels the distribution of the Hamilton local's membership in terms of gender and years of service in the Post Office. Second, the author took on an observer-as-participant role on the picket line and in the strike headquarters between October 1 and 16, 1987. Third, the author talked to two members of the union executive at length in order to learn their perspectives on events during and after the strike. The conversations with these key informants extended until June 1989.

The two structured interviews each took 30–45 minutes to complete. They yielded extensive data on postal workers' general identifications and beliefs, and on the attitude change which accompanied the strike. Operational definitions of these concepts are available from the author.

Based upon observations made during the strike by the author and the two key informants, a behavioural measure of strike participation was constructed for the sample of 45 postal workers. Workers were assigned to one of four ordinal categories: never/occasional participants (20%), sometimes participants (18%), regular participants (29%) and dutiful participants (those

who made extra contributions to the struggle without being asked; 33%). This measure is used when assessing the impact of strike participation on attitude change.

The other key variable measured in this study was struggle experience. The sample was split between veteran activists (those union activists who had participated in at least one other postal strike; 29% of the sample) and other postal workers (71% of the sample). Struggle experience is used as a proxy measure of the in-group identification which existed among Hamilton postal workers prior to the strike struggle. (Because the study was begun shortly before the strike, direct measurements of in-group identification for the pre-strike period are unavailable.) The data in Table 1 indicate that this is a reasonable measurement assumption. At the time of the strike, 86% of veteran activists reported being a strong supporter of their own union compared to only 32% of other postal workers. Furthermore, 92% of veteran activists identified with the working class compared to only 39% of other postal workers. The two groups also systematically differed on a number of political beliefs: veteran activists were more favourable towards unions than other postal workers, more radical on economic issues, more likely to blame the system rather than individuals in cases of deprivation, and more interested in politics. Therefore, at the time of the strike, veteran activists tended to be far more class conscious than other postal workers.

In a study such as this one with a small sample size, estimates of population parameters have large margins of error. It is thus important not to make too much of small group differences or correlations since they might easily be due to sampling error. As an indicator of relatively large group differences and correlations, tests of significance are reported in the three tables included in this article. These tests should only be used heuristically, however, since the study's sample was drawn using non-probability means.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Hamilton CUPW members viewed the federal Conservative government as the prime force guiding Canada Post's business objectives and strike strategy. In post-strike interviews, fully 70% of the sample reported that their feelings towards the federal government had become more negative as a consequence of the strike (see item 6, Table 2). On the picket line and in interviews, a number of people were almost as eager to talk about the implications of the just-negotiated Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement as their own strike. Their own experience with the Conservatives led them to look more critically at other aspects of the Tory political agenda.

TABLE 1
Political Identifications/Beliefs of Postal Workers, by Struggle Experience^a

<i>Identification/Belief</i>	<i>Veteran Activists (N=14)</i>	<i>Other Postal Workers (N=31)</i>
Strong Supporter of Own Union	86%	32%***
General Union Sentiment ^b (max=28)	25.9(+.37) ^c	23.8(-.17)**
Working Class Self-Identification	92%	39%***
Economic Radicalism/Conservatism ^d (max=4.0)	3.2(+.46)	2.8(-.21)**
Permissive System Blame/ Punitive Individual Blame ^d (max=4.1)	3.0(+.29)	2.7(-.13)*
Left Self-Identification	54%	35%
Correct Left-Right Knowledge	64%	45%
Political Disinterest ^e (max=20)	9.3(-.32)	10.6(+.15)*
Alienation from Government ^e (max=4.0)	3.3(+.15)	3.1(-.07)

* Difference is significant at the .1 level, one-tailed test.

** Difference is significant at the .05 level, one-tailed test.

*** Difference is significant at the .01 level, one-tailed test.

^a All measurements taken at the time of the strike. Measurement details are recorded in the Appendix available from the author.

^b Based on items taken from McShane (1986).

^c Number in brackets is the deviation of this group from the overall mean, measured in standard deviations.

^d The items are taken from the interview schedule of the Canadian Class Structure and Class Consciousness study, undertaken in 1982-83 as part of Erik Olin Wright's cross-national investigation of class structure and class consciousness (1985; 1989).

^e The items are taken from the interview schedule of the 1984 Canadian National Election Survey (see Lambert et al. 1986).

As is predicted by Hypothesis 1, state involvement in this dispute led strikers to question the authority of the governing party, but not to dismiss the entire state apparatus as biased. Nevertheless, the data suggest that this hypothesis needs to be modified. In the 1987 CUPW strike there was considerable parliamentary debate on the federal government's back-to-work bill from the day it was introduced (October 8, 1987) until the day it was passed in the House of Commons (October 15). Both opposition parties refused to support the bill and delayed its passage. As a result, the issues in the postal strike achieved an unusual level of public prominence. The actions of the Liberal and New Democratic parties not only built their own political credibility in the eyes of postal workers and their sympathizers, but also renewed the legitimacy of the federal parliament and the federal party system. What is crucial about this case is that the legitimacy of the state

apparatus was actively renewed during the strike. This suggests that state intervention in a strike may indeed call into question the legitimacy of the state apparatus when opposition parties are weak, ineffective or unresponsive to workers' interests, when a government can introduce repressive measures without parliamentary approval, or when a parliament has relatively little power relative to the government.

TABLE 2
Attitude Change Accompanying the Strike, by Struggle Experience^a

<i>Dimension of Attitude Change</i>	<i>Other</i>		
	<i>Veteran Activists (N=14)</i>	<i>Postal Workers (N=29- 30)</i>	<i>Whole Sample (N=43- 44)</i>
(1a) Volunteer negative on-the-job attitude	21%	37%	31%
(1b) Report moderate or major change in attitudes due to strike	50%	67%*	61%
(2) Very or somewhat discouraged by outcome of the strike	29%	60%**	50%
(3) Quite angry or furious towards scabs	57%	53%	55%
(4) More negative towards police	71%	70%	70%
(5) More negative towards local management	50%	79%*	70%
(6) More negative towards federal Conservatives	50%	80%*	70%
(7) More positive towards national union/leader	0%	13%	9%
[More negative towards national union/leader]	43%	13%**	23%
(8) More positive towards labour movement	21%	34%	30%
[More negative towards labour movement]	21%	10%	14%
(9) More positive towards fellow workers	71%	40%***	50%
(10) More positive towards local union	43%	23%	30%

* Difference is significant at the .1 level, one-tailed test.

** Difference is significant at the .05 level, one-tailed test.

*** Difference is significant at the .01 level, one-tailed test.

^a All measurements taken in post-strike interviews. Measurement details are recorded in the Appendix available from the author.

Hamilton CUPW members received very little picket line support during the strike from either Hamilton labour leaders or rank-and-file union members. (There are a number of reasons for this. CUPW was seen to be "too militant" by many union members and officials. Some male unionists objected to the relatively high wages earned by the mainly female inside postal workers. And the relatively short duration of the strike meant that attempts to mobilize support through official Labour Council networks never had a chance to yield substantial picket line help.) The limited assistance

caused a minority of the sample (14%; see item 8, Table 2) to report more negative attitudes towards the labour movement. However, the vast majority of postal workers were not embittered by the lack of support. This contradicts Hypothesis 2. In many cases, workers said that it was unreasonable to condemn others for failing to do what postal workers themselves would not be likely to do. Indeed, some workers discussed the lack of support for the strike in the context of a general assessment of the problems confronting the Canadian labour movement. "The labour movement is too scattered," argued one female worker. "It doesn't work together enough. We care if it's us in trouble, but we don't stick together when others are in trouble."

Despite the lack of support from unions and the community, a greater percentage of the sample (30%) felt more positive towards the labour movement after the strike than felt more negative. One of the workers who developed positive sentiments remarked that the strike experience helped him appreciate other workers' struggles: "I watched the TV pictures of the Gainers strike [in Edmonton, Alberta in 1986; see Noël and Gardner 1990] without really comprehending what was happening. Now I can better understand what the Gainers workers were going through." A female worker, who also reported more positive feelings for the labour movement, noted that because of this strike, "I now realize how much newspapers and top management lie about the situation workers find themselves in."

The contract imposed by an arbitrator almost a year after the 1987 CUPW strike was a partial victory for postal workers. However, after the legislated end to the strike in October 1987, Hamilton CUPW members did not return to work in a victorious mood. The strike had settled none of the workers' grievances at that point, the arbitrator appointed by the government was suspected of being pro-management in orientation, and Canada Post management, recognizing that the back-to-work legislation imposed very stiff penalties on any strike action while the arbitration process was underway, launched an offensive against postal workers. The management offensive was highlighted by attempts to limit the use of leave time for illness and to force workers who, for health reasons, had previously been assigned light duties to either resume regular duties or quit. It is thus not surprising that 50% of the sample reported being very or somewhat discouraged by the outcome of the strike in January 1988 (item 2, Table 2), with a further 41% being "discouraged but hopeful".

The data in Table 2 reveal that Hamilton postal workers were more likely to develop negative attitudes towards the out-groups in the dispute (scabs, police, local management and federal Conservatives) than to develop positive attitudes towards immediate (fellow workers and local union) or distant (national union/leader and labour movement) in-groups. This suggests that a minor qualification of Hypothesis 3a might be in order. The change

in workers' consciousness towards out-groups is likely to be quite similar in victorious or defeated strikes. However, the growth in workers' positive in-group identification will be much less in a defeated than a victorious strike.

A finding consistent with Hypothesis 3b is that the attitude change produced by the strike was not accompanied by a widespread commitment to action. In the months after the strike the executive of the Hamilton local was successful in getting a few more members to take part in union activity – as stewards, as participants in regional and national union gatherings, and, in two cases, as new recruits to the executive. However, most workers were pessimistic about the efficacy of union action given the offensive launched by management following the strike, and the local union's inability to counteract that offensive through the grievance system (which was hopelessly clogged with pre-strike grievances) or strike action (which was outlawed). Many workers adopted an alienated, instrumental orientation towards work – just doing what it would take to stay out of trouble with management. Even longtime union activists expressed frustration with the shift in the balance of power towards management after the strike. Indeed, the executive which had led the strike slowly drifted apart, and by the summer of 1989 four of the six executive members had resigned their positions. The evidence from this case study suggests, then, that the greater the gain in power by management due to a strike, the less likely it is that workers will engage in militant behaviour following that strike.

TABLE 3
Correlations between Strike Participation and Attitude Change

<i>Dimension of Attitude Change</i>	<i>Strike Participation (whole sample N=43-44)</i>	<i>Strike Participation (sample without veteran activists N=29-30)</i>
(1) Perception of attitude change	-.10	-.11
(2) Optimistic/discouraged	.26**	.38**
(3) Anger at scabs	.18	.27*
(4) Police	-.05	-.01
(5) Local management	.12	.11
(6) Federal Conservatives	.04	.05
(7) National union/national leader	-.21*	-.13
(8) Labour movement	.23*	.40**
(9) Fellow workers	.46***	.28*
(10) Local union	.19	.11

* Correlation is significant at the .1 level, one-tailed test.

** Correlation is significant at the .05 level, one-tailed test.

*** Correlation is significant at the .01 level, one-tailed test.

The first column of Table 3 contains the correlations between strike participation and different dimensions of attitude change. Participation has a relatively strong, positive correlation with attitude change towards fellow workers ($r = .46$; high levels of participation led to more positive attitudes towards fellow workers). Moderately sized correlations are also observed between participation and three other dimensions of attitude change: optimistic/discouraged ($r = .26$; high levels of participation led workers to be more optimistic), labour movement ($r = .23$; high levels of participation resulted in more positive attitudes towards the labour movement), and national union/national leader ($r = -.21$; high levels of participation go with negative changes in attitude towards CUPW and its national leader).

Before relating these findings to Hypothesis 4, it is necessary to introduce a control. Veteran activists were more likely to be dutiful strike participants than other postal workers (strike participation and struggle experience have a correlation of $.50$). If, as Hypothesis 5 maintains, veteran activists will undergo minimal changes in attitude during a strike struggle because they are already relatively class conscious, then the impact of strike participation on attitude change can only be ascertained after controlling for struggle experience. This is accomplished in the second panel of Table 3 where correlations are presented for the sample minus veteran activists. For this subsample, strike participation has relatively large correlations with optimistic/discouraged ($r = .38$) and attitude change towards the labour movement ($r = .40$). Moderately sized correlations exist between participation and two other dimensions of attitude change: anger at scabs ($r = .27$; high levels of participation led to greater feelings of anger towards strikebreakers) and fellow workers ($r = .28$). The negative correlation between participation and attitude change towards the national union/national leader was not significant in this subsample.

These findings offer partial support for Hypothesis 4. Among postal workers with limited previous struggle experience, actual participation in collective struggle was crucial to the development of a heightened sense of in-group identity at the levels of both workgroup (fellow workers) and class (labour movement). Furthermore, active participation also made workers more optimistic; this presumably reflects the influence of the positive in-group identities developed as the result of participation.

It is noteworthy that participation had a negligible impact on changes in attitudes towards three key out-groups: the police, local management and the federal Conservatives. This suggests that the circumstances and events of the strike caused workers to form negative oppositional attitudes towards these groups regardless of their level of strike participation. In contrast, direct contact with the scabs crossing the picket line fuelled strikers' anger towards this out-group.

To test Hypothesis 5 (inverse relationship between struggle experience and changes in political consciousness), the first two columns of Table 2 can be used to compare the attitude change experienced by veteran activists and other postal workers. Veteran activists experienced less attitude change than other postal workers on four of the eleven dimensions of attitude change (using a significance level of .1 as a guide). Veteran activists were much less likely to report a high level of discouragement (29% vs. 60%), were less likely to report a negative change in attitude towards local management (50% vs. 79%) and the federal Conservatives (50% vs. 80%), and were less likely to report a moderate or major change in attitudes (50% vs. 67%). On four of the other dimensions of attitude change, veteran activists were either indistinguishable from other postal workers (a similar percentage in each group was angry at the scabs and had developed a negative view of the police) or had experienced less attitude change although the difference was not statistically significant (a smaller percentage of veteran activists reported a negative on-the-job attitude and a more positive attitude towards the labour movement).

On two of the dimensions listed in Table 2, however, veteran activists experienced *more* attitude change than other postal workers. They were much more likely to experience a positive change in attitude towards fellow workers (71% vs. 40%) and somewhat more likely to experience a positive change in attitude towards the local union (43% vs. 23%). Hypothesis 5 contends that the positive in-group identification associated with struggle experience tends to limit the extent of attitude change during a strike. However, for these two dimensions, struggle experience *facilitated* attitude change, a finding consistent with Hypothesis 6. Veteran activists went into the strike with a deep sense of attachment to the local union; this attachment was an integral component of their well-developed class consciousness. Because they were intensely involved with and cared about the local union, veteran activists responded to the active strike involvement of Hamilton CUPW members with much the same pride as a parent feels at the success of a child. The Hamilton local was *their* union and it was having its finest hour in a long time. It would thus seem that a high level of in-group identification sensitized veteran activists to the performance of the Hamilton local and its members during the strike, and made them more likely to respond very positively to a good performance.

Finally, the data on attitude change towards the national union and national leader require a special explanation. A much larger percentage of veteran activists experienced a negative shift in attitude than other postal workers (43% vs. 13%). This unanticipated result reflects the fact that some of the key leaders of the Hamilton local were strong critics of the National CUPW leadership. In 1987-88, the leaderships of CUPW locals in Montréal,

Hamilton and a few other cities believed that the national leadership was out of touch with the membership and pursuing an ultra-left agenda. One member of the executive of the Hamilton local summed up the internal union conflict in this way: "We're more union than they pretend to be."⁴ Although the leaders of the Hamilton local were very critical of the national CUPW leadership, in the interests of union solidarity they did not communicate their views to the rank-and-file. As a result, only the Hamilton local's executive and activists who were close to executive members tended to judge the actions of CUPW president Jean-Claude Parrot and the national union in a negative light.

In summary, both Hypotheses 5 and 6 received some support from this study. The 1987 CUPW strike can be seen as a moment when the salience of the local union and its membership was dramatically increased. As predicted by Hypothesis 6, positive evaluations of these in-groups increased more among those postal workers who already strongly identified with the Hamilton local (i.e., veteran activists) than among those who were less strongly identified. At the same time, the psychological process described by Hypothesis 5 appeared to operate on a number of other dimensions of attitude change: veteran activists, with their higher starting level of class consciousness, experienced less negative change in attitudes towards out-groups and were less affected by the strike's seeming defeat.

CONCLUSIONS

The main finding of this study is that an increase in a postal worker's negative attitudes toward out-groups did not necessarily go hand in hand with an increase in that striker's positive identifications with in-groups such as fellow workers, the local union and the labour movement. Indeed among Hamilton CUPW members, negative out-group evaluations were far more likely to develop as a consequence of the 1987 strike than positive in-group identifications. Marx maintained that inter-group struggle would make in-group membership salient for an individual, thus simultaneously increasing identification with and loyalty to the in-group and hostility toward the out-group (Archibald 1989:153). A number of years ago Smith raised the possibility that the identity and opposition elements of class consciousness may not be cumulative (1978:459-460), and a recent conceptual model has proposed that perception of in-group identification and perception of inter-class relations are two separate dimensions of class consciousness (Kelly 1988:86-88). The results of this case study support treating the in-group and out-group dimensions of class consciousness as distinct. Thus, the explosion of

4. Further information on this internal union dispute can be found in Langford (1989).

consciousness turns out *not* to be the undifferentiated process which the explosion metaphor unfortunately implies. Different social-psychological processes govern different dimensions of attitude change during a strike.

This study indicates that the actions of out-groups in a dispute (at the bargaining table, on the picket line, in parliament or in statements to the press) can transform strikers' consciousness of inter-group relations. For working-class identification to develop, however, a striker needs to take an active part in the collective struggle or must already be closely identified with the in-group. The stress placed by Marxists like Rosa Luxemburg on the importance of collective action for the creation of class consciousness is confirmed by the first part of this finding. The second part of the finding represents important support for a proposition that had hitherto only been tested in experiments.

Future research on the explosion-of-consciousness thesis needs to be undertaken in a variety of settings.⁵ First, the different effects created in defeated and victorious strikes require careful attention, especially since this has been identified as a weak point in Marxist theorizing. There are various types of defeats and various types of victories in strike struggles, and the impact of each type of outcome on consciousness change needs to be specified and explained. Second, strikes where different branches of the state are split in their response need to be compared to strikes where the workers are repressed, undermined or ignored by all branches of the state. Do strikers develop a sense of the need for fundamental political changes when the state presents a uniform anti-worker face? Third, the impact of community support on the explosion of consciousness should be pursued. It is reasonable to expect that sympathy strikes, massive picket line demonstrations or generous donations of cash and goods should enhance strikers' class identification to a much greater extent than token community support such as was received by Hamilton postal workers in 1987.

Systematic research on strikes is difficult, not least because whether a strike develops into a major struggle, or even whether or not a strike occurs, cannot be predicted with certainty. Some of the best known studies of strikes and political consciousness have been opportunistic research exercises, initiated during the course of an interesting strike (e.g., Karsh 1982;

5. It can be added that future research should be undertaken using a variety of methods. For instance, videotaping the interaction of workers on picket lines or in strike headquarters would produce interesting data, although it could possibly create legal complications (the police might desire to view the videotapes if investigating picket line incidents). In studies which seek to test hypotheses, it would be useful to have data from a population survey of a workforce or a probability sample survey with a large N, although the problem of low response rate should be expected. An example of the latter is Stagner and Eflal who report a usable response rate of only 23% (1982:39).

Lane and Roberts 1971). Certainly it would be useful if case studies including pre-strike measurements are undertaken in the future. Nevertheless, whether a study gets up and running before or after a strike commences is a relatively minor issue. What is much more important is that investigations of the explosion-of-consciousness thesis are theoretically informed and build upon the existing systematic research. In this regard, case studies of strike struggles can benefit from pursuing the insights generated by experimental research on inter-group conflict.

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RÉSUMÉ

Les effets de la participation à une grève sur la conscience politique des postiers canadiens

Les marxistes ont longtemps soutenu que les grandes grèves provoquent une « explosion » de la conscience de classe chez les ouvriers. Leurs critiques ont, pour leur part, affirmé que le contexte politico-économique de la grève, le déroulement et l'issue de celle-ci ainsi que les caractéristiques

des grévistes détermineront plutôt si une telle explosion se produira ou non, ou à tout le moins dans quelle mesure elle se produira. En plus d'examiner quelques-unes des faiblesses de la thèse « explosionniste », cet article présente des hypothèses inspirées par les débats sur la question, et les vérifie à la lumière des résultats d'une étude de cas consacrée à la grève menée en 1987 par le Syndicat des postiers du Canada (SPC). Les données proviennent de trois sources : deux entrevues structurées auprès d'un échantillon stratifié, obtenu par la méthode des quotas, de 45 membres de la section locale du SPC à Hamilton (l'une réalisée au moment de la grève et l'autre en janvier 1988, trois mois après la fin de la grève) ; l'observation participante aux piquets de grève et au quartier général des grévistes ; et des discussions intensives avec deux informateurs clés, membres du comité exécutif de la section locale de Hamilton.

Selon l'hypothèse 1, dans les régimes démocratiques de type parlementaire et à suffrage universel, l'intervention de l'État dans les conflits de travail entraînera une remise en question de l'autorité du parti au pouvoir, mais pas celle des institutions fondamentales de l'État lui-même. Lors de la grève du SPC en 1987, les Libéraux et les Néo-Démocrates se sont vigoureusement opposés à ce que le gouvernement adopte une loi ordonnant le retour au travail. Les grévistes ont donc contesté l'autorité du Parti conservateur, mais ils n'ont remis en question ni la légitimité du Parlement ni celle du système des partis politiques. Ce qu'il faut surtout retenir dans ce cas, c'est que la légitimité de l'État a été activement renouvelée pendant la grève. Ce phénomène laisse supposer que l'intervention de l'État dans une grève peut provoquer une remise en question de la légitimité de l'appareil étatique lorsque les partis d'opposition sont faibles, inefficaces ou insensibles aux intérêts des travailleurs, lorsque le gouvernement est en mesure de prendre des mesures répressives sans l'assentiment du parlement ou encore lorsque le parlement a relativement peu de pouvoir vis-à-vis du gouvernement.

Selon l'hypothèse 2, les travailleurs en grève tendront moins à s'identifier à la classe ouvrière si leur grève ne reçoit pas l'appui des autres syndicats et de leur communauté. En réalité, même si les membres de la section locale du SPC à Hamilton ont reçu peu d'appuis aux piquets de grève, seule une petite minorité d'entre eux (14 pour cent) ont exprimé des attitudes plus négatives à l'égard du mouvement syndical ; 30 pour cent ont même exprimé des attitudes plus positives. Plusieurs membres du SPC ont déclaré mieux comprendre les luttes d'autres travailleurs en raison de la grève qu'ils ont eux-mêmes menée.

Là où les divers auteurs qui ont écrit sur la question s'entendent sans doute le moins, c'est pour savoir si la thèse de l'explosion de la conscience s'applique aussi bien aux grèves victorieuses qu'aux grèves qui

échouent. Marx et Engels croyaient que le développement de la conscience et de l'organisation de la classe ouvrière progressait inexorablement, même si la plupart des luttes ouvrières n'atteignaient pas leurs objectifs. Selon l'hypothèse 3a, les travailleurs auront moins tendance à changer d'attitude à la suite d'une grève qu'ils ont perdue qu'à la suite d'une grève victorieuse. L'hypothèse 3b affirme que les travailleurs seront peu portés à se comporter de manière militante à la suite d'une grève qui a échoué. En effet, le niveau de militantisme était très faible pendant les mois qui ont suivi la grève à Hamilton. Cependant, la majorité des travailleurs ont été amenés par le déroulement de la grève à adopter une attitude négative à l'égard des groupes extérieurs (briseurs de grève, police, cadres locaux des Postes et Conservateurs fédéraux), ce qui semble indiquer que le changement quant au sentiment d'opposition sera sensiblement le même que la grève soit victorieuse ou non. Une version révisée de l'hypothèse 3a affirme que le sentiment d'appartenance de classe sera beaucoup plus faible si la grève échoue que si elle réussit.

Selon l'hypothèse 4, plus un travailleur participe activement à une grève, plus ses attitudes politiques changeront. Cette hypothèse est validée en partie par les données provenant d'un échantillon excluant les militants de longue date. Plus la participation était forte, plus les travailleurs se sont montrés optimistes quant à l'issue de la grève, plus leurs attitudes à l'égard du mouvement syndical et des autres travailleurs étaient positives et plus ils ressentaient de la colère à l'égard des briseurs de grève. Par contre, la participation n'a influé que marginalement sur les changements d'attitudes à l'égard de trois groupes extérieurs clés, soit la police, les cadres locaux des Postes et le gouvernement fédéral du Parti conservateur.

Selon l'hypothèse 5, il existe une relation inverse entre l'expérience antérieure des luttes ouvrières et les changements sur le plan de la conscience politique. Cette hypothèse est également validée en partie. En raison de leur niveau de conscience de classe plus élevé, les vieux militants avaient moins tendance à développer des attitudes négatives à l'égard des cadres locaux des Postes et des Conservateurs fédéraux, à se sentir découragés par l'issue de la grève ou à percevoir un changement modéré ou majeur dans les attitudes. Cependant, ils étaient plus portés à donner des évaluations positives de leurs camarades de travail et du syndicat local, de toute évidence parce que leur identité personnelle était fortement liée à la section locale du SPC à Hamilton. Cette observation va dans le sens de l'hypothèse 6, selon laquelle une explosion de la conscience vis-à-vis du groupe auquel on appartient est plus probable chez les grévistes qui s'identifient déjà au groupe.

L'article conclut en expliquant pourquoi les travaux futurs sur la thèse de l'explosion de la conscience de classe doivent se faire dans des contextes

variés. Il insiste enfin sur l'importance pour les chercheurs de bien maîtriser le cadre théorique et d'exploiter à fond la recherche systématique existante, y compris les expériences sur les conflits intergroupe.

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