

Definition and measurement

Strikes are one manifestation of industrial conflict. The ILO's International Conference of Labour Statisticians defines strikes as a temporary work stoppage or closure of a workplace resulting from the initiative of one or more groups of workers or employers to enforce or resist demands and express grievances, or to support other workers or employers in their demands or grievances. The most comprehensive indicator of industrial conflicts is the proportion of the hours of work that is lost because of strikes, but this is available only in a few countries. Therefore, the main indicator used here is the ratio between the number of working days lost because of strikes and that of all employees.

International comparability of data on strikes is affected by differences in definitions and measurement. Many countries exclude from their official records small work stoppages, and use different thresholds relating to the number of workers involved and/or the number of days lost. Strikes statistics in some countries may also exclude stoppages in particular industries, such as the public sector, or of a particular type, such as political and unauthorised strikes. Conversely, some countries may include workers indirectly involved (i.e. those who are unable to work because others at their workplace are on strike) or work stoppages caused by the shortage of materials supplied by firms involved in strikes. In general, forms of industrial action that do not involve full-work stoppages, such as "go-slows", silent and other protests on the workplace are not included. The OECD periodically collects data on strikes and lockouts, from international and national sources, for monitoring labour market trends in member countries.

As strike activity can vary substantially from year to year, averages taken over consecutive years are the most reliable way to monitor trends in labour disputes. Figure CO5.1 presents five-year averages of the strike rate, i.e. the total number of working days lost because of strikes per 1 000 employees, over two periods – 1980-1984 and 2000-2004 – for 25 OECD countries (Panel A). In both periods, Canada, Iceland, Italy and Spain recorded the largest number of days lost per employee through industrial conflicts, while these were lowest in Germany, Japan, Netherlands and Switzerland.

In the OECD area, the strike rate has roughly halved in each decade since the early 1980s. The decline since the early 1980s was especially strong in Australia, Canada, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Spain and the United Kingdom. Changes in the structure of employment by industry, with a shift towards service sectors, partly explain these declines, as strike rates are usually twice as high in industry (mining, manufacturing, electricity, utilities and construction) than in the service sector (with the exception of transportation). However, in most OECD countries, strike rates have declined over the past ten years, in both the industry and service sector (Beardsmore, 2006).

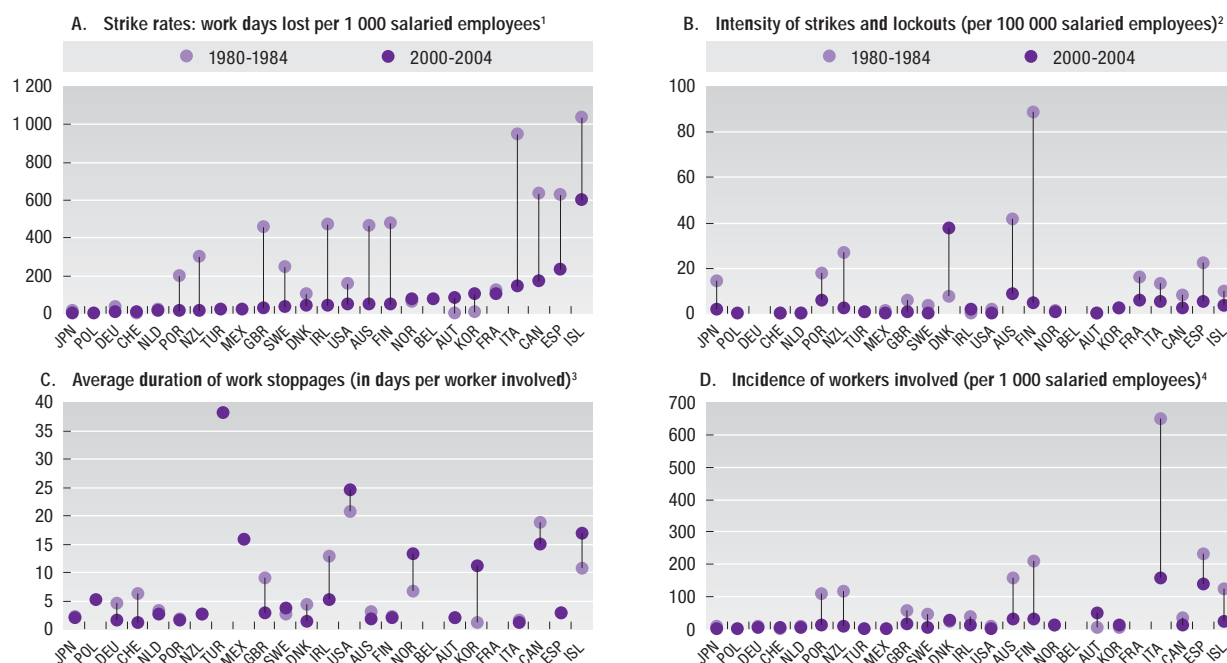
The strike rate can be expressed as a function of the share of workers involved in industrial disputes and the average duration of these disputes per worker involved (Panels C and D). The average duration of industrial disputes was around 7½ days on average in 2000-2004, with only seven countries recording more than ten days of work stoppages per worker involved. Turkey and the United States reported a larger number of strike days, albeit involving relatively few workers and work stoppages (but data for the United States exclude strikes involving less than

10 000 workers). In all OECD countries, the decline in strike rates was accompanied by a fall in the number of workers concerned, while the duration of strikes increased in Iceland, Korea, Norway and the United States. The number of industrial conflicts increased recently only in Denmark, but this did not translate into a higher strike rate (Panel B).

There is no simple relation between strikes and other characteristics of the industrial relations systems. Figure CO5.2 plots strike rates in the recent period against the degree of coverage of collective bargaining (the share of employees whose pay and working conditions are governed by a collective agreement between trade unions and employers) and the degree of unionisation (the share of employees affiliated to a trade union). Strike rates are very low both in countries where most workers are covered by collective agreements (e.g. Finland and Sweden) and in those where few workers are covered (e.g. Japan, although data for this country exclude unofficial strikes and those lasting less than half a day). Similarly, strike rates are relatively low both in countries where most workers belong to trade unions (e.g. Denmark) and in those where the unionisation rate is below 20% (e.g. the United States), with a weak tendency for strike rates to be higher in countries with lower union density. Recent research suggests that the quality of industrial relation matters for labour market performance. For example, Addison and Texeira (2006) concluded that, after controlling for a range of other factors, OECD countries characterised by a less conflictual system of industrial relations (as measured by strike rates) had lower unemployment than other countries.

Status indicators: Voting (CO1), Trust in political institutions (CO6), Life satisfaction (CO7), Employment (SS1).

CO5.1. Measures of strikes in OECD countries

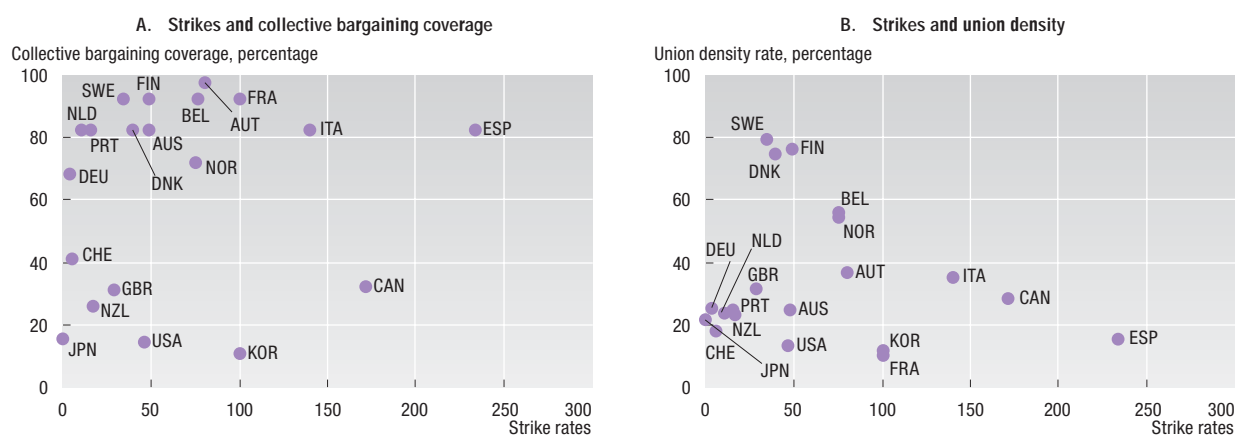


Note: Countries are ranked in ascending order of work days lost per 1 000 employees (strike rates).

1. Number of days of work stoppages per 1 000 salaried employees.
2. Number of work stoppages per 100 000 salaried employees.
3. Number of days of work stoppages per worker involved.
4. Number of workers involved per 1 000 salaried employees.

Source: OECD data derived from ILO Laborsta, Eurostat New Cronos and NSOs websites. Data on paid civilian employee are from OECD Labour Force Statistics.

CO5.2. Strikes are not correlated with coverage of collective bargaining and union density

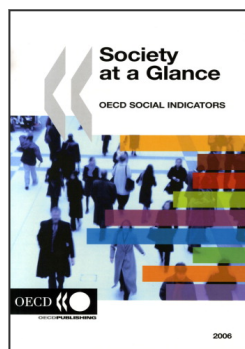


Note: All rates data are expressed as a percentage of civilian dependent employees.

Source: Data on union density and collective bargaining are from Table 3.3 of OECD (2004), *OECD Employment Outlook*, Paris; for data on strike rates, see Figure CO5.1.

StatLink: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/617431661727>

Further reading ■ Addison, J.T. and P. Teixeira (2006), "Does the Quality of Industrial Relations Matter for the Macro-economy? A cross-country analysis using strikes data", IZA Discussion Paper, No. 1968, February. ■ Beardsmore, R. (2006), "International Comparisons of Labour Disputes in 2004", *Labour Market Trends*, Special feature, United Kingdom Office for National Statistics. ■ ILO (2005), *Yearbook of Labour Statistics 2005*, International Labour Organisation, Geneva.



From:
Society at a Glance 2006
OECD Social Indicators

Access the complete publication at:
https://doi.org/10.1787/soc_glance-2006-en

Please cite this chapter as:

OECD (2007), "Strikes", in *Society at a Glance 2006: OECD Social Indicators*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1787/soc_glance-2006-34-en

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