



Introduction

In March 1924 the Comrades' Court of the Haifa labor council summoned Israel Litvak, a worker at the Rosenfeld printing workshop, to a trial.¹ The council—the local representative of the Histadrut,² of which Litvak was a member—was suing him for violating a strike action undertaken by his fellow printing workers: he had returned to work before the end of the strike and the ensuing legal action against the strikers at the Haifa District Court. The council, its secretary David Cohen claimed, “made it clear to him that this act devalues the prestige of the Histadrut and harms the strike. Without it we may have ended the strike more successfully, for this act satisfied the employer.” The secretary continued: “This is a breach of a brotherly alliance. I want to emphasize that we asked member Litvak to wait at least until the trial was over. He claimed that he cannot wait because of family reasons. I think that member Litvak, who places his private affairs above those of the Histadrut, cannot be found among us.”

Constituting insult to and betrayal of Litvak's fellow strikers and the Histadrut, the act, according to the council, deserved severe punishment. “I waited ten weeks,” Litvak answered:

I could not anymore. I was in a difficult condition. Anyway I said that if the strike ended I must return [to work]. I did not betray the Histadrut, but went with all the others. ... Everybody concurred that I shall return to work after the end of the trial. I don't know what is demanded from me. ... The strike was carried out by the workers and not by the Haifa labor council. The owners did not use the fact that I reentered work before the trial. Because the strike was lost I did not have anything else to do. The other members did not want to return to work. I always opposed the strike. But I was ashamed to say no. ... On returning to work I did not have any special terms with Rosenfeld [the employer].

The demands, concluded Litvak, “were not so just, and this was a mistake in my opinion that a strike was declared. ... When I entered work I was

a bachelor. Now I have a family." The tribunal panel rejected Litvak's arguments and decided to oust him from the Histadrut. His appeal was rejected as well, and other town labor councils were asked not to admit him to their ranks or ever assist him in finding a job.³

The Litvak hearing, one among hundreds of cases dealt with at the Haifa Comrades' Court during the 1920s, represented a thorny issue for the labor movement. On the one hand the prosecutor—the body that organized Haifa's Jewish workers—wished to express the ideals of solidarity of the Jewish workers' community that had evolved in this Arab-dominated town. The violation of these ideals, on the other hand, was couched in a very explicit manner. It was claimed to have helped the Jewish private employer to both resist workers' collective action and representation, and persist in employing Jewish strikebreakers or "cheap" Arab labor, disregarding the problems of Jewish immigrants and unemployed, and disseminating the image of militant Jewish workers and the Histadrut as unreliable and irresponsible. The council's leaders thus perceived Litvak's misconduct as both anti-labor and anti-Zionist: he had violated solidarity and aided the employment of non-Jews, allowed Jewish employers the freedom of action, and at the same time destabilized the image of the Histadrut as a viable practitioner of Zionist goals in Palestine's urban labor market. Not only was his interpretation of his economic hardships and his consequent action different from the strikers', but he had in practice violated the social codes of Haifa's labor community as a whole. Thus the Rosenfeld strike, which had originated as a social conflict, turned into a political transgression, and Litvak's actions into markers of the boundaries of the community.

Strikes and strike-related events such as the case above have always attracted the attention of historians and social scientists. Since becoming the dominant form of social protest in the mid nineteenth century, they have been considered a telling indicator of the state of employment relations, workers' collective behavior, and society's approaches to social rights and democracy.⁴ Strikes' correspondence with business cycles, together with the well-established pattern of an increase in strikes during economic booms, underscores their illumination of material aspects of social relations.⁵ Their correlation with the state of trade unions' power, and of labor movements in general, tells us much about the relations between workers and their representative organizations, as well as the latter's capacity to mobilize their social bases for action and exert political pressure.⁶

Furthermore, as reactive behavior against the breach of "social contracts" that may evolve in any workplace, strike action pinpoints the extent of workers' moral outrage, as well as expressions of solidarity, its limitations, and the way strike violators are treated.⁷ As succinctly put

by Laura Lee Downs, historians have been drawn to the study of strikes because they

... suggest the possibility of grasping (however momentarily) at the elusive phantom, the autonomous self-expressions of working people. This prospect holds special appeal for labor historians, whose quest for working class subjectivity is so often constrained by the silence that surrounds their subaltern subjects. As a strike unfolds, the once muffled voices of ordinary women and men ring with a startling, sharp clarity. The historian hitherto condemned to searching the silence for random bits and clues, is abruptly faced with the task of interpreting the sudden cascade of language and desire unleashed in the collective decision to take shop floor grievances onto the streets.⁸

More widely still, strikes tell us much about society. The propensity of certain groups of workers and occupations to strike more often than others (see, e.g., the case of miners and dock workers) has long served to unravel the histories of occupations and of communities.⁹ Similarly, the effects of strikes—on the strikers, employers, and the public at large—expose entire sets of social, political, and cultural norms concerning the legitimacy of social action, authority, and hierarchy in the workplace, as well as protest as a citizen's social right.¹⁰ This variety of interest in strikes is also expressed in the methodologies applied: the focus ranges from a singular influential strike to strikes in one locality or community; from cyclical strike waves to comparative and global studies; and from macro and quantitative approaches to strike patterns, through “from below” analyses of workers' expressions, to anthropologically oriented cultural studies that seek to unravel codes of behavior and adversarial languages.¹¹

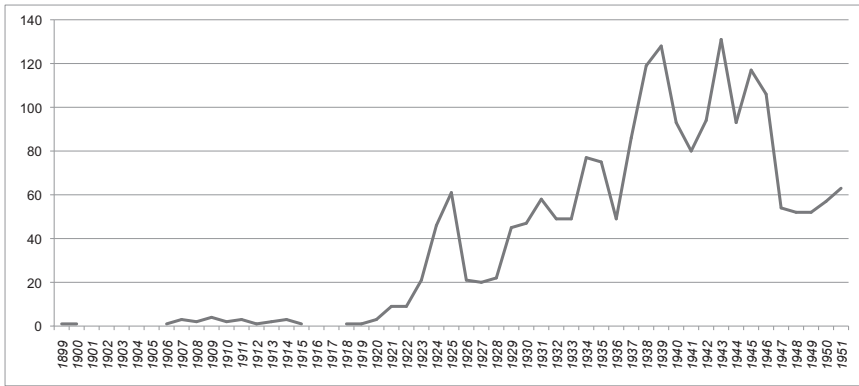
Though these approaches have in common a fascination with strikes as prisms for wider political, social, and cultural processes, and though many studies associate strikes with local, regional, and international politics, the association between strikes and nation building has remained relatively understudied. Strikes feature but little in the vast literature on the relations between nationalism and socialism, where the emphasis is on ideology, party politics, leadership, and thought. The much richer literature on labor strife in the history of imperialism and colonialism has contributed immensely to understanding the trajectory of strike action in nation- and state-building conditions. However, this literature has a relatively narrow impact on the analysis of such trajectories in individual cases. Palestine and Israel in the first half of the twentieth century are a case in point.¹²

Striking has long been a discernibly momentous phenomenon in Israeli society. This is as true today as it was in the 1970s and the 1930s. Despite

many forces that have weakened its recurrence—the Arab-Jewish conflict, the decline of Israeli organized labor, the exponential increase of precarious workers in the Israeli labor market—striking has been relentless. The achievements and impact of striking (e.g., on the level of wages) may not always have been immense, but workers in Israel persist in using the strike weapon for both economic improvement and influence on relations of power in the labor market and hierarchies of authority in the workplace. The Israeli “repertoire of collective action” (to use Charles Tilly’s famous term) takes many forms besides strikes: protests, demonstrations, disputes, various weak and strong oppositional practices, and collusive negotiations of authority.¹³ Strikes, however, despite their periodic abeyance and the negative resonance they often hold in public opinion, have persistently been at the top of that repertoire. This is still the case today, even when other forms of collective action and non-movement social protest seem, in the Middle East in particular, to resonate more powerfully.¹⁴

Strikes’ prime status on the Israeli “labor conflict scene” can also be extrapolated from society’s ambivalence toward their legitimacy and high cost. Contemporary Israel’s ongoing public deliberations on the nature and intentions of striking, and Israeli politicians’ and legal authorities’ recurrent attempts to devise restraints on the recurrence of strikes and limit their use, have likewise maintained this social form of conflict’s position at the forefront of public attention. True, many workers in Israeli society past and present have remained distant from the strike and avoided participating in the collective and negotiation cultures that strikes usually cultivate.¹⁵ Still, the many workers who tend to strike and re-strike keep reminding Israeli society of the strike weapon’s availability, its attraction for certain groups of workers, the irritation it causes, and occasionally also its relative effectiveness. Israeli society has often witnessed a periodic decline in strike intensity, a reminder of strikes’ characteristic “cyclical behavior” in many regions and countries. But society remains fully aware of the availability of this means, the propensity to use it, its cost, its power to refuel solidarity, and its varying social resonance.

More significantly, and contrary to conventional wisdom, this social embeddedness of the strike is hardly recent. The strike has been shaped over many decades, and despite its noted absence from the historiography, its present centrality and weightiness are deeply rooted in Israel’s past in Ottoman and Mandate Palestine.¹⁶ Much as today’s practitioners of the strike and its opponents are oblivious to the history of strike action, they are still unknowingly re-creating and reproducing a social practice and vibrant ritual whose historically shaped codes have withstood the test of time against the odds. Strikes are never alike and have never been so, though deceptively, like the endless variety of military battles, they look

Figure I.1. Strikes in Palestine/Israel, 1899–1951 (by Periods)

Sources: *Sikumim* for the 1930s–1950s (periodic reports published by the Histadrut, LA Library); Aviad Bar-Haim, “The System of Labor Relations in the Jewish Settlement in Palestine during the British Mandate” (MA thesis, The Hebrew University in Jerusalem, 1972); Yeshe-yahu Etkin, “Sixty Years of Striking in Israel, 1921–1980” (MA thesis, Tel Aviv University, 1982).

Table I.1. Strikes in Palestine/Israel, 1899–1951 (by Periods)

	Strikes (n)	Strikers (w)	Lost Days (d)	Average Size (w/n)	Average Duration (d/n)	Average Intensity (d/w)
1899–1917	26					
1918–1930	306	8,281	111,674	27.1	365.0	13.5
1931–1940	783	22,080	179,124	28.2	229.0	8.1
1941–1946	621	54,020	847,971	87.0	1365.0	15.7
1947–1951	278	31,427	267,684	113.0	963.0	8.5

Source: See Figure 1.

Note: Data on strikes and lost workdays from 1899–1917 is missing. It is estimated that of the 2014 strike events, fewer than 100 were lockouts. As the distinctions between the two are not clear, here they are lumped together.

the same. Furthermore, recent strike activity in Israel and elsewhere has evidently been attuned to the changing contexts and spirit of the times. Meanwhile, strikes are also situated within long-evolving social and behavioral structures and historically molded assumptions and understandings. For this reason this book focuses on their history and on their pre-1948 origins in particular.

More than 2,000 strikes broke out in Palestine in the first half of the twentieth century—an annual average of about thirty-eight strikes (see Figure I.1 and Table I.1 above and the tables in the appendix). The immen-

sity of that number, compared to the figures for countries and economies of similar size during that period, cannot be ignored, especially considering the following facts. First, almost no strikes were recorded in Palestine in the nineteenth century. The first broke out only in 1899, in a Jewish agricultural school. Second, during the “takeoff” in strike activity—roughly between 1922 and 1947—the majority of the population was Palestinian Arab, but the overwhelming majority of strikes were staged in the Jewish community (the *Yishuv*¹⁷), in Jewish workplaces, and by Jewish workers. Third, compared to this mostly *Yishuv* social turmoil, only a handful of strikes occurred in the British public sector (e.g., the colonial bureaucracy or the railways) or in workplaces owned by international capital, such as in the oil industry. Fourth, despite the expansion of a large Zionist public sector in the *Yishuv* economy, almost all the strikes took place in the Jewish private capitalist sector, the motor of Palestine’s industrialization.

Fifth, many strikes during this period were orchestrated by organized labor, that is, the Zionist socialist labor movement and its elaborate organizational organ, the Histadrut.¹⁸ However, many strikes started without Histadrut authorization and lacked funding, and most were short-lived, as in the case of the World War II-era diamond cutters, the occupational group with the greatest propensity to strike.¹⁹ In another example (which concludes the book), the seamen’s strike of 1951 turned into a watershed event in Israeli history, partly because the strikers positioned themselves against both the Histadrut and Mapai, the ruling labor party of the new government of Israel.²⁰ Finally, a significant share of the strikers in this period of nation building and national conflict with Palestine’s Arabs were recent Jewish immigrants into Palestine, most of who settled in urban areas, where employment was found mainly in the private sector of the economy. In comparison with other migrant-absorption countries of similar size in terms of population, urban population, and labor force, the frequency and volume of the strikes in Palestine was surprisingly high.

These basic features of the strike phenomenon in pre-state Palestine and Israel are puzzling. Why did so many strikes occur in a community so deeply engaged in nation building and national conflict? How did they surmount so many strike-preventive factors, such as the anti-strike stances of British officials and Jewish *Yishuv* leaders? If organized labor was, at least politically, so dominant in the Zionist project—vis-à-vis capital owners and private employers—why did strikes become routine, particularly in Jewish private workplaces? Why was social tension so vibrant in a society lacking political sovereignty? Why were strikes—and the temporary spaces of negation they reflected—more central to the country’s repertoire of collective action than any other form of protest and social strife? Why did strikes peak during World War II (see Figure I.1 above), despite the

British authorities' enhancement of the anti-strike arsenal? And why was the early institutionalization of the State of Israel in the early 1950s accompanied by highly resonant strike action?

Strikes have long interested historians and industrial sociologists of Palestine and Israel.²¹ Their proliferation in a relatively small, conflict-ridden society has always been part of divisive social imagery and political contention. The enhanced presence of strikes, the culture of negotiation they have produced, and their cyclical downturns and peaks have attracted the attention of labor leaders abroad and international labor organizations. The Ottoman rulers, the (British) Palestine government, and the State of Israel have consistently observed them and sought means to contain them. Moreover, political and organized labor in Yishuv society—which occasionally co-opted strikes and strikers to advance political, material, and bureaucratic interests—was often bewildered by their from-below energies and increasingly routine and ritualized nature. The historiography of the period, however, has drawn only a partial and fragmentary picture of this prevalence of strikes, their political and legal treatment, and the diverse interest they aroused among contemporaries.²²

Despite the considerable extent of the social, economic, and labor historiography of Ottoman and Mandate Palestine, it has largely neglected this intensive recurrence and richness of strike action. It has tended to focus more on the national ideology of labor than on the form and effectiveness of workers' collective action; more on labor institutions than on the social history of protest; more on the national division into segmented and segregated labor markets than on the workers' and employees' experiences in the momentary spells when a culture of demand presentation and negotiation prevailed. Moreover, although the research of individual strikes during the British Mandate has expanded their conceptualization within the evolution of the Arab-Jewish national conflict and in the context of Zionist nation and state-building has remained incoherent.

In this historiography, three main approaches to the association between nationalism and strikes can be discerned. The first locates strikes, mostly in Palestine's Jewish sector, in the system of relations between the Labor-Zionist movement, the Jewish employers, and the liberal Revisionist movement. It focuses on the internal social politics of the Yishuv and is characterized by its treatment of the Yishuv as a bounded political and social system. Whereas this approach justifiably emphasizes the centrality, to the strikes, of the question of the national preference for Jewish workers (known as the issues of "Hebrew Labor" and "Conquest of Labor"), it ignores the extent to which nationalism was also present in strikes over improvement in workers' pay and conditions. It thus tendentially pre-

cludes understanding of the strike phenomenon in the Yishuv in its necessarily larger contextualization in the British presence and the national conflict.²³

The second approach, highly critical of the first, places strikes—particularly those during the period of British rule—in a relational context, arguing that workers' collective action in both the Arab and Jewish sectors can only be understood in terms of Zionism's impact on labor and the centrality of national ideology to the split labor-market strategies of the Zionist labor movement. This approach fruitfully associates national ideologies with labor practices, but it still confines this association to the manipulative strategies of the Zionist-oriented Histadrut and underrates unorganized and underrepresented workers' varied experiences of strikes.²⁴

Finally, the third approach, much distant from the first two, dissociates strikes from nationalism altogether. In focusing on the dynamics of strikes as insular occasions reflective of social injustice, group interests, or workplace-bound worker-employer tensions, this approach tends to isolate instances of strike action as momentary expressions of labor's quest for expansion of its organizational power, straightforward tensions in the labor market and workplaces, or status-related problems of particular groups of workers and professionals.²⁵

Without discarding the insights of the approaches outlined above, the following discussion proposes an alternative perspective. The emergence and presence of strikes did not merely signify the prevalence of social tension and open social conflict; rather, their marked invigoration, cyclical peaks, unrelenting character, and political resonance exposed an extremely vibrant facet of a society otherwise deeply immersed in nation building, colonial encounter, and national conflict. Therefore, instead of narrowing the discussion to the orchestration of strikes, particularly during the Mandate period, by a politically hegemonic labor movement, the book approaches strikes from a perspective much underrated by the historiography: the maturation of private capital and the private sector in Palestine's urban economy, a process encouraged by the British Mandate authorities and Zionist movement, and largely unhampered by the labor movement. In becoming a habitual, vibrant feature of Palestine's social structure, the book argues, the strike was an expression of both the challenge to the empowerment of private capital and the labor movement's weakness in the labor market and workplaces.

Viewing strikes as richly telling sites of social, cultural, political, and economic contention and as extensive sources of historical information, the discussion below approaches the intersection of strikes, nation building, and national conflict as a dynamic negotiation between social actions and evolving social structures. Strikes, the book argues, were used to ad-

vance nationally oriented labor market segregation, mobilized for political purposes, and expressed protest against state structures' interventions in industrial relations. However, after a formative period in which collective action was overshadowed by national issues of economic separation and market segregation along ethnic lines, "routinized" strikes increasingly revolved around issues of economic improvement, workers' rights, and the freedom to act against employers. With the growth of an urban and industrial manufacturing sector, issues of economic improvement, workplace rights, and anti-authoritarian stances prompted the "denationalization" of strikes. This occurred in parallel to the regime and political transitions that beset Palestine and harbingered the growing power of private capital in post-1948 Israeli society. The twofold process—of strikes first being "nationalized" and politicized, then "denationalized" and normalized—explains the proliferation of strikes in Palestine and Israel and their evolution as a central, routine means of social protest in society. Moreover, this trajectory goes a long way toward explaining why workers' protest, workplace disputes, and actual striking were deeply impacted by the political developments that have transformed Palestine since the early twentieth century.²⁶

My aim in this book is therefore to approach the multitude of strikes in Palestine and Israel in the first half of the twentieth century as a phenomenon that has become routinized and embedded in society in contexts that were seemingly not conducive to unrelenting strike action. To explain how that transformation occurred, I approach the strikes as a phenomenon that requires a social or collective biography, analyzing a large number of individual strikes, keeping in mind their variety and particularities, and narrating historically the trajectories of the strike phenomenon as a whole.²⁷

These strike stories and trajectories are based on two kinds of empirical material. The first is the strikes themselves as clearly defined events of work stoppage that produced a wealth of descriptive, experiential, interpretative, and legal information. The second type of source is the larger discussion sparked by the strike phenomenon—richly varied references and allusions made by examiners, advisers, bureaucrats, scribes, bystanders, strike beneficiaries, and strike victims. Both types of materials were found primarily in archives: the National Archives in London, the Israel State Archive in Jerusalem, the Central Zionist Archive in Jerusalem, and not least the Labor Movement Archive at the Pinchas Lavon Institute in Tel Aviv. Smaller archives consulted included the Jabotinsky Institute in Tel Aviv, the Yad Tabenkin archive in Ramat Efal, the archive of the Municipality of Tel Aviv-Yafo, and the Yad Yaari archive in Givat Haviva. A no less significant repository (for both types of sources) was the contempo-

rary press—from the weekly and monthly periodicals of the early period, through the extremely rich daily newspapers of the Mandate period, up to the highly informative leaflets and bulletins produced by the Histadrut and various labor unions and organizations involved in strike action. Complementing the archival and press materials were reports and publications produced by the Palestine government, the Zionist movement, the Histadrut, and employers.²⁸

These sources made it possible to combine the various types of materials and ultimately depict the strikes' trajectories. Quantitative material about strikes, strikers, strike demands, and strike results began to be collected in the early 1920s, mainly by the Histadrut and the Palestine government that reported on Palestine to the League of Nations and the International Labour Office. The gathering and publication of these materials achieved great sophistication in the 1930s and 1940s, and was further elaborated in the early 1950s by the Histadrut and the Israeli government. For the purposes of the discussion below, I used these quantitative sources first as base material for drawing the trends (see Appendix for further visualization). I then compared them with qualitative evidence on strikes from the archives, press, and printed materials. Relating these numbers to the workplaces and occupations affected by the strikes, and to the names and titles of relevant organizations and strikers, resulted in an approximate estimate of 2,014 strikes for the entire period from 1899 to 1951.²⁹

Next, I constructed "strike histories." Many short strikes produced only "thin" stories, so society's response to them remains unknown. Similarly, the relatively small number of strikes among Palestinian Arabs constrained any findings about the ethnic and rural/urban divisions of strike action. Furthermore, archived primary sources relating to small workplaces and workers' committees hinted that the contemporary press did not cover all labor disputes but only those that turned into full-fledged strikes. The relative paucity of archive and press sources produced by and relating to private workplaces and employers further hampered a full view of the negotiations and arbitrations occasioned by strike actions, let alone society's reactions to them. Finally, the absence of strikes in Palestine's and Israel's collective memory—that is, despite the vibrancy of the phenomenon—made it necessary to focus the construction of strike narratives mainly on contemporary primary sources. The latter, consulted for the first time for the purposes of this book, are singularly rich and offer, in terms of the history of modern Palestine, an unmatched micro-historical view of the outbreak and "lives" of strikes, and of contentious politics in general. Building on these individual stories, the formal details of each strike, and the analysis of their expressive social and cultural language, I drew the main trajectories of the phenomenon: the strikes' attunement

to the business cycles of the Palestine economy, their expression of the primacy of private capital, their interplay with nation building, and their transformation into a routine societal phenomenon.

The book explains these trajectories via five concepts, developed separately in each chapter. The first is the notion of emergence, which locates the arrival of the strike phenomenon in Palestine in the last phase of Ottoman rule over Palestine and emphasizes the looming versatility of the strike as a form of conflict. The second concept is national construction, which denotes the maturation of the strike phenomenon as a useable means of pursuing national aims and a recognized social form of action in the Yishuv as a nation-building society. This maturation, I argue, began in the period of the British conquest of Palestine and ended in the late 1920s, when strike action came to be considered a full-fledged part of the society's repertoire of collective action. The third concept, politicization, roughly dominated the 1930s. It refers to the waning of the national dimension of strike action and its growing use for the political purposes of both Jews and Arabs. Normalization, the fourth concept presented in the book, describes the apex of the strikes in the first two-thirds of the 1940s, their full-fledged social habitualization, and the "evaporation" of national and political elements from the strikes. The book closes with the concept of democratization, which denotes the strike's emergence from the watershed events of 1947–1951 as part of the workers' realigning relations with the new sovereign state of Israel. Epitomizing this phase was the highly resonant seamen's strike of late 1951, which both closes the circle that opened with the strike's emergence half a century earlier and looks forward to its ripening in the 1950s and beyond.