

No smiling for Algerian workers: explaining the modest harvest of the labour movement during the Hirak

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ABSTRACT

Between March 2019 and October 2021, Algerian workers staged no fewer than 214 strikes, playing a vital role in the fall of former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, and continuing to mobilise in the aftermath. Yet, they have gained little. This article constructs an innovative dataset on strikes in Algeria, which draws on both French-language and Arabic newspapers, to explain why workers have achieved only modest gains. It does so by pointing to three crucial factors: the separation between the ‘economic’ and ‘political’ wings of the protest movement; the division between workers in the private and public sectors; and the split between the former sole trade union in the country and the autonomous unions.

KEYWORDS

Labour movement; workers’ rights; Algeria; strikes; Hirak; mass protests

Introduction

Since the outbreak of the 2007–2008 financial crisis, mass protests have risen to prominence in world politics. In contrast to the previous century, however, there would have been a general decline in the capacity of labour to act as the leading social force in these processes of mobilisation (Clover 2016; Di Cesare 2021). Although there are certainly countries that strongly vindicate this narrative, labour protests have played a vital role in unleashing and sustaining mass protests elsewhere. Arguably, one of the contexts in which workers’ mobilisations have been more relevant over the last decade is North Africa. This, in turn, has led to an upsurge in labour studies focusing on the region (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014; Yousfi 2015; Beinin 2016; Buehler 2018; Hartshorn 2019; Bishara 2020; Feltrin 2020).

Building on this literature, the article aims to explore the 2019–2021 wave of labour activism in Algeria and explain why workers have won so little, if anything at all. Workers’

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Note: The authors affirm that this article was equally the work of both of them.

Accepted: 13 October 2023; published online: 15 May 2024

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<https://roape.net> doi: 10.62191/ROAPE-2024-0006

mobilisations were critical in contesting President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's rule and tilting the balance in favour of protesters in the 2019 uprising, also known as the 'revolution of smiles' (Del Panta 2022). The labour movement also continued to mobilise en masse after Bouteflika's fall (Beddoubia 2021). Nevertheless, Algerian workers are no better off today. The regime raised the minimum monthly wage slightly from 18,000 to 20,000 dinars and introduced a temporary allowance for young jobseekers during the Covid-19 pandemic. It also avoided major privatisation. However, real wages first stagnated and later dropped when the government's attempt to boost hydrocarbon exports by devaluating the currency contributed to rising inflation (Bersali 2022). More importantly, the country remains firmly authoritarian and there has been no improvement in union rights. Instead, the government announced its intention to introduce a new law in autumn 2022, which was ratified by Parliament in March 2023. This increased the legal requirements for establishing a union branch in the public administration and made it more difficult to call for strike action, especially in sectors regarded as strategic (Boukhlef 2023).

This article contends that there are three main factors that account for the modest harvest of Algerian workers. First is the separation between the organised labour movement and the popular political movement, known as the Hirak, which first emerged to contest President Bouteflika's bid for a fifth mandate in February 2019 and then continued to mobilise in favour of democracy, social justice and the demilitarisation of politics. In their attempt to secure a balance between activism and moderation, unions significantly contributed to foster this separation. Second is the division between workers in the highly informal private sector and the unionised workforce in the public arena. Third, the split between the former sole trade union, the Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens (UGTA), rooted predominantly in the industrial sector, and the autonomous unions, whose strongholds were in the public administration and services, needs to be considered.

The article first discusses the literature on labour in North Africa, proposing an approach based on a dynamic understanding of how the Algerian class structure has changed over time, and moving beyond the tendency to consider unions as an analytical proxy for the working class. It then introduces an innovative dataset on strikes in Algeria between March 2019 and October 2021, when workers' actions reached their zenith and an opportunity to change class relations remained, at least potentially. Drawing on French-language newspapers such as *El Watan*, *Liberté*, *Algérie Eco* and *Tout sur l'Algérie*, newspapers in Arabic such as *El Khabar* and *Echorouk El Yawmi* and the labour-focused Facebook page *Jurnan Al Amal*, this reveals 214 strikes. For each strike, details of the union that organised the strike, main claim of the mobilisation, type of strike, and workplace of origin, sector and geographical location are given. The dataset is an innovative instrument to not only explore why Algerian workers failed to reshape the system in their favour, but also to learn many details about labour mobilisations in the course of the anti-Bouteflika uprising and its aftermath. The conclusion reviews the main points raised by the article.

A different perspective on the class structure and trade unions

As Samuel Valenzuela (1989) argues, labour occupies a special position among social forces because workers share common material interests and possess a great capacity

for mobilising through trade unions and grassroots networks. Even more importantly, workplace strikes can interrupt the process of capital valorisation. Workers' mobilisations therefore have a high potential to produce political effects that go well beyond labour issues (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Collier 1999). However, in the post-Cold War period, the contribution of labour to deep political change has become more ambiguous (Baccaro, Benassi, and Meardi 2019). In some cases, scholars have also underlined how workers are no longer at the forefront of contemporary protest movements (Clover 2016; Di Cesare 2021). North Africa seems an exception in this regard. Workers played a vital role in the mass uprisings that shook the region in the 2010s, challenging the prevailing view among specialists who regarded the organised labour movement as weak or entirely co-opted (Bellin 2002).

In the upsurge in academic interest in workers' mobilisations in North Africa, scholars have focused on the role of the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail in promoting democratisation in Tunisia (Yousfi 2015), tracing back its autonomy to the legacy from the struggle for independence (Bishara 2020). By providing a comparison between Egypt and Tunisia, other studies have discussed how the labour movements in the two countries have evolved over time (Beinin 2016) and questioned why Tunisian unions were significantly more influential and successful during the political transition than Egyptian unions (Hartshorn 2019). Scholars have also studied the emergence of labour militancy in Hosni Mubarak's Egypt and the role of workers in the Egyptian revolution (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014). On Morocco, the focus has switched instead to the labour–state relationship (Feltrin 2020) and the conditions that help explain the capacity of unions to obtain socioeconomic benefits despite the regime's stability (Buehler 2018).

Building on this literature, this article aims to contribute to the research on labour in North Africa, focusing on Algeria. Although there are studies on recent developments in the Algerian labour movement (for instance, Djabi et al. 2020; Beddoubia 2021), the thorny issue of why the movement has won so little remains largely unaddressed. The article does so by proposing a dynamic understanding of how the Algerian class structure has changed and viewing the trade unions as actors in their own right that seek to maximise their bargaining power.

Most studies rooted in political economy have highlighted the connecting line between the turn to neoliberal policies in North Africa and the outbreak of huge protests. However, as Joel Beinin (2021) has pointed out, they tend to focus more on macroeconomic trends and indicators rather than on the reconfiguration of the class structure. This is even more true for hydrocarbon-rich countries such as Algeria, where the 'salience of class as a conceptual category' is often denied (Hanieh 2021, 107). Thus, political economy tends to miss two crucial elements.

The first is that the progression of different phases of capitalist development at the international level is not simply reflected in the domestic arena. As Anne Alexander and Mostafa Bassiouny (2014) have shown in Egypt, the privatisation of state-owned assets, which represents a key tenet of neoliberal policies, can be slowed down or even blocked by workers' militancy. Whether this happens or not it strongly affects the composition of the working class and its capacity to mobilise. Therefore, the various phases of development, such as state-led development and neoliberalism, do not follow one another in a linear way. Rather, the domestic class structure is continually being remade and represents a country's unique amalgam of the past and the present (Beinin 2021).

Second, scholars have tended to treat unions as analytical proxies of the working class, leading to what Maurizio Atzeni (2021) has recently defined as ‘trade union fetishism’. This approach leads to overlook conflicts that emerge between rank-and-file workers and union officials, and between unionised and non-unionised parts of the working class (Feltrin 2020). In contrast to what is often assumed, unions should not be seen as mere representatives of workers’ interests and aspirations, but as actors that attempt to enhance their power by establishing a monopoly over the sellers in the labour force, that is, the employees (Pizzorno 1978). To pursue this goal, they are eventually compelled to create a layer of full-time officials (FTOs) to conduct daily activities. To guarantee their social existence, which ultimately depends on the stability and vitality of their own institution, FTOs are forced to perform a dual social function, oscillating between a credible threat of action and their capacity to remove the menace of disruption (Offe and Wiesenthal 1980). The former depends on the unions’ willingness and ability to mobilise, whereas the latter is the FTOs’ ability to control the membership. To perform this social role, FTOs must move like a pendulum, swinging between the two positions but needing to avoid their extreme ends: rendering unions completely irrelevant for workers and conflicting directly with the state (Darlington and Upchurch 2012). It is by embracing these two theoretical points of view that this article seeks to explain why Algerian workers have gained so little. Before doing so, it is useful to discuss how the class structure has changed after independence.

Class transformations in Algeria and workers’ struggles

France’s colonial domination of Algeria, which lasted from 1830 to 1962, transformed the country into a commodity-extracting hinterland for the metropolis and an importer of manufactured consumer goods, resulting in an inconsistent process of industrialisation. After independence, state-led development emerged as a plausible solution for breaking the chain of dependence on Western countries. In the wake of Houari Boumédiène’s bloodless coup in 1965, priority was given to state-owned and vertically integrated industries, favouring capital-intensive sectors such as steel, heavy machinery, iron metallurgy, organic and inorganic chemistry, and electricity. Algeria’s class structure was transformed. Agricultural employment shrank from about 50% of the workforce to less than 30% between 1967 and 1977. Conversely, non-agricultural employment increased by more than 130%, from approximately 730,000 workers in 1966 to about 1,730,000 in 1977. Heavy industry experienced the most rapid growth in this period (Bennoune 1988).

Because Algeria inherited a mainly agrarian economy from colonialism, the country was forced to import technologies and machinery from core capitalist states to promote accelerated industrialisation. To do so, hydrocarbon revenues and external financing were mobilised. However, in the wake of the demise of Keynesian dynamics of accumulation at the global level, external loans became increasingly costly (Beinin 2016). Moreover, an overvalued exchange rate due to oil and gas exports hampered the competitiveness of Algerian manufactured goods, while an upsurge in workers’ militancy in the second half of the 1970s and the government’s claim at the time of being a ‘socialist’ regime rendered it very difficult to raise productivity (Alexander 2002). All these factors, together

with pressure from the resilient private sector and the desire of high-ranking bureaucrats to transform themselves into the owners of the means of production, drove economic liberalisation.

This started under President Chadli Bendjedid, who succeeded Boumédiène after his sudden death in December 1978. Resources allocated to industry were reduced from almost 60% of government expenditure in the 1970s to about 28% in the 1980s, allowing investments to be redirected towards infrastructure and social services. Consequently, the industrial sector continued to grow in numerical terms, but its percentage vis-à-vis the total workforce was very stable, slightly decreasing from 13% in 1977 to 12.3% in 1987. Most of the tens of thousands of Algerians who entered the job market every year found work in the public administration, which grew significantly between 1977 and 1987 from 385,024 workers to 1,180,259, rising from 16.8% to 28.9% of the workforce (Dillman 2000, 18). However, the sharp drop in oil prices between 1985 and 1986 and the regime's adoption of austerity measures led to an impressive wave of strikes that crippled the entire industrial sector in the autumn of 1988 and paved the way for mass protests (Alexander 2002).

Although the January 1992 military coup cut short the democratic opening that had followed the October 1988 uprising, this phase produced long-lasting effects. A new constitution and Law 90/14 granted workers the right to form trade unions outside UGTA for the first time in post-independent Algeria. Dozens of independent unions sprang up, especially in the public sector. Not only did they survive in the post-1992 period, they emerged as important structures for workers' mobilisations from the early 2000s onwards (Larabi 2021). The onset of the civil war between state apparatuses and insurgent Islamists in the wake of the 1992 coup did not reverse the process of economic liberalisation, which led to the signing of a structural adjustment plan with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1994. However, the amount of privatisation remained limited. Between 1988 and 1999, Algeria privatised state assets for only US\$55.05 million, which was one-tenth and one-fortieth of the amount of privatisation undertaken by Tunisia and Egypt, respectively (Hanieh 2013). Three main reasons explain this. The first is the long-lasting and savage civil war fought throughout the 1990s, that deterred multinationals from buying assets in the country. Second, to survive in power against the Islamist insurgency, the military-led regime needed allies. It found important support in UGTA, which adopted a strongly anti-Islamist stance, but remained critical of the regime's privatisation plans. This limited what the government could do (Larabi 2021). Finally, although the number of workers' strikes did not reach the heights recorded during the 1988–1992 transition, they remained a powerful barrier to privatisation.

The combination of the sharp decline in government expenditure on industry and trade liberalisation to comply with both IMF prescriptions and the interests of the comprador private sector resulted in an unprecedented process of deindustrialisation (Hamouchene and Rouabah 2016). The value added to GDP by manufacturing shrank from 11.4% in 1990 to just over 5% in 2010, hovering around this percentage throughout the 2010s. Consequently, industrial workers declined from 12.3% of the total workforce in 1987 to less than 9% in 2010, before increasing slightly to 9.5% in 2019 (ONS 2019). This contributed to an increasing fragmentation and casualisation of labour relations in the expanding private sector. Although some major fortunes accumulated in trade, transport, construction and agro-industry, such as the conglomerate Cevital, small firms became

dominant. There were only 3140 medium-sized private enterprises employing between 50 and 250 workers in Algeria in 2016, slightly more than the 2485 firms employing between 50 and 250 workers in Tunisia, whose population is about four times smaller (Oxford Business Group 2017).

In line with this, there was a significant expansion of informal employment and temporary contracts. The former constituted about 25% of the labour force between 1980 and 1985, increasing to 40% between 2004 and 2009, whereas the latter skyrocketed from 6.2% in 1992 to 35.4% in 2014 (UNECA 2019). It is important to highlight how the process of deindustrialisation and growth of the private sector has been uneven. Although the industrial labour force in the public sector more than halved, from approximately 60% of total industrial employment in 1977 to about 30% in the late 2010s, workers' resistance to the government's attempts to close down state enterprises meant that some of the gigantic and vertically integrated factories established during Boumédiène's term, such as the state-run enterprise ENIEM, the iron and steel El Hadjar factory in Annaba Province, and the state-owned enterprise in the industrial area of Rouïba, the Société Nationale des Véhicules Industriels (SNVI), survived. In most of the mobilisations in the industrial sector, workers used the lower levels of UGTA, which, although its leadership was completely under state control, remained more independent in scattered industries, territories and federations (Del Panta 2022).

Another important development in the process of class transformation in Algeria has taken place in the public administration and education and health services. These sectors had emerged as the main employer during Chadli's presidency and on the eve of the civil war represented slightly less than 30% of the Algerian workforce. Under Bouteflika, the number of people working in public administration and education and health services grew further, peaking at 34.4% in 2013. However, once oil prices fell from US\$80 to US\$110 per barrel between 2011 and 2013 to just US\$40 to US\$60 between 2015 and 2017, the government turned to austerity measures. These led to two main trends.

First and foremost, workers in these sectors were heavily affected by factors such as the reduction in funds allocated by central and local authorities, the government freeze on public wage increases between 2011 and 2016, and the November 2016 pension reform that scrapped the option to retire after 25 years of work and increased the retirement age from 55 to 60 (Del Panta 2022). Second, the number of people employed in public administration and education and health declined significantly, from 34.4% in 2013 to 30.9% in 2019 (ONS 2019). As a result, absorbing new job seekers became even more difficult. This contributed to youth unemployment rising to as high as 26.9% in 2019 and favoured the adoption of casual contracts in public administration and in the education and health services. Between 2013 and 2019, fixed-term contracts increased from 14% to 21% in the state sector, further undermining the traditional middle-class status of this tier of workers (Direction Générale de la Fonction Publique 2019). In response, a long wave of protests and strikes affected the capital's public transport system, railway network, airports, postal service and education and health services. Although most of these protests were short-lived and almost half of the strikes lasted just one day, they contributed to the emergence of radical practices and culture of protest that turned public sector workers into vocal anti-regime protesters in the 2010s. Interestingly, it was not UGTA that led these strikes, but independent unions. In an attempt to reduce their endemically

high level of fragmentation, 13 of these founded the first federation outside of UGTA, the Confédération des Syndicats Algériens (CSA), in 2018 (Djabi et al. 2020). Other important unions, such as the Syndicat National Autonome des Personnels de l'Administration Publique (SNAPAP), did not join the CSA, which was especially influential among education, health and postal workers.

Finally, it is important to mention the workers in the strategic oil and gas sectors. Although just 1.4% of the Algerian labour force worked in these sectors in 2019, and even less if managers are excluded, these sectors accounted for about 97% of Algeria's exports, two-thirds of government spending and one-third of the country's GDP (ONS 2019). This means that oil and gas workers occupy a strategic position in the Algerian economy and, potentially, can command considerable bargaining power. By blocking production, they can affect the entire economy of the country. To avoid this scenario, the Algerian state has historically granted relatively better social and economic conditions to hydrocarbon workers, as the industry is publicly controlled. However, starting from the mid 2010s, austerity measures have affected their living conditions and salaries too. Furthermore, decreasing oil revenues have put pressure on the government to ease restrictions on foreign direct investments and promote a partial privatisation of the sector (Belalloufi 2020). Workers in the oil and gas sectors have staged three hunger strikes: in 2013, 2016 and 2018. Despite being mostly influenced by UGTA, this tier of workers has often mobilised under the banner of an autonomous union, mainly the Syndicat National des Travailleurs de l'Électricité et du Gaz (SNATEG), which is affiliated to the Confédération Syndical des Forces Productives (COSYFOP) (Merani 2021).

Strikes in Algeria between March 2019 and October 2021

To assess the role of the labour movement in Bouteflika's fall and in the aftermath, this article provides a unique dataset on workers' strikes between March 2019 and October 2021. It does so by drawing on four French-language Algerian newspapers, *El Watan*, *Liberté*, *Algérie Eco* and *Tout sur l'Algérie*, and the Facebook page Jurnan Al Amal (in Arabic), which specifically covers labour disputes. It also relies on two leading newspapers in Arabic, *El Khabar* and *Echorouk El Yawmi*, although their coverage of strike action was marginal in comparison with the francophone press. Strikes were retrieved by searching for keywords in French or Arabic on the articles published on online newspapers, such as strike (grève, إضراب [iḍrāb]), union (syndicat, نقابة [naqāba]) and worker (travailleur, عامل [‘āmil]). Plural and feminine forms were also considered.

The selection of a comprehensive set of media sources with different editorial lines and geographical foci should increase the number of strikes revealed, thereby reducing the risk of biased coverage. Moreover, as Killian Clarke (2023) has recently shown, datasets based on local sources rather than on international and English-language newspapers capture a larger number of events and tend to be less biased towards large urban events that coincide with cathartic political moments. This does not mean that the dataset presents a complete record of all strikes that took place in Algeria over the period considered. No event dataset can claim this and a strike catalogue is even less likely to do so, first and foremost because small labour protests outside of the capital tend to be undercounted even in local sources (Clarke 2023). Moreover, it is likely that the privately owned press might

have an interest in underreporting labour disputes, especially when the owner of a newspaper is not merely a publisher. Finally, a newspaper's online version might not contain all the articles included in its print version. Bearing these caveats in mind, the dataset appears to be highly reliable and provides what is, arguably, a useful tool for researchers. **Figure 1** presents monthly strikes in Algeria between March 2019 and October 2021, showing how workers' mobilisations were a relevant issue during this period. In total, there were no less than 214 strikes.

Figure 2 focuses on the geographical distribution of strikes, pointing to the more turbulent character of some regions, such as Béjaïa and Tizi Ouzou. Both are part of Kabylia, which is the main Amazigh (Berber) area of the country. Since the so-called 'Berber Spring' in 1980, whose main aim was to promote the use of the Amazigh language, the region has been a hotbed of anti-regime mobilisation, culminating in a violent revolt in 2001 that costed the lives of more than 100 protesters.

In this article, a strike action is defined as a coordinated workers' mobilisation resulting in a stoppage of work activities, no matter which actor calls for the strike action. Any strike counts as a unique episode. This approach has its limitations. A general strike, for instance, is worth as much as a single workplace strike. Moreover, strikes lasting a single day or multiple days are both counted just once. To deal with some of these issues, Michael Biggs (2018) has called on scholars to focus on the number of participants and not the frequency of events. However, data on the number of workers participating in strikes or the duration of stoppages are scattered and often unreliable (Clarke 2023). By taking into account factors such as workplace, sector, geographical location, type, main

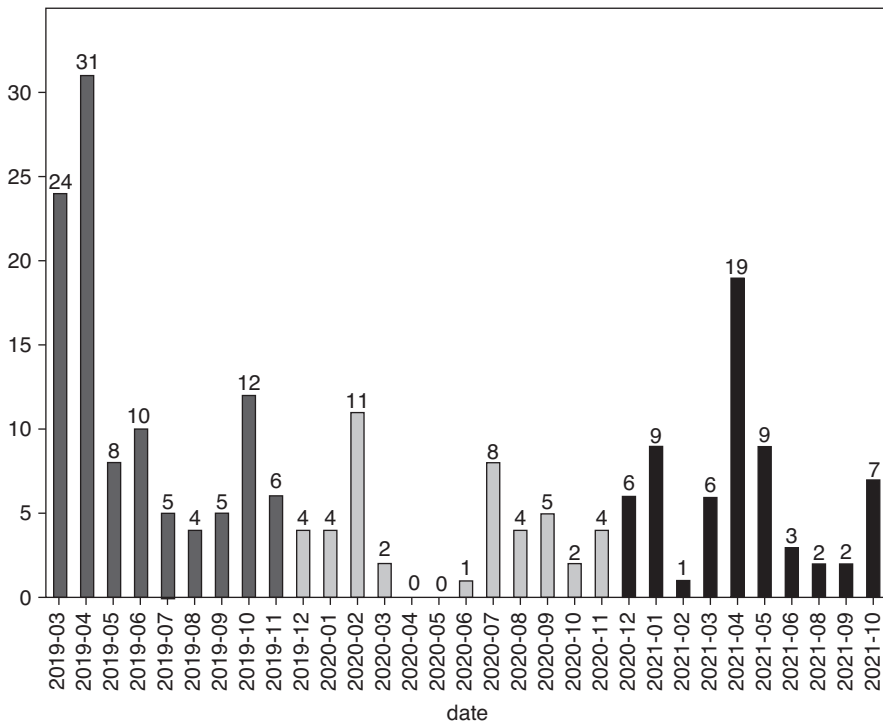


Figure 1. Strike actions by month (March 2019 to October 2021).

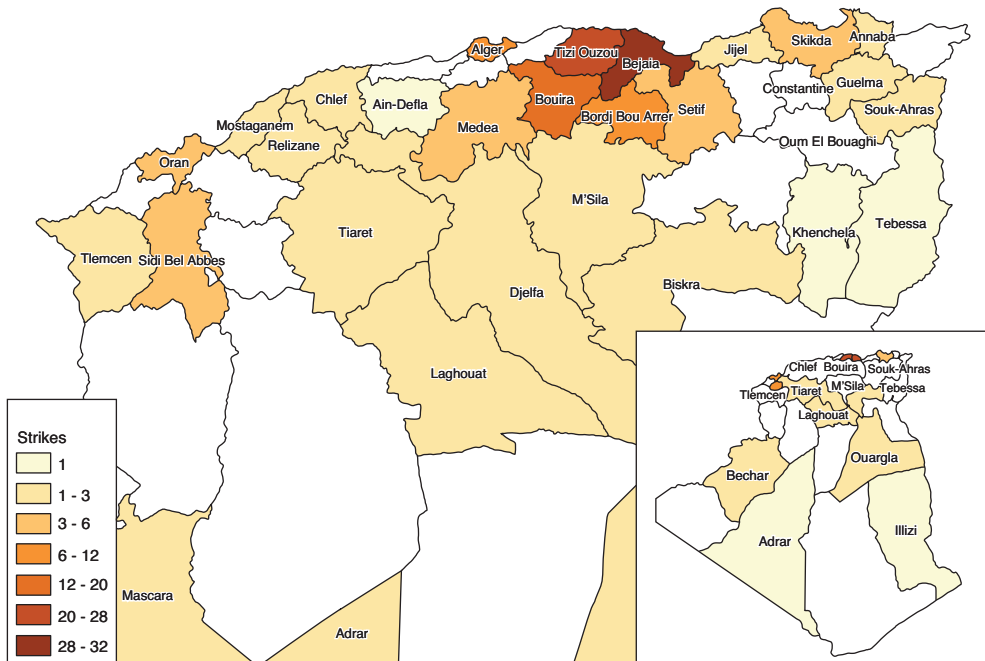


Figure 2. Geographical distribution of strike actions (March 2019 to October 2021).

Note: The total number in the table is less than the total number of strikes because both national general strikes and general category strikes were not assigned to any region.

claim and union that organised the strike, this article aims to provide a qualitative understanding of workers' strikes in Algeria between March 2019 and October 2021.

Unions' behaviour and the missed recomposition between the labour and political movements after Bouteflika's fall

On 22 February 2019, workers were not at the forefront of mass demonstrations that first questioned Bouteflika's bid for a fifth presidential term. Rather, they mostly participated as individuals. Students and disenfranchised youth, many of whom were without a job or employed in the informal sector, were the most visible social force (Northey 2021). In late February, an important teachers' national strike took place, but autonomous unions did not try to connect it with the Hirak. It was only on 10 March that the labour movement entered the scene when some political activists used social media to spread a call for a five-day general strike. Neither UGTA nor the CSA responded. The former defended Bouteflika and the latter expressed only generic solidarity with the Hirak against repression. Nevertheless, spontaneous stoppages paralysed schools, universities, transport, ports such as Béjaïa and Skikda, public offices and key industrial complexes such as the SNVI in Rouïba, ENIEM in Tizi Ouzou and the El Hadjar iron and steel factory (Del Panta 2022). Strikes also involved key workplaces in the hydrocarbon sector, for example, Sonatrach in Béjaïa and Sonelgaz in Algier, Annaba and Relizane, following an appeal by SNATEG and COSYFOP for action (Beddoubia 2021). In response to the successful mobilisation, Bouteflika declared he was withdrawing his candidacy for the next presidential election (Volpi 2020). However,

workers' and popular protests did not stop, pushing the army to stage a soft coup as the best option to appease the masses. On 2 April, Bouteflika was forced to resign.

The ousting of Bouteflika did not significantly curb the Hirk, which continued mobilising to demand demilitarisation of political life and the establishment of a civilian government. As **Figure 1** shows, there were more strikes in April than in the previous month. On 8 April, COSYFOP launched a 10-day general strike against the military-led transition (Beddoubia 2021). It succeeded in involving some UGTA bastions such as the *Entreprise Publique Économique des Tracteurs Agricoles*, a huge state industry producing tractors in Constantine, and Sonatrach plants in Ouargla and Sétif (Lamrimane 2019). On 10 April, the CSA finally started the strike that had been proclaimed 10 days earlier when Bouteflika was still in power, demanding the immediate resignation of the executive nominated by Abdelkader Bensalah, the interim president. The action was reported as being successful among UGTA rank-and-file members in the state industrial sector, especially in Tizi Ouzou, Béjaïa and Skikda (Djafri 2019).

A few days earlier, the general secretaries of the local UGTA sections in Tizi Ouzou, Béjaïa, Saida and Tlemcen had signed a document demanding a 'new republic' and the departure of UGTA's leader, Sidi Saïd, who reacted by suspending the dissident officials. The move backfired, and while the CSA general strike was ongoing, 37 out of 45 delegates from UGTA's national committee published a statement supporting the Hirk and putting pressure on Sidi Saïd to resign. On 11 April, thousands of workers and union activists gathered in front of the hotel in Oran where the executive committee was meeting. Particularly noteworthy was the presence of workers from the SNVI in Rouïba, arguably the single most important UGTA branch in the country. Sidi Saïd sought to resist the mounting pressure and scheduled an extraordinary congress for late June. On 1 May, the dissidents from UGTA joined the independent unions in the Algiers Labour Day march, and announced the formation of the *Comité National de Réappropriation et de Sauvegarde de l'UGTA* (Committee for the Reappropriation and Safeguarding of UGTA). They demanded the reinstatement of the sanctioned representatives and the postponement of the congress as preconditions for a democratic renewal of the organisation (Poletti 2019).

However, the dissidents' movement was not able to prevent the congress from taking place on 22 June. Here, Sidi Saïd was replaced by a man close to him, Salim Labatcha, a former MP for the *Parti des Travailleurs*, which he had left in 2016, denouncing it as too critical of Bouteflika (Alilat 2019). Labatcha was a little-known figure, not directly involved with the regime. Thus, his election represented a partial, although instrumental, acceptance of the issues put forward by the *Comité National de Réappropriation et de Sauvegarde de l'UGTA*. A few days later a front-runner of the movement, Béjaïa's general secretary, Abdelaziz Hamalaoui, began a collaboration with the new UGTA leadership (Benakli 2019). This signalled its willingness to reinstate the dissident officials, achieving a substantial drop in grassroots protests in the following weeks (Latreche 2019). Therefore, by channelling dissent towards an extraordinary congress that changed the leadership in what was essentially a window-dressing operation, UGTA was successful in regaining control of rebel officials and sections. Two consequences followed. On the one hand, this development weakened the upcoming mobilisations through securing the split between the industrial workforce and employees in the public administration and services, mostly affiliated with autonomous unions. On the other hand, a growing division between the political movement and the labour movement emerged as a key mechanism for regime

stabilisation. In this regard, both the behaviour of the autonomous unions and the failure to democratise UGTA were crucial.

After the constitutional court had declared many presidential candidates to be illegitimate, the interim government and army generals announced the postponement of presidential elections that should have been held in July, and opted for dialogue with parties and civil society representatives (Volpi 2020). Up to this point, the CSA had maintained a contentious approach towards the government. In May, it aligned with the *Conférence de la Société Civile* (Civil Society Conference), whose aim was to put forward proposals for a ‘civic’ transition to democracy by gathering together opposition parties and non-governmental organisations involved with the Hirak (Beddoubia 2021). However, on 6 July, some independent education unions participated in the national dialogue between the regime and the Islamist and nationalist parties that had represented the ‘loyal opposition’ to Bouteflika. This initiative failed because of its overt complicity with the regime’s electoral agenda (Dris-Aït Hamadouche 2020). However, the army-orchestrated dialogue continued, leading to the establishment of a new panel for discussions under the direction of Karim Younes, former president of the national assembly. Representatives of some independent unions such as the *Conseil National des Professionnels de l’Éducation Supérieure et Technique* were also included in the panel. In September, Younes agreed to lead a commission that was expected to organise and supervise the ballots scheduled for 12 December, co-opting as vice-president the general secretary of the *Conseil National des Enseignants du Supérieur* (Beddoubia 2021).

During the autumn, the regime’s attempt to hold presidential elections radicalised the Hirak, also contributing to creating the context for a sharp increase in workers’ mobilisations. October 2019 is the third-most ‘turbulent’ month in the dataset, with 14 walkouts in different sectors, especially in public services and transport. Primary teachers coordinated a grassroots strike that was not authorised by the unions, threatening to boycott the professional exams (Beddoubia 2021). Therefore, the launching of a general strike by the CSA on 28 October should be read in the light of growing popular and rank-and-file pressure. However, the mobilisation did not directly criticise the army’s electoral agenda and took place on Monday 28 October to avoid an encounter with the students’ march the next day. This stood in sharp contrast to what had occurred on 10 April, when students helped union activists to resist police repression and reach the *Algérie Poste* headquarters, facilitating the walkout of postal workers in the capital city (Guernani 2019). Even more importantly, the absorption of dissent by UGTA officials and the rank-and-file prevented the strike action from extending to the industrial workers, as had happened in the spring. The protest was a fiasco, but this did not affect the Hirak, which was able to launch demonstrations involving millions of people on 1 November and 6 December under the slogan ‘boycott the elections’.

These marches were qualitatively different from the ones in the spring, because young and marginalised workers from the urban suburbs were no longer the mainstay of street actions (Sidi Moussa 2019). The emphasis on a gradual approach from the middle-class leadership of the Hirak, which was narrowly focused on democratic transition, discouraged disenfranchised youth from joining the popular movement (Dufresne-Aubertin 2021). For their part, unions did not commit to repairing this fracture between the ‘economic’ and the ‘political’ wings of the movement. Rather, they contributed to such a division. This happened at critical junctures, such as the general strike lasting from 8 December until the election day which aimed to prevent the presidential election from being held. The demobilisation of UGTA’s ‘rebels’ after June was a pivotal act in the chain of events and prevented

defections from the rank-and-file and local branches. Only Béjaïa's UGTA joined the general strike, and there was no action in the industrial sector. In addition, some independent unions explicitly supported the holding of elections (Belalloufi 2020). Others, such as SNAPAP, contested the military-led transition, but did not call on their base to mobilise (Rechidi 2019). The political movement therefore remained largely isolated in its attempt to directly challenge the regime's planned transition. Without a direct intervention of the organised labour movement, this was not enough to prevent the presidential elections being held. Although turnout was a historical low of 40% and the regime's legitimacy remained weak, the candidate favoured by the state apparatuses, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, was sworn in. The army thereby achieved an important victory, disorienting the Hirak and unleashing a wave of political repression that the outbreak of the pandemic helped to strengthen.

Between increasing repression and half-hearted co-optation in times of COVID-19: Why did a new wave of strikes not become widespread?

If the Covid-19 crisis marked a major setback for the Hirak, the labour movement was also badly affected. Work stoppages almost halved in 2020. As **Figure 3** shows, there was a drastic fall in the number of mobilisations in public administration and education, which were strongly affected by confinement measures.

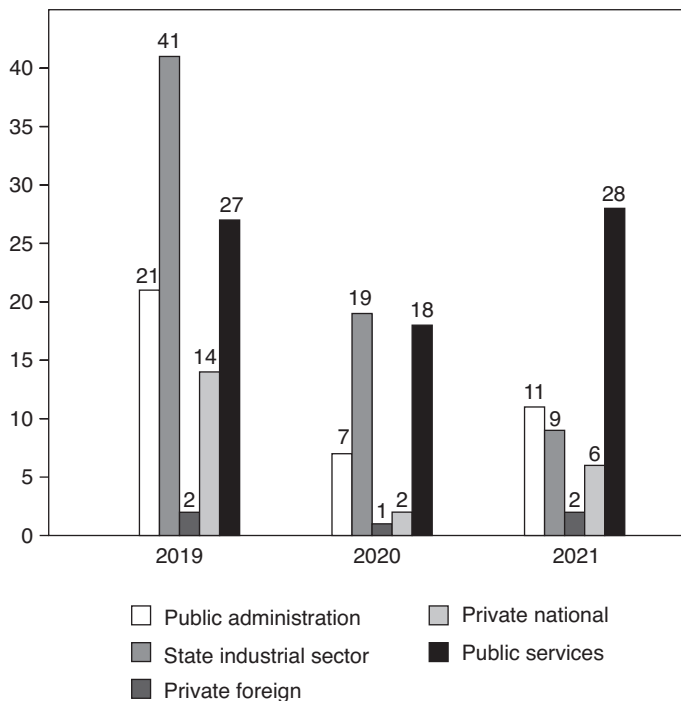


Figure 3. Strike actions by sector (March 2019 to October 2021).

Note: The total number in the table is less than the total number of strikes because general national strikes were not assigned to any category.

Other sectors experienced different trends. There was, for instance, less of a decrease in the number of actions in public services because of the growing militancy of groups such as refuse collectors, firemen and health personnel. Although the number of strikes in the state industrial sector more than halved, the sector was less affected by the lockdowns and experienced no fewer than 19 strikes in 2020 alone. To some extent, these data were driven by a deteriorating economic situation marked by wage arrears and growing concerns among public sector industrial workers about restructuring. There were also some major single strike actions, such as the month-long stoppage by Béjaïa's dockers in July, which paralysed the second-most important port for oil and liquid petroleum gas exports in the western Mediterranean. This protest centred around the demand for the removal of the management responsible for not recognising the union branch, epitomising a relatively widespread move over 2020. This explains the partial resilience of political and union claims, despite the retrenchment of the Hirak and the growing importance of grievances related to wages and working conditions, as **Figure 4** shows.

Since the autumn of 2020, moreover, the easing of restrictions had coincided with signs that the Hirak was being revitalised. The Tuesday and Friday marches gradually reemerged and thousands gathered in Algiers on 22 February 2021 to commemorate the second anniversary of the outbreak of the popular movement (Northey 2021). After having obtained the approval of a new constitution in November 2020, despite a low turnout of 23%, Tebboune

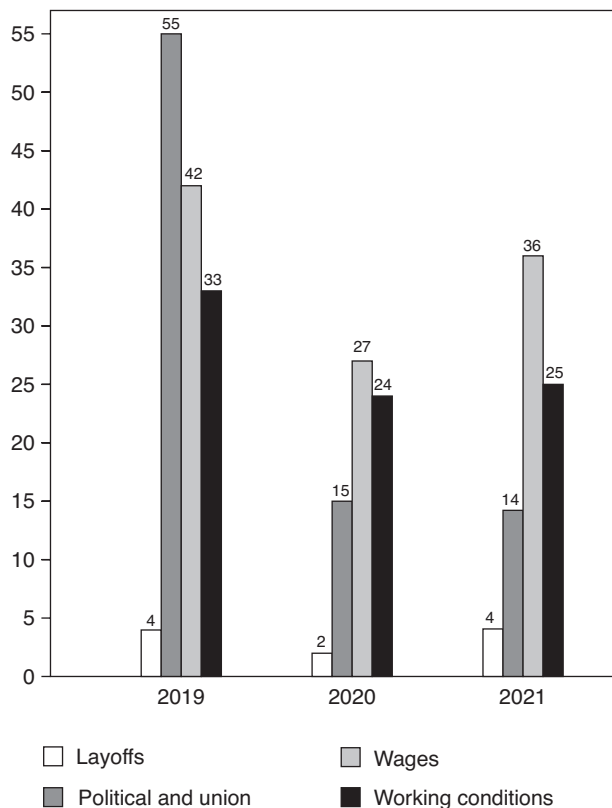


Figure 4. Main issues at stake in strike actions, March 2019 to October 2021, shown as the number of strikes principally for the four featured motives.

Note: The total number in the table is higher than the total number of strikes because in some instances there were multiple claims.

reacted by mixing repression with certain concessions, such as the liberation of some political prisoners. He then dissolved Parliament and scheduled early elections for June. In response, the Hirak issued a new call to boycott elections (Benfodil 2021). At the same time, the resilience of labour struggles during the lockdowns and the reopening of schools and public offices prepared the ground for a new wave of workers' activism. The catalyst was the actions of 200 workers who were fired for demanding the recognition of a union branch by Numilog in Béjaïa, a logistics firm owned by Cevital. Workers' activism peaked in April 2021, when 19 strike actions were reported. Almost half were national sector-wide mobilisations of education workers (janitors, and primary and high school teachers), medical assistants, postal workers, clerks from the Ministry of Trade, tax collectors and firemen. The major demand from primary teachers and medical assistants was a wage increase in recognition of their professional status. Although the local section of UGTA in Béjaïa called a successful regional strike in solidarity with Numilog and the Hirak on 21 April (Al Amal 2021), it was independent unions that launched most of the strikes, in keeping with what happened during the whole of 2021, as **Figure 5** shows.

Nevertheless, this was not enough to create an existential threat to the regime. In the reverse of what had happened in December 2019, the weakness of the Hirak meant that the labour movement could not find support in the political movement. Even more importantly, the strikes of public sector workers affiliated to autonomous unions were not able

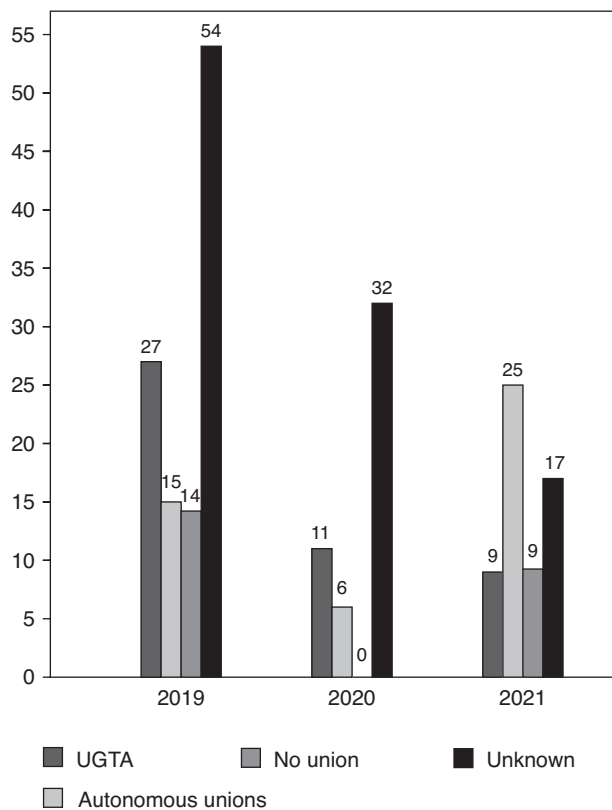


Figure 5. Strike actions by the union declaring them (March 2019 to October 2021).

Note: The total number in the table is higher than the total number of strikes because in some instances the strike was jointly called by UGTA and autonomous unions.

to activate a generalised mobilisation of the entire Algerian working class, suffering from the lack of involvement of the highly informal private sector and industrial workers unionised by UGTA. In this context, independent unions were careful to restrict their claims to socioeconomic issues, and to keep the sectoral mobilisations separate in a clear example of ‘controlled militancy’ to check pressure from below and engage in negotiations with the government (Darlington and Upchurch 2012). This was particularly the case with the teachers’ national strike proclaimed in late April, under the pressure of a grassroots mobilisation in Oran. Other national protests followed in May, but the threat to boycott students’ exams was withdrawn (Bersali 2021). Such a strategy was apparently successful in terms of recognition by the state, which opened negotiations with the independent unions for the first time since their emergence in the 1990s (Charef 2021). However, promises resulting from negotiations remained unfulfilled. In June, reported strikes were down to almost nil and there was no substantial popular mobilisation to prevent parliamentary elections from being held, despite another historically low turnout. In the following months, the HIRAK gradually disappeared from the public scene and workplaces remained silent. Once demobilisation had been achieved, the regime cracked down on workers and activists.

Conclusion

In March 2023, the Algerian parliament ratified a new government bill on labour rights which aimed to prevent conflicts at work by severely restricting the right to strike, especially in those sectors regarded as strategic. Arguably, this shows the dual nature of recent workers’ mobilisations in the country. Although labour protests have been so challenging that the regime thought it necessary to limit workers’ capacity to mobilise, labour conditions have not improved. In fact, not only did workers gain little, if anything, in socioeconomic terms, but the country is possibly even more authoritarian than it used to be. This article has sought to deal with this paradox, contributing to the expanding interest in labour studies on North Africa following the mass mobilisations of the 2010s. It has done so by creating a new dataset on strikes in Algeria between March 2019 and October 2021, following a recent and rapidly developing trend of building datasets using local sources.

The article focused on three main factors that could help explain why Algerian workers have mobilised in such a large way and obtained nothing of substance. The first is the separation between the ‘economic’ and ‘political’ wings of the protest movement. Although several different factors played a role in this respect, trade unions contributed significantly by exchanging their control over workers’ militancy for political recognition from the state. However, in so doing, they severely weakened the capacity of the HIRAK to force the regime to become more politically open and, therefore, create the possibility of workers obtaining socioeconomic gains. Second, the process of economic liberalisation since the 1980s has produced a division in the labour market between a highly informal private sector composed of many small enterprises on the one hand, and the public sector on the other, in which the level of unionisation is higher and the relationship between workers and owners more formalised. Third, the rapid growth since the 2000s of the autonomous unions that first emerged in the short democratic opening between October 1988 and January 1992 has created a split between industrial workers, who mainly remained within the ranks of UGTA, and workers in

the public administration and services, who have predominantly switched to one of the many autonomous unions. The endemic fragmentation of the latter camp and the conflict between UGTA and the autonomous unions has made it more difficult to obtain a non-sectoral mobilisation of the entire Algerian labour movement, thus limiting its capacity to reshape society.

Acknowledgements

Preliminary drafts of this article were presented at the Labour in the MENA Region conference organised by the American University of Beirut (4–7 January 2022) and at the SeSaMO conference in Naples (22–24 June 2022). The authors wish to thank all the organisers and participants who were associated with the two events. Anne Alexander, Francesco Bagnardi, Joel Beinin, John Chalcraft, Lorenzo Feltrin, Wael Gamal, Rima Majed, Guglielmo Meardi, Elizabeth Saleh and Andrea Teti provided extended and insightful comments on earlier versions of this article. Special thanks go to Giada Azara, who helped us in drawing the geographical map on strikes using GIS software. Any errors and omissions remain ours.

Disclosure statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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