

# INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS IN ROMANIA. OUTCOMES OF TWO STRIKES IN A WOOD MANUFACTURE FURNITURE FACTORY FROM CLUJ COUNTY (2017)

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**ABSTRACT.** In the case of Romanian state, the dependent developments under neoliberalism shapes local dynamics of labour. On a local level, having a main investor a foreign firm will shape the standards, quotas, competitiveness between workers. I will focus on two strikes inside a manufactory firm and what their components illustrate about industrial relations. One outcome shows that dynamics between union, workers and employers regarding financial disagreements can have a positive result and the other shows how organizational dynamics that questions specifically the status quo relation between workers and supervisors/management can have a negative result. Because of organisational environment and macroeconomic context of a post socialist state involved in accommodating foreign investment firms while under developing collective bargaining through labour legislation, workers have diverse interpretations of these two specific labour movements inside their factory.

**Keywords:** industrial relations, trade unions, work management, labor conflicts, wildcat strike.

## Introduction

The trajectory of the Romanian industrial relations market coupled with the evolution of transnational economic collaborations have been extensively studied in recent years. Whether we talk about economic analyses on Romanian labour market (Ban, 2016) or sociological insights of industrial relations in Romania (Perneș, 2023; Mihaly, 2021; Trif, 2016), the labour market contexts

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were pertinently exposed in their dependence and imbalances. However great the progress in acknowledging the constant and competitive market that international economy entails on Romanian workers, or however successful the attempts to establish a link between macro-structural phenomena and micro dynamics inside industrial relations in Romania have been, there are still questions left unanswered.

My first sociological research was in 2015 when for my bachelor thesis I conducted participant observation in a Maramureș County factory. In the bachelor's thesis I described the manufacturing routines, worker activities in one small production assembly line. After this research of 2 months' ethnography and interviews, I continued to have questions about the particularities of industrial relations in Romania and questions about the workers inside manufacturing industry and their understanding of this work realm. Therefore, in 2017, I searched in Cluj County market for a factory with similar characteristics to the Maramureș factory to study industrial relations at a deeper level. During my 6 months' work in the wood manufacture factory, I had the opportunity or luck to participate in **two spontaneous strikes**. The first strike happened in May 2017 and the second one in July 2017, both bringing me questions about conflicts and labour movement in a factory's shop floors.

The paper will focus on two strikes and what their components illustrate about industrial relations in a manufactory firm. One outcome shows that dynamics between union, workers and employers regarding financial disagreements can have a positive result and the other shows how organizational dynamics that questions specifically the status quo power relation between workers and supervisors/ management can have a negative result. I will also show how the same events are interpreted by workers differently because of organisational environment. At the same time, diverse interpretations can be tied to the macro context of a post socialist state involved in accommodating foreign investment firms while under developing collective bargaining through labour legislation.

## **Sociology of work**

From a sociological perspective, work activities are embodying in the everyday life of a person. Whether we conceptualize it in a classic perspective and acknowledge the social relation of labour's production relations or focus on organizational dynamics a link can be drawn between social structure and work. Ethnography research in a contemporary factory can be used to understand social phenomena within a society. In the case of Romanian state, the dependent developments under neoliberalism shapes local dynamics of labour. Having a main investor a foreign firm will shape the standards, the quotas, the competitiveness

between workers. Furthermore, their way of responding, resisting will reflect the relationship between their local conflict and macro structure of state's labour legislations and foreign firm strategies.

These modern societies focused on organized work for profit and capital are the direct result of Industrial Revolution. On one hand, this event created the need for new ways of management due to larger ways of production, work contracts and consumption. And on the other, it raised the need to protect and represent the workers in new ways. Scientific management was created by F. Taylor with the specific purpose of improving productivity and worker's individual activity. The work environment and relations became very rationalized, technical with clear separation between workers along the assembly lines. Later, Fordism extends scientific managements by developing the focus around mass production process that includes the workers as market consumers (Watson, 2017). Globalization created a shift from the industrial capitalist societies to post-industrial societies, postmodernism, post-Fordism. Consequently, human recourse management brought an employee engagement discourse that depoliticize and decontextualize the employee inside organizations (Dyer et al, 2014).

### **Industrial Relations**

Industrial relations are a field of study developed in XIX Century as a response for the new context of industrial capitalism. At the same time, labour law as a field was developed to keep up with unbalanced power relation in the employee and employer contract. The focus of industrial relations is the tripartite relation between unions, patrons and the state (Coutu, Dukes & Murray, 2023). Labor laws as a direct result of state decisions can have an impact on organization and mobilization on a local level. Industrial relations focus on this relationship where trade unions are the core of its analyses (Watson, 2017) but also bring into discussion collective bargaining and strikes that outline the employee's disadvantage in particular dynamics. Hence, the trade union studies have the purpose to outline the capacity of translating micro level action into political or industrial matter or to translate the unbalanced situation between employee and employer (Watson & Korczynski 2011; Watson, 2018).

There are substantial differences between economic sectors such as capital-intensity and the degree of dependence on skilled labours, as well as in the spatial organization of production and its power relations (Adăscăliței and Guga, 2017; Mihaly, 2023). To some extent, trade unions and particular worker mobilizations are dependent to structural decisions that shape labour unions rights and restrains the individual acts. For instance, the change of Labour Code

in Romania from 2011 changed the employee and employer relations and new amendments in The Social Dialogue Act unbalanced the relation between social partners: trade union and employees' associations (Constantin and Guga, 2017; Trif, 2016).

In a contemporary class stratification and capitalism order, work stoppage, resistance, labour movements or strikes fall into two major categories: *strikes* organized within unions or with trade union members and spontaneous *strikes* organized by workers or without a third party. The institutionalized characteristic of trade union and its macro-structural position can lose contact with struggles from the organizational level (Fantasia, 1988). The understanding of these initiatives might lay in the "class consciousness" that is beyond an organizational collective bond. R. Fantasia proposes "cultures of solidarity" that focuses on specific actions of conflicts as a class action and separate it from the institutional status. Cultures of solidarity are the collective practices inside a specific work organization that not necessarily imply trade unionism. But it implies specific bonds inside organization that covers cultural expression within wider culture, yet which is emergent in its embodiments of oppositional practices and meanings.

Moreover, there are two version of strike interpretation, one entails the relationship between workers and union leaders of labour movements. Trade unions leaders will mobilise people to act collectively to maintain a clear link between worker's interest and employers (Watson, 2018). The second case emphasise that informal and unofficial collective activities will happen without a direct supervision of Trade Unions. "Wildcat strike" is a term used to describe action unauthorized by union, a semi-spontaneous work stoppage action inside a production unit (Gouldner, 1954). Even if they start because workers agree that union leaders cannot act in their best interest, trade unions can have an important labour movement role depending on local alliances, workers conditions and participants, and local policies (Erdinc, 2020). "Wildcat strike" is a type of informal self-management, and it can also contain refusal to work, absenteeism (Boraman, 2017). It entails demands that **transcend monetary subjects**, but most important this type of strikes can become a manifest that threatens to modify **the status quo relationship** between workers and management.

### Labour Market in Romania

Romania as a former socialist state and Central-Eastern European located state participated into the Westernization process after 1990. Romania's neo-liberal elites encouraged radical structural reforms for a macro-economic

upgrade which implied massive de-regulations of the labour market (Ban, 2016; Trif, 2023a;). To illustrate the progress of work governance in a global competition we should follow the regulations in industrial sector. Aurora Trif (2008) outlines in the European integration process of NMS (new member states) that Romania, along other post socialist countries, needed to do. The upgrade of industrial relations institutions meant to transform labour law, developments and labour standards for foreign direct investments. Additionally, the Government's interventions in 2011 regarding the new amendments to the Labour Code and The Social Dialogue Act were not for the remediation of the 2018 crisis. (Trif, 2016) but another step towards a universal and neoliberal process. The new Labour Code made it easier for the employers to dismiss employees, increase workload unilaterally and implement flexible working time arrangements, while the Social Dialogue Act reduced fundamental collective rights to organize, strike and bargain collectively. Moreover, her findings indicate that the Romanian industrial system suffered a main transformation due to the ownership changes.

At the same time, the workers interpretations of trade unions roles in Romania are attached to their socialist history and post 1989 union involvement in the new economy. Firstly, unions inside socialism had the role was to ensure the productivity plan implemented, thus in workers collective memory the role of unions was of a mediator favouring productivity. Secondly, after 1989, unions strategies were to participate in economic deregulations either through affiliation with political actors that favoured neoliberalism or through maintain relations with political parties. (Mihaly, 2021; Trif et al 2023). This last strategy was used by a former union leader that serve as a prime minister and had a clear intention to preserve institutional power in trade unions (Trif & Szabo et al, 2023b).

## Methodology

The aim of this project is to analyse the industrial relations in a wood manufacture factory in Cluj County, Romania in the year 2017. Thus, ethnography is the main qualitative methodological approach of my study which implies the researcher fully involved in a fieldwork setting. For my research I acknowledged the primacy of interpretations in *reflective qualitative* research (Alverson and Skoldberg, 2009), which means that my research work includes and is driven by an interpreter due that as a sociologist I interacted with the studied world. Social phenomena are embedded in political and ethical context; therefore, I became aware of the political-ideological character of my research.

The selection of fieldwork developed from my 3 months' ethnography that I conducted for my Bachelor thesis in 2015. I prepared a profile for my next fieldwork: a) a wood manufacture factory in Romania b) a wood manufacture factory with several production lines c) an industrial factory with transnational partners and/or clients, d) a factory with unqualified or semi-qualified forces of labour e) a factory with local employee: the city in which the production unit and villages around it.

While conducting my research I formulated two research questions around the implications of the strike. How are strikes conducted inside a manufacture factory in Romania? And what are the participants insights on the strikes? My research objectives are to analyse and describe factory level strikes inside the chosen factory and to follow the inner experience of the workers during and after those two strikes.

My research timeline consists of three periods. In the first period (January 2017 and March 2017) when I created the factory profile that I need for my fieldwork. In the second period (March 2017 and September 2017) I fully engaged in the fieldwork setting of the wood factory RoWoods<sup>2</sup>. Third period (October 2017 and May 2018) I conducted several interviews with employees to have insights of their understanding of the strikes.

### **Ethnographic description**

My first weeks of the ethnography was inside the production halls of Chairs/Elements shop floor, Workstation E. As a beginner I was put in the finishing and packing work-sector. After several weeks, the major client IKEA came into inspection few weeks after it stopped a lot of our packages which started an organisational crisis. A new quota was brought into our schedule and that brought some conflicts among women. Because the supervisors made it clear of our deadline issue the workers raised their work pace. But along the days the products would come back as inadequate to IKEA standards, so the faults were offered in all directions. Moreover, due to deadlines pressure, the working schedule was extended to two shifts, and I got relocated due to lack of transportation back to Cluj-Napoca after 23:30. Therefore I was moved to the "P workstation".

In "P workstation" I worked in the second part of the Chairs assembly which contained: painting, varnishing/lacquering, finishing and packing the wood chairs. The dynamics between workers became more conflictual after the

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<sup>2</sup> For ethical reasons, I choose not to use the real name of the factory, therefore this name is a fictional one. The production unit is in Cluj County is.

new quotas were implemented. The quota means the final number of products manufactured in 8 hours by one worker or work team. Each week a table with individual performance would be exposed. During my stay here the flux of production was slowing. **When the first strike happened**, I was in the point 3 and during the break I was inside the production hall trying to recover my energy for the following set of effort, so I missed the actual start of the strike.

One day, the production director announced the forewoman about work-force need in the other assembly line. The first to go, in this urgent situation, was me. Because I was the newest and Nala another colleague that was a senior, but which was the less likely to oppose or comment about her relocation. The "EM" workstation was seen by the P women workers as the "dirty side" of the production hall because it requires work with lot of sawdust in hot environment.

When working in "EM workstation" interacted with colleagues and superior that defeated the quota. In one case when I had to keep track of the wood items productivity in the EM work workstation and when I reported to him, we wrote it down with 50 items less. Because of my all-day anxiety of counting wrong the productive outcome I asked how I was wrong. But the **team leader** said that we do not need to tell the real number because we risk having the quotes rise. I look surprised at him and became more surprised when I saw that my teammates were aware of the procedure. Moreover, in one working day I was relocated in individual workstation because of some difficulties inside de EM workstation, and I had individual productivity and again I struggled with counting right the wood items I processed. When the **foreman** came to me to ask me the number, he also cut it by 100 items. He did not give me explanations; he just filled the report paper and went along. Shortly after, a woman next to me said that I did too many items for such a short amount of time, so he reduced the number for our own good.

**The second strike was organised here** (EM workstation) and when we were told about the forthcoming strike, the woman told us how the young supervisor scolded her without taking into considering her seniority at warm wood presses. Indeed, among workers this workstation was considered the hardest, on one side because the worker needs to know how to handle the veneers with the presses and on the other because the environment is very hot and uncomfortable to work. The initiative for the second strike came from point 1, considered by EM workers and me the most challenging point and where workers are the most entitled to stop work.

## Strikes In RoWoods

### *First strike*

For over six decades “RoWoods”s has provided furniture items and supplied wood units for other factories (Romanian or international firms). In 1991 it experienced the shift from national production to private production and transnational collaboration. However, in a 2017 spring day the workers gave a new type of experience that took RoWoods by surprise. This general strike got all workers out of their workstations into the firm’s court. Some of them knew what the main reason was and why they gathered, some did not know the reason but got into the crowd anyways, as I did.

Monday, another working day for me and my colleagues on the plant floor in the wood factory. As usual, I woke at 4:45 and at 6:30 am I start a new day in P workstation, one of the production lines. Nonetheless, in this Monday, May 2017 the routine has been disturbed by a general strike that happened in all three factory shop floors: Furniture, Plywood and Chairs/Elements. It is our last break (12:50-13:00) and my colleagues are outside enjoying some gossip talk before the last two hours of work. I am in the production hall trying to find some energy for the next round of work.

At 13:00 sharp I get up and go back to my work point but for some reason the workers do not return in good time. They finally appear in small groups, and they are debating if they should join it or not. I do not understand what “it” is. I listen to the discussion with confusion and somnolence. One of them asks *“Shall we go? The Furniture went”*. The forewoman enters our hall production sector and with large hand gestures she tells us to go outside *“Go! The ones from Furniture’s went at the offices!”*. She says we should go; she cannot join us. The workers, including me, decide to get outside the production hall and go to the administrative building which is located at in entrance of the firm’s court.

Around one hundred people are standing at the main door wearing the blue equipment. There are several groups but there is a main group gathered at the entrance that demands to talk with the employer. In the main group, I recognize a former foreman (team supervisor with whom I previously worked in another production line) who I found out is a union leader. It looks like he is one of the main speakers. The owner of the factory comes down in the crowd and starts talking with his employees. He seems overwhelmed with the crowd and says that he cannot have a discussion with so many people, therefore we should have some volunteers that will go and continue the discussion in the conference room above the canteen with him and Human Recourses manager. Workers start to volunteer, and I hear the union leader encouraging people to



join it assuring them that nobody will fire them. Also, a woman says, "*A man should go*" and my feminist spirit cringes, but I slightly recover when I see one woman joining the group. About 10 people volunteered to join the employer and HR director for discussing the reasons of this strike. Meanwhile the other workers remain in the factory court waiting for the outcome.

It's around 2 pm and the sun is shining over the employees making them to look after shades under which to wait the end of the meeting. People talk about the reasons of the strike: the leaves, work conditions, the new quota, the wages but the main reason that triggered today's strike was the *cut off the holiday bonuses*. The cut off was announced last Friday and before this one, the Christmas leave bonus was also reduced without justification. In the meantime, some of us rested under the Firefighter building shadow and I continue to listen to the topics discussed by workers: Will they (the employers) make us to stay overtime for this strike? Will they cut these hours from our pay checks? Will they cut off hours from today's work schedule? Approximately one hour later, the workers came back from the meeting. The volunteers enter the court, and small groups gather around each one of them. They start to explain the cause of the cut and new approach regarding the wages increases by the HR director.

Several minutes later the employer returns and the everyone pay attention to his words. He says that the bonuses will be reinstated, he did not even know about the cut, and he also mentions that wages will be increased. The patron looks calm and genuine when he says about another meeting, this Wednesday where several topics will be discussed and anyone interested should participate. It is also mentioned that the leaves must be discussed more because the firms have production delays, and it needs workers in the production units. He sadly remarks that we unfortunately lack work force. The speech ends with his request to not do this (the strike) again, because we can peacefully talk about these situations without people interrupting their work. We have left half an hour until 3 pm, our end program, therefore we return to our work units and finish a package for the production line. Around 3 pm, the Plywood trade union leader comes to invite us again to the Wednesday meeting. Another discussion circle happens but I must leave to catch my commute bus. I rush out and lots of questions dive in my brain during the bus drive to Cluj-Napoca. For how long this discontent was happening? Who decided that the strike would be a solution? Who organised this strike? How is a strike organised?

### ***Second strike***

We are now in July 2017, and I am no longer part of the Plywood workstations, I was relocated to Chairs Stations on the main line of production. This production unit has two teams because we work with two wood presses.

I am new here and still try to keep up with my colleagues' pace of work. On this production workstation I met some tensions between workers and the shop floor supervisor. The new supervisor's expectations are excessive according to the workers, and because he is younger than most of the workers and he lacks the experience in the wood production, his authority is very low among the EM working station.

This time, the 9:00 am Thursday strike did not take me by surprise. During the ten minutes break I get into the planning of a strike in the EM workstation with the wood presses workers. My colleague and I are resting near our working table when a woman comes and talks with us about how disrespectful was the new supervisor with her today. She was going to take some medicine and the supervisor scolded her, without taking in consideration her daily performance and seniority in this workstation. She concludes that she has never been treated like this in this factory and her team agrees. Because of his attitude they will stop working and we (the wood presses) should join them. My colleague approves and when our teams return in the working unit, she tells them about the *forthcoming strike*. We start working at 9 sharp and I am constantly looking at the warm wood presses station for the woman's signal. I see it and while they gather near the wood presses, I tell my colleague that they have started. She stops our teams with hand gestures, and we follow her to the strike group.

In this second gathering I hear a male voice asking, "*Who will run the discussion?*" and a woman replies, "*A man who knows how to use the words!*". The foreman tells us that he talked with the supervisors but right now there is a production meeting, and they will talk afterwards with us about the problems. In the meantime, we are asked to continue our work until the supervisors are available. I immediately think that this action is not taken very seriously if the supervisors want to postpone a dialogue. The strike group of approximately 30 people does not go back to their stations, therefore the foreman sadly concludes "*So, you do not want to go back to work.*" He returns to the supervisor's office and another dialogue between workers begin, they talk about going for demands in front of the Pavilion like last time, but that idea rapidly vanishes. Meanwhile I ask some workers what their main demands and someone in the back are says that everybody should speak up and share their individual demands.

Several minutes later, the two supervisors join the strike gathering. In the centre, the production supervisor and the shop-floor supervisor are on one side and the foreman on the other. The main supervisor asks, "*Why aren't you working?*". He is waiting for an answer, so do I, and nothing is being said. *Not a word*. After a long and painful silence, he talks again: "*First of all, I am going to cut off your meal tickets. Beside that you do not meet your production quota, you*

*stop working. WHY?*". The group of workers are still silent, and I try to formulate in my mind the main reasons: the new aggressive supervisor, the work conditions, the days of leaves are always postponed. Then I try to find courage to speak up, but another woman starts talking. She asks about the transportation for the following weekend. Because most workers are from villages around the city, their Saturday extra work is dependent on transportation. The young supervisor promptly says that she already asked that question, and he answered earlier that yes, transportation will be provided. After this, the main supervisor starts a speech about bonuses offered for the ones that will come to work during the two-weeks official summer leave and about the wages increases planned for the next months. He ends with "I am serious. Go back to work". The strike is over, and the strikes go back to work. People retreat in their working points and the silence's awkwardness and embarrassment could be felt inside the workstation, at least I felt it.

That day I went with another round of questions in my mind: Why did nobody speak? Where were the union members? Would it have ended differently if a union member had been present? Will this happen again?

For this question I need a descriptive framework that explains how these two strikes occurred. There is a need to find out what is behind these tensions. The next workstations explore the plant level relations and factors that contributed to these events. I will start with evaluating the two strikes (B.) by comparing their components and then I will describe the workplace dynamics (C.) that might have created the need for the strikes. In the last part of the ethnographic description, I will refer to the production line in 2017 when new expectations regarding production quota, work schedules and supervisor's interactions created a conflictual and unbalanced dynamics on the assembly lines. I will single out the management production plan elements that created the context for workers to question and resist to the organisation plan processes.

### **Strikes in RoWoods: Comparative Analyses**

After the first strike I asked myself: "Who organised these strikes?" and "How was the strike organised?". For the comparative analyses, I organised some categories that contrast the particularities of the two events. Both strikes have been triggered by a series of elements that resulted in stopping the shop floor assembly lines and ask for direct dialogue. First strike demanded explanations for the cuts off from the holiday bonuses (a money bonus). Being the second time when the cut off was made without consulting the workers or union members, this strike was organised to ask for justifications. After the spontaneous meeting with the employer and HR manager solutions were

offered immediately. The outcome was that the rest of the holiday financial bonuses will be returned that month. By contrast, in the second strike participants did not enumerate clearly the demands and solution were not offered. In fact, nobody spoke a clear sentence about the claims, but the wage increase was mentioned.

The discrepancy between two moments can be explained both from an objective perspective as in quantity- number of participants, spatiality, timing and subjective perspective regarding the human interaction. Given the legislative employment framework, I will evaluate these moments by *a.* numbers of participants and the workers' demands, *b.* spatiality and timing during strikes, *c.* employee-employer, worker-supervisor interaction during strikes. Also, I intent to single out an essential element that influenced the strike to have an objective result.

**Table 1.** Strikes characteristics

Characteristics	First strike May 2017	Second strike July 2017
Numbers of participants	Approx. 100 participants	Approx. 30 participants
Strikers demands	Holiday bonuses cut off	New shop floor supervisor's behaviour
Strike's location	RoWoods court	In the production hall: EM workstation
Striker's timing	After the last break: 12:50	After the first break: 9:00
Types of participants	Workers, union leaders, the employers and HR director	Workers, foreman, the new supervisor and production supervisor
Strikes outcome	Several volunteers went with the employer and HR director in an immediate meeting	Nobody answered the supervisor's question: "Why aren't you working?".

Source: *Author's table.*

*a. numbers of participants and their demands*

I start with the most striking difference between the two moments: the number of participants. Taking an objective position, we can use “the more the merrier” sentence as explanation for a successful strike. In the first strike the number of attendants can be approximated around 100, while in the second there would not be more than 30 workers. The latter got less attention by supervisors and there is no surprise of the fact that the main supervisor proposed to postpone the dialogue after their 10 o'clock meeting. Hence, when all workers from production unit gathered for the strike, supervisors from all position gave attention to them, especially the employer, without any delays.

Also, the main demands were different from one event to the other: one was about the holiday bonuses cuts off and the other about the new shop floor supervisor. However, there is a common ground regarding both strikes claims: *working conditions* and *workers' wages*. In the first situation during the meeting within volunteers, the Human Recourses manager presented his future regarding wages. The EM strike participants (the second strike) mentioned the wages and the overload working schedule that the shop floor supervisor would insist on, but none of them delivered the complains in the discussion with the main supervisor, the shop floor supervisor and foreman. Thus, even if there were common claims influenced the decision of ceasing the work, the main trigger of the strike was on one side an objective matter- the financial cut and on the other was an industrial relation matter- the relations between workers and the new supervisor. In the second strike the major demand is about the basic relation between workers and supervisors which is a classic struggle among classes inside a production unit.

*b. spatiality and timing during strikes*

Spatiality also differs in the two strikes; one was initiated in the production hall and the other in the firm's court. The production hall contains complex assembly lines which use wood machines, wood presses that creates a noisy environment. Several times, during meeting alongside production lines, workers would not hear what the foreperson or supervisor says. Therefore, the loud mechanisms usually disturb a direct dialogue, even if several working stations are not running. So, in the 30 people group gathering to speak up would mean to shout out demands or complains about the shop-floor supervisor. In contrast is the outdoor strike was machine noise free, and people positioned in front of the crowd could easily get in a dialogue with administrative personnel.

The time chosen for ceasing production activity also differs in the two events and can be considered essential for the outcomes. The outside strike happened in the last break, the 12:50 break which means that the administrative offices personnel is present, especially the employer would be in the firm's

office building. In comparison, the indoors strike happened around ten o'clock, when supervisors had a production meeting. So, it was used as an excuse to postpone the conflict. In the other situations, when workers gathered around 1:00, when all administrative employees would be present, the strike was the first concern because the next work program would start in less than two hours. At the end of each program the foreperson needs to report the production and, in some workstation that I worked usually in the last part of the day would intensify their activity to meet the quota. Hence, having the workers strike at the end of program is much more an inconvenience than workers strike at first break. In the second strike, the production stoppage could be easily recovered during the rest of the program.

*c. employee-employer, worker-supervisor interaction during strikes*

Both initiatives bring attention to the production plans and managerial decisions. Employee's demand direct dialogue for recent financial cut off or the production plans effects on the EM working stations. Taking into consideration the other elements of the strike, we also need to analyse the interaction between employee-employer in the first strike and the worker-supervisor's interaction in the second strike. I will outline that participant's status differ in the two situations. In the first strike, some employees were union leaders who encouraged workers to collectively ask for demands. While in the second strike, the union members were not mentioned, and the strategy was to individually speak about the EM work-station problems. In the first case the employee-employer relations were clear, and the participant roles (workers and employers) were mediated by union leaders also workers while in the second case there were two fronts: on what side the approximately 30 persons and on the other foreman, new supervisors and the production directors. The evident bridge between two different roles inside the production unit resulted in dysfunctional dialogue: a nonverbal response.

At first glance, I see relevant to emphasis the presence of a union leader or a person with authority towards employer or management personnel who can influence the outcome of a strike or collective bargaining. According to a union leader the first strike was initiated by the union, because the cut off was officialised without their consent, as workers representations members.

The May strike, I remember I was on a night shift when they called me: How could you negotiate less for the holiday financial bonuses? I looked at the phone in shock. The problem was that on previously Friday the cut off was announced with a protocol that had the union leader's names on it but in fact nobody talked with us. I personally had nothing to do with it, I did not agree with the cut off. So, I called the other union members, and we talked the result: a strike. (union leader, 44. male)

When the union leaders would have embraced the dialogue between employer and employee the managerial personnel had an immediate intervention. In the second strike, the EM working station strikers did not become a priority for the managerial employers. Namely, the supervisors wanted to postpone the strike because they were in the middle of a production meeting. By this comparison I want to draw attention an essential part of social dialogue and the official mediator of it inside a factory. It might look like the union member present in the first strike had a role of creating environment favourable for the strikers, while in the second nobody took this role. In addition, when I asked former colleagues about the strike and union's involvement the responses said that it was rather a worker initiative, not an active action of the trade union.

No! We got out. The trade unions representatives said "Do you want to go to the employer? Let's do it" and they came with us. But usually, they do not help much. (F, 56 years old, 9 years' experience in RoWoods)

This discrepancy between some workers understanding of the strike and trade unions leader's version of the strike along with my initial assumption of the mediator factor as essential in the outcome of the first strike sheds light on out of sync industrial relation at a micro level. This layered understanding of the strikes brings the questions around types of managements practices here. On what extent can these fragmentations be explained by the spatiality and logic of the production lines (a classic scientific management). Furthermore, the discrepancy might be approached as a characteristic of the RoWoods dynamics. The second strike lacked dialogue, but their initiative outlines the actual relations between employers and employee when is not negotiated by a third part. An event that resists to a supervisor management does not only brings a particular problem with a new supervisor, but it might bring into question the entire work environmental relation or the antagonist relations between classes.

### **RoWoods workers and solidarity structure**

RoWoods employers portray the factory's community and the solidarity infrastructure. The workers inside the working class are composed mostly from the city's inhabitants but also from villages near the small city in Cluj County. The employees would recognise each other from the shopfloors or firms transport buses, but not exclusively by name. The workers are brought in firm's court 30 minutes before the work program. Some of them have never left their first workstation and they worked with the same foreman and with the same machines for years, even if the product changed over time. On one hand, new employers are being relocated along the production lines, while the seniors

with experience remain in the same work-station due to their expertise. The salary is the state's minimum wage for most operators inside the assembly lines. Consequently, RoWoods workers have similar social trajectories (same trajectories before and after the work program) and economic resources (same wage and household situation), that makes a solidarity infrastructure dependent on workers understanding of their common role (economic and productive role inside the assembly lines) inside the factory.

RoWoods organizational pattern outline the dichotomy between managerial employees and workers inside the assembly line. Due to my relocations, I observed how managers decided the elements of individual work and then engage supervisors to cooperate with workers to respect the organisations plans according to the firm plan. The pattern of the new organisation plan outlines the supervisor's role to justify the new quota- the need for more productive results and to supervise the worker's performance and accommodation in the new production pace – meetings in which foremen or supervisors transmit production expectations (the day's production plans, quantity needed) and individual performance (technological charts). During this process, **several resistance actions** were present in the workstation. Actions such as EM's worker's not reporting their actual productivity or team leader's actions to question the managements logic show the solidarity infrastructure. Inside each workstation I saw minimum resistance that outlined the desynchronization between the rational managements for assembly lines and the manufacture workers. Stopping from work as a resistance to the supervisor's attitude was in fact a resistance to the new organisational plans. In short, workers resistance to new plans highlights an existing solidarity culture along different workstations inside the factory.

These two strikes highlight a lack of synchrony and collaboration between employee and employer or new employee and senior employee. Beyond the local managerial context and workers, the tensions are part of a systematic problem that consists of employee-employer's collaboration. In other words, these tensions illustrate the types of managements, solidarity practices inside manufacture industrial sector. Furthermore, I will engage these two strikes into the wildcat term and the unions autonomy in the workstations.

### **RoWoods strikes: Wildcat striker or union's strikes?**

At first, looking only on my field notes, I easily assumed that the first strike was organized by the union and the outcome is dependent on a mediator element: union leader. As the comparison outlines the first strike was objectively more advantageous due to its number of participants, clear (and voiced) demands,



timing and location. Its success, however, is due to the employee composition which differed, the first being composed of union leaders that from my observation coordinated the dialogue. The second strike was at disadvantage because of the fewer participants, lack of coordination or dialogue. My assumption was that the lack of union leader's supervision and the main reason (resistance to a supervisor) were the explanations to the silent outcome. Moreover, in an interview a RoWoods union leader told me that the strikers from July should have approached a union leader from another shop floor to have a better outcome.

During that strike, I don't remember on what work program I was, but the workers said that they intended to go to the employers. No, they should have gone to Dipri<sup>3</sup> (union leader from Chairs/Elements shop floor) and ask him to go after the employers. And then the workers could have told him about the supervisor, and he would have fired him immediately. (male, union leader, 44 years)

By contrast, during my fieldwork I found out that RoWoods workers would not appreciate the unions activities, nor do they correlate the two strikes with union initiative, but with a worker's initiative. After the first strike I asked around about the union and its role, and some responses were how they do not attend the workers needs but they will withhold their membership percentage from the wage. I asked workers about the May strike during interviews and some of them firmly affirmed that the strike was the worker's initiative, while other workers including union leaders said that it was union initiative. *"No, the workers did it. We saw that the union approved the cut. If you want to strike, we'll support you, said the union leaders"* (woman, 61 years, manual workers for one year). Moreover, when I asked a former college how she heard about the strike that she missed, she said it was a union leader's initiative. The shop floor's union leader told her he started the strike.

First, it was Dipri, the union leader who got out. I was not there but I asked him what cause this strike. He said: I went first, because people came to ask me about the cut, to blame me. So, I went on strike. And then the workers went on strike also. (woman, 52 years old, 8-year seniority).

Because of multiple opinions on the first strike, I focused on workers understanding of union role and autonomy. All my respondents mentioned that the union's purpose is to protect the workers: *"The union leader purpose is to protect the workers. Any problem you have at work you go to them"* (woman, 56 years, manual worker for 9 years). When asked to give an example they explained to me the lending money operation as the only relevant activity, because in

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<sup>3</sup> Fictive name for ethical issues.

general they scarcely do something for workers. The most appreciated role of the union inside the firm is the action of helping workers financially regarding healthcare issues or family decease. If an employee needs to get an urgent surgery, she can go to a union leader and ask for help. The union leader would complete the procedures, and the workers will be given a loan. This loan will be reimbursed by the workers each month without interest. And for this reason, people chose to be enrolled in Union and to accept the monthly membership cut *because you never know* what happens and when would they need a fast loan. Strikes frequency can influence union membership or a reflection of “higher quality” industrial relation (T. Watson & Korczynski, 2011, p. 301) whereas in the RoWoods workers that do not recognise union action but are dependent on the financial support, so they stay enrolled in the union.

On the other side, when I asked a union leader what they do inside RoWoods he would mention the misunderstanding of their role. He would emphasise their role on representation but instead workers would come to ask him for demands that exceed his expertise. Moreover, the union leader that I interviewed would claim his role of representation but not for all situations, almost he would claim himself as a partial “manager of discontent” (Mills 1970), sharing his responsibilities with supervisors and foreperson. On a particular problem the union participation would be obvious: making sure that workers will be offered financial aid through formal process. But on a personal problem such as performance and wages he cannot have an opinion.

What I can do is to fill in a workers complain or something, if a supervisor yelled at him. But the workers come to me and say: I want a raise because I work well. But that is not my responsibility. I told the supervisors to not send workers to me when the subject is about the wages, they're the ones that evaluate them. If the workers come to me, I would definitely raise their wages, but I cannot do that. What I can do is to go to the employer if someone mistreat them. I will go to the general director and the supervisor will be sanctioned. The foreperson would send workers to me for little things, but I am no mediator or psychologist. We represent the workers for example if there is a death in someone's family and they cannot afford the funeral we will help them. (male, union leader, 44 years)

RoWoods workers' general assumption of union roles are to help and protect them, but the first strike is not seen as a 100% union initiative. The unions position and leader's roles are differently understood by workers. The institutional role of unions makes workers to define their role as to protect them in any conditions on a work-related matter, but on organizational level they do not associate union members in relevant action except formal role- the financial aid. The worker's interpretation of formal role's highlights how the institutional position that unions have manages to disturb local actions and

workers understanding of union's role. The macro-structural position of trade union results in an underestimation of actual union leader's actions and a disruptive contact with organizational level struggles.

When the workers need an urgent loan, they go to the union leader. He will be an endorser, a witness. He goes up (at the administrative building) to deliver the paper. But a lot of workers quit the union because they think they do not do anything for them. But you never know when you need money. (woman, 52 years old, 8-year seniority).

Thus, the first strike is a trade union initiative strike but at the same time is understood as a union-free initiative. The dialogue was conducted by the union leaders who also needed to show that they did not approve the cut, but because of union autonomy the strike is taken for granted by the workers. Thus, this strike falls under the specification presented in Gouldner's first assumptions that formal union leaders pretend to have little control over it but is mostly led by individuals. The diverse interpretation of the strike highlights the industrial workers' willingness to step beyond the bounds of bureaucratic unionism (Fantasia, 1988, p. 112). Even if there was an intention to engage in mutual solidarity, the strikers were from all shopfloors which entails separated groups of people that have never interacted with each other because of the shop floors management. Strikes are an indicator of fluent worker mobilisation but inside RoWoods general strikes means a multiple delimited groups and segmented understanding of the strike.

On the other hand, the second strike was a wildcat strike because it was not supervised by union leaders, and it was spontaneous. Its silent outcome shows that it does not imply essential wildcat characteristics like aggressive approach towards managements. However, the reason of this strike threatens the status quo relationship between management and workers. The resistance to the young supervisor might be seen as a resistance to manager's hierarchy so when a direct dialogue happened between the two parties the more surmised part did not raise their voice. RoWoods managerial structure is visible in this mute strike in which the relation between workers and supervisors is one of power between those who own the means of production and those who do not. The woman that announced our team about the forthcoming strike talked about the supervisor's "overstepping their bounds" (Gouldner, 1954). The July 2017 spontaneity can be seen as a strike at organisational level or a particular reaction for the new managerial plans. Reinstalling my ethnographic description along with informal discussion I had, the second-strike frame sheds light on the actual relation between workers and supervisors. Without a union representative a medium party, the power relation can be interpreted as a class conflict between workers and supervisors in a clearly antagonistic work environment.

Nonetheless, inside the RoWoods shop floors have been developed a defective solidarity. On one side, this term covers the physical context of plant level organisation and the employers' dynamics and conflicts inside segmented work environment. On the other side, this term takes into consideration community experience with individual interpretation and its effects on general understanding of collective or class initiatives. First, the managerial setting for workstations builds a defective spatiality for solidarity among workers; they do not see themselves as a community but units along the assembly lines. This lack of class consciousness contributes to the multiple interpretations regarding the strikes and trade union's responsibilities. Accordingly, the second meaning of this term emphasises the defective communication inside shop floors which basically is a faulty translation of workers' collective actions, use of strike and union leader's autonomy.

Moreover, the context of mixed managements and a specific industrial working class (workers with similar trajectories, interests and social and economic characteristics) makes possible the practice cultures of solidarity but in it extend this environment nurtures a defective solidarity. Both collective conflicts or strikes were both shaped by mixed organizational management and governances' system which gives the organizational elites to contain the conflict (first strike) and repressed the conflict (second strike). Therefore, this defective solidarity does not happen only on local level, the characteristics of the working class along with firms' investors demands for products, the workers action during strikes and interpretations after the strikes contribute to a constant flawed work environment. For example, financial struggles make some workers to detach from collective actions. Their behaviour is affected by the threat of being dismissed and forced to face bank debt alone. Also, the superficial understanding of union responsibilities makes them vulnerable in conflictual situation where is safer to settle than to challenge the community.

We're not united. People are not united. People have financial debt at banks. So, they do not want to go on strike because they think they will get fired and then how will they pay the banks? So, the workers settle with their situation. They do not have elsewhere to go. (woman, 52 years old, 8-year seniority)

### **RoWoods manufactory industry and Romanian labour market**

Analysing the Romanian Labour Code and Social Dialogue Act we can see how workers strike can be legally categorized. In 2011, the Labour Code changed the action of strike; each strike intention must be announced three days before it happens. Which means that conflicts can be contained by the

employers or supervisors in the three days. Thus, neither of the RoWoods strikes would qualify into the institutional framework demands. In this matter, both strikes are wildcat strike due to its illegal characteristic in the legal context of 2017. Beside the spontaneous character limited by the legal amendments, the strike in RoWoods cannot be officially stated as strikes because they did not officially announce them, and the second one was not even approved by union. Moreover, this institutional decision shows the focus on transnational employers rather than unions autonomy, let alone worker's autonomy. The mixed industrial managements inside the factory along with multiple understanding of strikes and unions autonomy outlines the diversity implemented inside industrial relation after 1898 (Trif, 2013b).

RoWoods factory is functioning in Cluj County since 1960 with producing solid furniture and later adding shop floors of pressed elements which enlarged their production. In 1991 the firm was privatized with the state remaining the owner but by 1999 was entirely bought by the current owners. The process of privatisation and enlarging the production series show how the global completion entered wood manufacture sector and encouraged it to get investors. In 2007 the firm established its own sawmill to supply the solid wood to production lines and in 2009 the production developed small products series. The Labour Market development process after 1989 is visible in the constant upgrade of the production processes. Moreover, the economic and political trajectory of Romania can be traced in RoWoods local history. The factory is considered a pylon in the host city economy. Because of classic assembly lines organisation and rationalises workstations the work force inside the RoWoods required no qualification or semi-qualifications. Most employers are from the villagers around the city and that features a particular working-class membership.

## **Conclusion**

I began this research for a deeper understanding of industrial relations and manufacture workers in Romania as a MA student. The layered description of workstations inside a factory pointed out the complex relations of industrial employees and diverse interpretations of strikes. Granted that, the empirical content can be seen from a pessimist and optimistic perspective.

From a pessimistic perspective the two strikes do not represent a good use of collective bargaining or a solid acknowledge of the union's role. The first strike meets the workers' demands, but its lack of understanding the strikes initiation or union leader's role on strike shows a fragmented understanding of

the first collective action. Conversely, the following strike did not deliver the complains which emphasis once again the fragmented solidarity infrastructure inside the firm. The solidarity inside RoWoods is shaped both by managerial mixed practices and working-class composition. First, the spatial and employee's hierarchy limits the worker's communications and understanding of strike use or union autonomy. Second, the workers have similar social and economic trajectory or demographics: unqualified, semi-qualified positions and rural household or they are the city's residence that influence their behaviour during strikes and interpretation after the strikes.

From an optimistic perspective, the two moments not only show the practices of solidarity inside a restricted work environment but also singles out the uneven and taken for granted relation between employer and employee. Despite the unbalanced institutional frame regarding labour market and the Social Dialogue Act, RoWoods workers exceeded the daily routines of resistance and organised two spontaneous strikes. With or without the union initiative recognition, the need to stop work to re-equilibrate the authority relation between management decisions and workers' wages or the relation between supervisor's behaviour and worker's new work pace, the strikes prove the existence of a class struggles and potential class consciousness awareness. I can furthermore infer that the action itself, not necessary the outcomes, reveal the layered and uneven employee's relation: workers-foreman-supervisors- union leaders- directs and employers which also justified them.

The mixed managerial context the solidarity infrastructure is developed accordingly. The constant and routinized infrastructure solidarity is parallel with the constant and routinized, normal conflicts. The workers are spatially separated in working points which results in a segmented community, in which people do not interact with people from other shop floors. The managerial settings bring different interpretation among workers regarding strikes and union's responsibilities. Another effect of this defective solidarity is the defective communication that emphasis a faulty translation of workers collective actions, use of strike and unravel struggles. The lack of understanding the constant struggle might be seen as a lack of class consciousness. The actors inside industrial sector are subjected to mixed management practices that result from a demanding labour market and transnational investors claims. Moreover, the workers that share similar life trajectories compose a particular working class that act within a culture of solidarity, while strike can be suppressed by the subtle disciplinary power.

The unbalanced relations between workers-managers can be correlated with the institutional framework inside Romania. The context of industrial relations based on transnational collaboration, labour legislation favouring the

employer or investors creates struggles along assembly lines which become more obvious when new organisational plans are implemented or general cuts (wage related) decision are made by the managers. Moreover, union autonomy and activity can be explained by their institutional role and regulation inside the Romanian Labour Market but also by the specific defective solidarity. A conclusion might be that strikes inside wood manufactory firms from Romania are conducted differently because of mixed managements and its solidarity infrastructure, but also because of the working class. The outcome is shaped by workers understanding of the collective bargaining and union role. Institutional status of workers and interconnected transnational collaboration brings complex answers to "How are strikes conducted?" and "What contexts results in strikes?"

In my research, the local struggles become obvious when new organisational plans are implemented by management or bonuses cuts decision are made by the managers. However, due to management strategies and multiple interpretation of collective action, resistance develops differently. The two strikes mirror the two opposite directions in labour movements; one is standard legal interventions by trade unions relating monetary subjects, and the other is a core critical intervention at the status quo relationship between workers and management. Both empirical cases show labour movements at a debutant state due to context of industrial relations based on transnational collaboration, labour legislations favouring the employer or foreign investors. Moreover, the history of a socialism is embedded in the workers understanding of trade unions and their power; hence their involvement is associated with financial disagreements rather than managerial power disagreements.

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