



## A Democratic Right to Political Strikes

**Philipp Stehr**, Politics, Munich School of Politics and Public Policy at TUM, Germany, [philipp.stehr@hfp.tum.de](mailto:philipp.stehr@hfp.tum.de)

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Democratic politics in practice often lags far behind the democratic ideals that justify democracy in theory. Where democratic theory postulates the equality of citizens and the accountability of elected officials, democratic practice is often characterised by the absence of accountability and deep political inequality. This paper argues that, under these conditions, citizens have a moral right to engage in political strikes. Such a right can empower citizens to effectively hold officials accountable and prevent the worst excesses of elite capture. It is therefore justified as a means of self-defense to protect basic democratic rights. The article defends this claim against the objections that this is an overly contestatory approach to politics and that political strikes distribute the burdens of political contestation unfairly.

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# A Democratic Right to Political Strikes

**PHILIPP STEHR**

*Politics, Technical University of Munich, Germany*

Democratic politics in practice lags far behind the democratic ideals that justify democracy in theory. It does so in two main ways. First, where democracy as an ideal aims to create relationships of accountability between citizens and elected officials, democracy in reality rarely creates these relationships and therefore gives elected officials substantial leeway in shaping politics. Second, where democracy as an ideal posits the equality of citizens in the political process, democracy in reality is often deeply unequal.

This article discusses an institutional provision to better align real democracy with its theoretical promises. Political strikes can provide a means for ordinary citizens to exercise political influence and hold elected officials accountable. By withdrawing their labour, they can pressure politicians into stopping policies that they deeply disagree with. Having presented the relevant defects of real democracy in Section I, I provide this basic democratic rationale for a right to political strikes in Section II. Section III presents the moral justification and Section IV compares it to other arguments for strikes and other tools of political resistance. Sections V and VI discuss two objections to a right to political strikes.

The article makes two main contributions. The first is to the debate on political resistance<sup>1</sup> and realist democratic theory<sup>2</sup> where it introduces the political strike as a practical tool of democratic self-defence. The second is to the political theory of the strike. Strikes have only received marginal attention in contemporary analytic political philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Existing contributions overwhelmingly focus on the labour strike. My article will offer a first argument on the rationale and moral status of political strikes in contemporary liberal democratic societies.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Delmas 2016.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Guerrero 2014; Phulwani 2016; Bagg 2024; Prinz and Westphal 2024.

<sup>3</sup> To my knowledge, there is only a handful of articles in the last 30 years (Gourevitch 2016; 2018, 2020; Borman 2017; Raekstad and Rossi 2022) and an older book-length treatment (Macfarlane 1981).

<sup>4</sup> To my knowledge, the only other explicit argument on political strikes is a short (and largely skeptical) treatment in Macfarlane (1981, pp. 158–65).

## I. THE REALITY OF DEMOCRACY

A simple picture of democratic politics is this. Elections give all citizens a roughly equal say through universal suffrage. Election winners are elected in order to broadly pursue the policies and ideals they advocate for in their campaigns. Citizens monitor politicians in office and can articulate new demands in the public sphere. Politicians have to be responsive to these demands, because at the next election citizens can reward or punish them for their past performance. Politicians' actions thus have to broadly track the interests of their electorate, because voters are equally enabled to hold them accountable at the ballot box. Something like this picture underlies many political theories of democracy.

This simple picture of politics has recently come under criticism based on a range of empirical findings, for example in Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels's *Democracy for Realists*.<sup>5</sup> These findings indicate that representative democracy creates neither accountability nor rough political equality. Let me briefly summarize the key arguments. First, representative democracy does not reliably create relations of accountability. Elections do not seem to translate the electorate's preferences into politicians' behaviour.<sup>6</sup> Especially in contested electoral districts, the electorate's political stance does not predict the elected politicians' stance well. Similarly, more direct democratic measures also fail to put political preferences into action.<sup>7</sup> Additionally, voters do not consistently reward and punish politicians for their policy decisions in office.<sup>8</sup> For example, American voters in the 20th century have consistently punished incumbents for severe weather, a factor out of politicians' control.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, voters did not punish Woodrow Wilson for the Spanish Flu of 1918 and some 500,000 deaths associated with it, an outcome over which politicians surely had more control than over the weather.

If voters reward and punish politicians in this short-sighted manner and do not consider whether they realistically could have prevented bad outcomes, there cannot be retrospective accountability. That is because voter behaviour is so irrational that politicians have no reason to take it into account. Combined with the fact that elections do not reliably select for politicians whose political preferences are similar

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<sup>5</sup> Achen and Bartels 2016. For a brief overview of criticism, see Arlen and Rossi (2021, p. 32).

<sup>6</sup> Achen and Bartels 2016, ch. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Achen and Bartels 2016, ch. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Achen and Bartels 2016, chs. 4–6.

<sup>9</sup> Achen and Bartels 2016, ch. 5.

to their electorate's, there does not seem to be any reliable accountability mechanism in elections. Absent a reliable accountability mechanism, elections cannot constitute an effective exercise of citizens' democratic rights. If elections neither select for politicians whose views are representative of the electorates' nor incentivize politicians to act according to their electorate's views, it is difficult to see in what sense they could constitute meaningful control over the political process.<sup>10</sup>

Second, in addition to this problem with accountability, real democratic politics also fails to realize rough political equality. While the large majority of citizens is unable to meaningfully influence politics through elections, well-informed, well-organized, and well-resourced citizens can make their interests count.<sup>11</sup> Across liberal democracies, empirical studies consistently find that policy outcomes disproportionately reflect the political preferences of rich citizens rather than those of the public at large.<sup>12</sup> Social elites are consistently able to capture political processes, because elites hold the power to reward and punish others for following along with their rules and norms, either through financial incentives or through the power they hold in office.<sup>13</sup> This elite capture of contemporary democratic politics violates the democratic promise of equality.<sup>14</sup> Political influence being largely dependent on material wealth and political connections is considered to be a characteristic of oligarchic rather than democratic politics.<sup>15</sup> Democracy demands that material wealth not be a determinant of political power.<sup>16</sup>

Contemporary democratic societies thus seem to suffer from some defects with regards to both accountability and equality. Ordinary citizens are unable to hold elected officials accountable for their actions in office and their effective influence in politics is minimal when compared to wealthy and well-organized citizens. Thus, if we want to hold on to the democratic ideals of effective accountability and equality, something has to be changed. My argument in the remainder of this article will be that political strikes

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<sup>10</sup> Some have argued that this overstates the role that retrospective accountability should play in political theory (e.g. Sabl 2017). I lack the space to discuss this issue at length, but as long as one sees *some* role for retrospective accountability in democratic politics, these results look troubling for conventional electoral democracy. Furthermore, the issue of political equality mentioned below still holds as a substantial empirical indictment of the conventional model.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Page, Bartels, and Seawright 2013, p. 53.

<sup>12</sup> Achen and Bartels 2016, p. 320; Persson and Sundell 2024.

<sup>13</sup> See Táíwò 2022.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Arlen (2019), or for the case of business corporations Alzola (2013).

<sup>15</sup> Winters 2011.

<sup>16</sup> See e.g.: Walzer 1983, ch. 4 and 12; Pettit 2012, ch. 2.

can be a valuable tool that increases political equality and gives citizens a means to hold politicians accountable effectively.

## II. THE FUNCTION OF THE POLITICAL STRIKE

My argument in this section will be that political strikes can serve as a disruptive tool to improve accountability and political equality in democratic politics. For that argument, I will first define what a political strike is and what its basic mechanism for influencing politics is. I will then argue that, empirically speaking, political strikes can make effective use of this mechanism. Finally, I will discuss the role of legal regulation in making political strikes an accessible and thus effective tool of contestation. This basic argument lays the groundwork for the subsequent discussion of the moral permissibility of political strikes.

But first, what is a strike? Strikes are collective withdrawals of labour that serve as a form of protest. Participants withdraw their labour while at the same time claiming that they retain a right to their job.<sup>17</sup> This is the distinctive feature of strikes. They violate contractual terms while at the same time claiming that this violation should not be penalized. As a form of protest, strikes come with demands. In conventional labour strikes, these demands are directed at the employer and often about job security, wages, or other conditions of employment. In contrast, political strikes are strikes that involve political demands, directed at government. Participants withdraw their labour, claim they retain a right to their job, and demand concessions from government. A recent example are the political strikes in Israel on September 2, 2024.<sup>18</sup> Feeling that their government was not doing enough to secure the release of Israeli hostages from Hamas, thousands of people walked out of their jobs, often violating their terms of employment, and took to the street to protest, bringing economic life in parts of the country to a halt.

The basic mechanism behind strikes is easily understood. Economic life depends on labour. The withdrawal of that labour brings production to a halt, putting at risk economic profits for the owners of enterprises, but also withdrawing goods from customers. That is how labour strikes can be powerful tools for pressuring employers. As soon as production comes to a halt, their profits are at risk. This is not the case for politicians. Their personal wealth is not in the same way directly dependent on labour.

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<sup>17</sup> Gourevitch 2016.

<sup>18</sup> Zilber 2024.

Nevertheless, political strikes can influence politicians in two main ways.<sup>19</sup> First, political strikes come with political costs for incumbent governments. Because of their disruptive character, political strikes make a specific issue salient in the political debate and focus attention on it. Citizens learn about the issue and the fact that other citizens are discontent about it. That makes the government look bad and can lead more people to adopt the same critical point of view. Second, political strikes come with economic costs because they negatively impact many people's lives. That can in turn decrease confidence in the government. Much (although not all) of the economic costs will be borne by employers who are often well-organized and well-resourced and who might exert pressure on governments to stop the strikes. In these ways, political strikes can be powerful tools to extract concessions from politicians.

These theoretical considerations on the function of political strikes are coherent with real-life cases and empirical research. Political strikes do occur regularly. Some recent examples, in addition to the strike in Israel, are strikes for the independence of Catalonia in Spain in 2017,<sup>20</sup> for the repeal of the Irish abortion ban in 2017,<sup>21</sup> against the pension reform in France in 2019,<sup>22</sup> against a range of agricultural reforms in large parts of India in 2020,<sup>23</sup> and against police brutality in Minneapolis in 2020.<sup>24</sup> Quantitative empirical research on political strikes has focused in particular on the rise of general strikes in Europe between 1980 and the 2010s.<sup>25</sup> General strikes are simply political strikes with wide participation that extend across more than one economic sector. The success factors for these strikes are complex, but researchers do generally find that they have meaningful effects on policy outcomes and subsequent election results.<sup>26</sup> A pioneering study on political strikes in Latin America also finds a long-term increase in the number of political strikes between 1990 and 2019.<sup>27</sup> As in the case of Europe, there are however substantial differences between individual countries. When it comes to political strikes' efficacy in Latin America, researchers report both cases in

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Johnston, Hamann, and Field 2022, p. 840.

<sup>20</sup> Pellicer and Mouzo 2017.

<sup>21</sup> McSorley 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Lemarié and Pietralunga 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Pahwa 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Gurley 2020.

<sup>25</sup> See e.g.: Hamann, Johnston, and Kelly 2013; Lindvall 2013; Nowak and Gallas 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Hamann, Johnston, and Kelly 2013; 2016. Interestingly, a study for the case of Spain finds that general strikes there only decrease the public approval of leftist governments and not that of conservative ones (Johnston, Hamann, and Field 2022).

<sup>27</sup> Medel 2022, p. 76.

which strikes did cause changes in government policy <sup>28</sup> as well as cases in which they ultimately failed to be successful.<sup>29</sup>

Political strikes can thus be effective measures for correcting the course of government policy and stopping or at least changing intended measures that are deeply unpopular. As such, political strikes can contribute to remedying the defects regarding accountability and political equality that I laid out earlier. Political strikes allow citizens to hold politicians accountable because they are a tool to pressure politicians in response to some political action. While strikes are not formal sanctions and do not remove officials from office directly, they are nevertheless a way for citizens to exert effective pressure on them, leading to similar results.

The ability to go on political strikes also increases political equality between the affluent and well-organized and ordinary citizens insofar as strikes empower the latter to effectively pressure politicians even without substantial material means. The ability to engage in a political strike levels the playing field, so to speak, by giving ordinary citizens an additional means to exercise political power, bringing their abilities closer to social elites.

That is not to say that political strikes create full political equality. Some people will be able to make more effective use of their ability to go on political strikes. That can be, for example, because their jobs have a more direct impact on people's lives. Bus drivers going on strike have a more profound impact than graphic designers going on strike. It then seems likely that the bus drivers' strike will be more effective than the graphic designers'. Likewise, some groups might be better able to organize collectively to go on strikes. For example, professions that have a higher degree of labour organisation will likely also have an easier time organising for a political strike than professions that are not organised as well.

Nevertheless, being able to go on political strikes does distribute political power more widely than it currently is distributed, because political influence currently mostly tracks material wealth. While political strikes plausibly empower workers in impactful sectors like garbage disposal and well-organized sectors like heavy industry more than others, this is still a development we should welcome. That is because these people currently lack political power compared to social elites. While the ability to go on political strikes does not create full political equality, it does distribute political power more equally among different groups than it currently is distributed.

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<sup>28</sup> For example in Ecuador: Trujillo and Spronk 2018, p. 137.

<sup>29</sup> For example in: Brazil in 2017: Carbonai 2019.



Also note that political strikes being democratic from the perspectives of accountability and political equality does not mean that the content of the political demands involved will always be democratic. Political strikes can have anti-democratic demands, for example demanding the exclusion of specific groups or individuals from the political process. While political strikes as a procedural means of political action in general can make a valuable contribution to democratic societies, the democratic merits of any individual strike will also depend on the goals that are pursued. Just as citizens can vote for anti-democratic candidates, they can also strike with anti-democratic demands.

Evidently, then, political strikes can only be part of the solution to the existing deficits regarding accountability and political equality. In addition to the fact that political strikes will not empower all citizens equally and the risk that they are used for anti-democratic purposes, there are also some practical limitations. For example, effective political strikes require a lot of organisation and motivation in the general citizenry. They also probably only work where there is a specific policy to protest against that is highly visible and publicly salient. Gradual policy changes or highly technical policy decisions might also be objectionable but will most likely not have the same motivating force. Political strikes are therefore best seen as a tool to curb the worst excesses of elite capture.

Another important factor that can influence the effectiveness of political strikes is their legal status.<sup>30</sup> Where political strikes are not legally protected, employers can simply dismiss strikers. That raises the costs of participating in a political strike considerably. This can discourage citizens from participating in strikes and it gives employers a powerful means to make employees return to work. Without legal protection, participation in political strikes will probably be limited to highly motivated citizens or cases where highly objectionable policies threaten deeply held convictions. Under those conditions, political strikes can cease to be an effective threat to consistently deter politicians from undermining basic democratic rights, simply because they are so unlikely to actually take place and attract wide participation. In practice, political strikes are illegal, i. e. not legally protected, in most countries today.<sup>31</sup> The political strike in Israel for example was ended by a court decision shortly after it started.<sup>32</sup> Where political strikes survive challenge in court, it is mostly because courts classify them as regular labour strikes under a wide definition of what constitutes a

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<sup>30</sup> I thank two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on this point.

<sup>31</sup> Waas 2014a, p. 21.

<sup>32</sup> Zilber 2024.



labour-related issue and not because political strikes as such are legally recognized.<sup>33</sup> My understanding of political strikes provides an argument for their legal protection as political strikes. That enables citizens to more easily resist the threat of dismissal and other sanctions and thereby lowers the costs of participating in political strikes, making them more effective tools to contest elite capture over a range of issues.

However, even though my argument speaks in favour of a legal right to political strikes, such a right is neither necessary nor sufficient for any particular political strike to be effective. As mentioned above, most countries today do not recognise a legal right to political strikes, yet political strikes happen and are often effective.<sup>34</sup> That might be for a variety of reasons. I mentioned earlier that courts sometimes classify political strikes as regular labour strikes, giving them legal approval.<sup>35</sup> If citizen power is large enough, employers might also fear backlash if they sanction people for striking. Conversely, political strikes being legal is not a guarantee for there being effective accountability and rough political equality. In countries like Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands that have legalised some political strikes through a wide definition of labour-related issues, there is no significant difference in terms of effective accountability and political equality compared to many other European countries. And the degree to which political strikes are used also varies. In Finland, political strikes are entirely legal, yet perceived political self-efficacy is low.<sup>36</sup> To reiterate, my argument here is that legalising political strikes makes them more easily accessible and thus more effective. It thereby contributes to citizens' ability to contest political decisions by officials who would otherwise be largely unaccountable, increasing political equality. But even without legal protection, political strikes are used and can be effective.

Let me touch upon a final question regarding the legal status of political strikes. Per my argument, legalising political strikes can help level the playing field and equalise political power in societies characterised by elite capture. But what are the chances of political strikes being legalised if this will greatly reduce the political power of those who currently have disproportionate control over the legislative process? If the problem is the elite capture of political power, how can that political power ever be used to combat those who have captured it? Where elite capture is severe, the chances of political strikes being legalised are probably low. But, as mentioned earlier, it is neither

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<sup>33</sup> See e.g. France: Kessler 2014.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. for the importance of non-legal factors for the effective organisation of strikes Reddy (2021, sec. III).

<sup>35</sup> Waas 2014a, p. 22.

<sup>36</sup> Lamminen 2014; Bäck, Karv, and Kestilä-Kekkonen 2024.

necessary nor sufficient that political strikes are legal in order for them to be effective. Countries where political strikes are comparably legal do not have more political equality and even where political strikes are illegal, they can be effective. My argument here is merely that political strikes can contribute to effective accountability and political equality and that legalising political strikes can make them more accessible and more effective. My argument thus speaks in favour of legalising political strikes, but it does not require political strikes to be legal in order for them to fulfil their function.

### III. THE BASIC MORAL ARGUMENT: POLITICAL STRIKES AS PERMISSIBLE SELF-DEFENSE

In the previous section, I laid out the function of political strikes and the contribution they could make to accountability and equality. Let me now turn to the moral justification of political strikes. For while I have shown that political strikes can be effective tools for holding politicians accountable and supporting political equality, I have said nothing on whether they are permissible means for doing so. And the permissibility of political strikes is less than obvious. Strikes constitute a violation of contractual obligations and thus seem *prima facie* impermissible. Additionally, workers' claim that they retain a right to their job even though they refuse to work looks contradictory. One of the most basic principles of contemporary legal orders is that contracts are to be fulfilled: *pacta sunt servanda*. And if a contract is not fulfilled, the other party is not liable to uphold their end of the contract. Yet, strikers claim that they can violate the employment contract and not suffer any consequences. Let me now give a moral argument for why this is permissible in the case of political strikes and then compare and contrast it with some existing justifications for labour strikes to further illustrate the specifics of my argument.

Given their function, political strikes can be seen as a tool of self-defence in cases of threats to political rights and justified as such.<sup>37</sup> The basic argument is as follows. Where effective accountability and political equality are lacking, there is a threat to basic political rights. Namely, to rights to effective political participation and political equality. In a situation where these rights are under threat, political strikes can serve to defend them by pressuring politicians into making political concessions, thereby giving an opportunity for effective political participation and stopping policies that would further entrench democratic deficits.

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<sup>37</sup> See for an introduction Frowe and Parry (2022).

This kind of self-defence justification proceeds from the idea that rights also come with the permission to defend them when they are under threat. One conceptual reason for such self-defence rights is that we want rights to effectively protect certain goods or interests.<sup>38</sup> If rights did not come with secondary rights to defend them, they would leave their holders purely at the mercy of others' willingness to respect these rights. An instructive example is the right to bodily integrity. Where that comes under threat, I am permitted to enforce my right and defend myself, even if that means that I will infringe upon others' rights in the process. That is because my right to bodily integrity would otherwise depend only on others' willingness not to infringe upon it. And that does not look like an effective protection of the goods or interests that the right is supposed to protect. The permission to defend oneself holds even where there are institutions in place that are supposed to guarantee the right in question.<sup>39</sup> For the case of bodily integrity, think of a well-functioning police force and a judicial system for example. That is because even where those systems are relatively effective, they cannot protect the rights in question everywhere and always. It then seems prudent to allow for self-defence where necessary.

Like the right to bodily integrity, political rights also come with a right to defend them in order to effectively safeguard the goods and interests they are supposed to protect, even where there are other institutions in place that are supposed to serve this function. And in the course of that self-defence, it can be permissible for the holders of political rights to infringe upon the rights of others as long as they do not impose undue burdens upon them. I will discuss the question of what exactly constitutes an undue burden later on.

In Section I, I have shown what the threat looks like that political strikes are supposed to serve as defence against. In contemporary liberal democracies, political rights are under threat since the conventional institutions fail to create effective relationships of accountability and since well-resourced and well-organised groups can make much more effective use of their formal rights than others. Although the threat here is not that political rights will be legally abolished, there is nevertheless a threat in situations of elite capture that citizens are systematically unable to effectively participate. Political strikes here function as political self-defence not only when they help avert direct threats to formal political rights. They also more generally serve to defend basic

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<sup>38</sup> There are also more substantial justifications of harmful self-defence, see Frowe and Parry (2022, sec. 1). However, for my purposes, this conceptual justification is more illuminating.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Ferzan 2007/2008.

political rights wherever they allow citizens to contest unaccountable political power and to re-establish effective accountability and rough political equality.

Political strikes can only serve as a defence against threats to political rights if they are in fact effective at averting those threats. I argued for the effectiveness of political strikes in Section II. There is a plausible mechanism for how political strikes can pressure politicians and empirical data confirms that political strikes can in fact be effective. My argument also shows why it is necessary for citizens to engage in practices outside of the regular political process in order to defend their rights. Since the threat to political rights arises because of the vulnerability of existing institutions to capture, citizens need alternative means to be able to effectively defend those rights.

Let me again clarify here that I am discussing the moral justifiability of political strikes as a means of self-defence and not the question whether they should be legalised. My basic argument only aims to show why it is morally permissible for people to engage in a political strike. This is notably distinct from the question how the state should react to such activities. Of course, the moral justifiability of political strikes certainly speaks in favour of the state refraining from punishing them, at the very least.<sup>40</sup> After all, political strikes arguably complement the state's framework for the protection of political rights in a morally permissible manner, empowering ordinary citizens to defend their political rights against threats. However, I lack the space here to fully explore whether or not political strikes should be legalised, all things considered.

So far, I have thus shown that there is a threat to political rights and that political strikes are a necessary and effective means of self-defence against that threat. This is my basic argument for and justification of political strikes. For a full moral justification as a means of self-defence, I will also have to show that political strikes do not impose undue burdens on others. That is, I will have to show that, in addition to meeting the criteria of effectiveness and necessity, they also meet the criteria of narrow and wide proportionality. I do so in Sections V and VI. But let me first further illustrate my argument by comparing and contrasting it with existing justifications of the right to strike and other arguments about permissible means of political resistance.

#### IV. ALTERNATIVE JUSTIFICATIONS

Let me now compare and contrast my argument with two related groups of arguments: arguments for a right to strike in the context of labour struggles and arguments for other

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. for the legality of self-defence more generally Ferzan (2007/2008) and for resistance and illegality Delmas (2018).

kinds of political resistance. This will illustrate what is distinctive about my argument and how it positions the right to political strikes in the wider theoretical landscape.

There are three main arguments to ground a right to strike in the context of labour disputes:<sup>41</sup> a liberal rights argument, an argument from bargaining equality, and a socialist argument. The first proceeds from the liberal right to association and is particularly popular in the legal literature.<sup>42</sup> It states that people have the right to associate and should therefore be allowed to associate and organise to conduct strikes. This argument is flawed however, because it cannot explain the peculiar nature of the right to strike.<sup>43</sup> Why should employers not be allowed to fire workers on strike? The liberal argument merely purports that employees should be able to associate, not that they can violate their contractual duties in this specific way. The right to associate can explain why people should be allowed to coordinate to refuse to work and to take to the streets to articulate their claims, but it cannot explain why strikers should be protected from the consequences of violating their contractual obligations. The argument from self-defence on the other hand can explain why strikers should not be fired: it would make political strikes ineffective in a situation where an effective tool for self-defence is necessary, because of the lack of accountability and the presence of elite capture.

The second way of arguing for a right to strike is from bargaining equality.<sup>44</sup> Employers are in a structurally advantaged bargaining position compared to employees. Often, employers do not depend on individual employees and replacements are readily available at comparatively low cost. Employees however often depend on their jobs to make a living and switching jobs can be difficult and come with great costs. Employers are then able to exploit this bargaining inequality and push employees to work under conditions that they would have otherwise found unacceptable. A right to strike effectively empowers workers to bargain on equal footing with employers, because it allows them to effectively pressure employers. This argument largely resembles my argument for political strikes. Both outline an asymmetric relationship where one side finds itself in a structural disadvantage and should be empowered via an effective right to strike. The main difference between the two is that the reduction of strikes to a means of bargaining strips them of their political content.<sup>45</sup> Strikes then become purely economic tools and are regulated as such, aiming at bargaining equality between

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<sup>41</sup> Gourevitch 2016.

<sup>42</sup> Waas 2014b, p. 5.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Borman 2017, p. 88.

<sup>44</sup> Gourevitch 2018, 912.

<sup>45</sup> Reddy 2021.

two parties to an array of economic transactions. On my account, strikes retain their political character and are used to establish a broad balance of power in democratic politics.

Third, there is a socialist argument for the right to strike.<sup>46</sup> It starts from the socialist analysis of social relations under capitalism. Under capitalism, workers are structurally dominated by capitalists. Because capitalists own the means of production and everyone needs access to the means of production to sustain themselves, everyone who is not a capitalist somehow needs to gain access. They do that by selling their labour power on the labour market. This sale of labour power is not properly voluntary because workers have no reasonable alternatives to this course of action. They need access to the means of production to lead a flourishing life. Strikes are then a means of protesting against objectionable conditions that employers can impose upon workers and also serve to articulate and highlight this basic fact of social domination. As Alex Gourevitch puts it, 'facing a freedom to quit the job but not the work, workers assert a right to quit working but keep the job.'<sup>47</sup> Again, the argumentative strategy here largely resembles my argument for political strikes. Facing some fundamental objectionable asymmetric relationship, the worse off should be empowered to assert their rights effectively. On this general level, the two arguments are quite similar. The main difference between the arguments lies in the specifics. Here, note two in particular. First, the socialist argument proceeds from non-domination as the foundational normative principle while the argument for political strikes aims at rough political equality. Second, the socialist argument understands strikes as part of the socialist toolbox to overcome a fundamentally unjust state and transition to socialism. My argument for political strikes neither understands democratic societies as fundamentally unjust nor does it aim at a transition to an entirely different political system. Rather, it merely aims to better fulfill the basic democratic promise of effective citizen influence.

How do political strikes relate to other tools of political resistance? Political strikes often come with protests and demonstrations in the streets, but they involve more than just that. The distinguishing feature of the political strike as compared to a regular protest is that people refuse to work in order to pressure the government to give in to their demands. This refusal is also what makes political strikes more disruptive than mere protests of comparable size. Because of their disruptive character, political strikes are then also likely to draw more public attention than protests. The additional element of the refusal to work also sends a stronger signal to politicians. Citizens are

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<sup>46</sup> Gourevitch 2016; 2018; 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Gourevitch 2016, p. 315.

so discontent that they refuse to cooperate in the economic life of the polity. Political strikes share this element of disruption with forms of everyday resistance like shirking, foot-dragging, and false compliance.<sup>48</sup> However, political strikes have an element of publicity that is absent in these forms of resistance. The refusal to work is not covert, but public.

Their public character puts political strikes conceptually close to civil disobedience.<sup>49</sup> Civil disobedience describes protesting through deliberately unlawful actions. This is what makes them acts of disobedience as opposed to civil protests. However, these actions still adhere to some standard of civility and fealty to existing democratic institutions and the rule of law. That is what makes disobedience civil. Citizens engaged in civil disobedience typically commit illegal acts in public with the intention to disrupt, draw attention, and express dissent. These goals overlap with the goals of the political strike. The main difference between political strikes and civil disobedience is their relation to the legal system. Civil disobedience puts at its center the illegality of certain actions and the acceptance of penalty, simultaneously expressing discontent with some state of affairs while also declaring fealty to democracy and the rule of law in general. In political strikes on the other hand, protesters refuse cooperation by withholding their labour. Although a political strike being legal or not can influence its effectiveness, the legality of the strike plays no role in the logic of the political action. The point of a political strike is not to break the law, the point is to withhold labour and thereby effectively pressure the government. We can see this difference most clearly when we consider the consequences of a legalisation of either tool. As I have argued above, there are good reasons to legally protect political strikes, making them a more accessible and effective tool of democratic protest. Legalisation here would support the practice. Civil disobedience on the other hand cannot be legalised. Because the whole point of this kind of political action is to be disobedient by committing an illegal act, legalising it would render the practice meaningless.

While political strikes signal deep discontent and do so by going beyond mere protests, they do not necessarily involve violence. This distinguishes them from armed resistance, for example.<sup>50</sup> The latter necessarily involves (the credible threat of) violence, conceptually speaking. The idea of non-violent armed resistance is incoherent whereas the idea of a non-violent political strike is not. Many of the

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<sup>48</sup> See paradigmatically Scott (1985). For an application to contemporary workers' situation, see Aytaç (2024).

<sup>49</sup> For an introduction see Delmas (2016).

<sup>50</sup> See e.g. Finlay 2015.



political strikes mentioned earlier did not involve any significant violence. Political strikes are permissible articulations of political demands within deficient democratic systems where the political deficits do not yet warrant employing violence, for example because basic liberties are still largely protected and those in power do not themselves employ violence. That is not to say that political strikes cannot be employed in more authoritarian political systems as well. In those systems too, political strikes are justified as articulations of basic democratic rights, and they might also be effective tools to pressure politicians.

While political strikes do not require violence, some have argued that strikes generally require coercive tactics to be effective.<sup>51</sup> Only if workers manage to prevent the use of strikebreakers, for example, can they effectively halt production. I take the question whether or not these coercive tactics are necessary to be an empirical question that is beyond the scope of my article. In political strikes specifically, the strikers' refusal to provide essential services like transportation or childcare might be considered coercive. At the same time, including these sectors in a political strike might well be particularly effective since it increases political pressure. Does this make political strikes coercive, conceptually speaking? If we employ a wide definition of coercion and consider these common tactics coercive, it does. But the core question of my article is whether this distribution of harms and benefits—coercive or not—is justifiable.<sup>52</sup> I will thus leave aside this conceptual question and focus on the broader normative point: Can the kinds of harms that political strikes involve be morally justified?

Having further clarified the right to political strikes, I now want to return to the criteria of their moral permissibility. In order to provide a full argument for the moral permissibility of political strikes as a means of self-defence, I still have to show that they do not impose undue burdens on others. To illustrate what is at stake in this argument, let me discuss two objections. The first claims that political strikes as a means of self-defence impose harm on people that are not liable for that harm. They violate what is conventionally called narrow proportionality. The second claims that political strikes unduly escalate political struggles by putting important social goods at risk, preventing peaceful cooperation and derailing democratic systems. They violate what is conventionally called wide proportionality.

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<sup>51</sup> Gourevitch 2018, p. 905.

<sup>52</sup> For discussions of strikes and coercion from a more deontological perspective, see: Dobos 2022; Christensen 2025.

## V. EMPLOYER LIABILITY FOR THE COSTS OF POLITICAL STRIKES<sup>53</sup>

The first objection goes as follows. The political strike addresses politicians who plan to carry out objectionable and undemocratic policies. But the political strike most directly harms the employers of the citizens who go on strike. They will miss out on the labour they have contracted and they are unable to fire and replace the employees who refuse to fulfill their contractual duties. This looks unfair. After all, the employers are not the ones who pass the objectionable policies, nor could they directly change policies even if they wanted to.

Let me draw on a standard account of permissible harm in self-defence in order to flesh out this objection. Here, one important consideration for permissible harm is whether those harmed are liable to harm.<sup>54</sup> One is liable to defensive harm if one is not wronged by the imposition of harm, i. e. when one has no right not to be harmed.<sup>55</sup> What makes someone liable to defensive harm? Paradigmatically, one is liable to defensive harm if one causes wrongful harm to others.<sup>56</sup> The wrongful attacker is liable to defensive harm on the part of the victim because they have attacked the victim, forfeiting their rights against harm.

But rights forfeiture through wrongdoing is not the only way in which one can become liable to defensive harm. One's rights against harm can also be overridden by a range of duties.<sup>57</sup> For example, if I have an enforceable duty to rescue someone, then it is permissible for others to impose (limited) harm on me in order to rescue that person. However, any person liable to harm is always only liable to some amount of harm and not to harm in general. One's duty to rescue makes one liable to much less defensive harm than one's attempt to kill someone. An action that only harms those liable and does not exceed the amount of harm they are liable to is considered narrowly proportional.<sup>58</sup>

We can now specify the objection in the terms of this account: Political strikes are supposed to defend political rights. The democratic deficit I discuss stems from the general setup of the political system and the behaviour of politicians. But political

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<sup>53</sup> I would like to thank Jeff Howard for his advice in structuring this and the following section.

<sup>54</sup> Tadros 2016.

<sup>55</sup> Although liability is generally neither necessary nor sufficient for permissible harming, I follow the objection and assume that in the case of political strikes, liability is a necessary condition for permissibility.

<sup>56</sup> See for a detailed analysis along these lines Rodin (2011).

<sup>57</sup> Tadros 2016, pp. 116–18.

<sup>58</sup> Frowe and Parry 2022, sec. 3.1.

strikes most directly harm employers who have no meaningful part in bringing about this infringement of political rights. Because they play no such part, employers retain their general rights not to be harmed and are therefore not liable to defensive harm in the course of political strikes. In response to this objection, I will offer three reasons why employers are in fact liable to harm from political strikes: their responsibility for that harm, their duties of justice, and their duties to rescue.

First, and most straightforwardly, one can respond to the objection by arguing that employers are liable to defensive harm because they are responsible for the infringement of political rights and have thereby forfeited their rights against harm. Many employers will be part of the very elite that exerts outsized influence in the political process in the first place. Employers are often very well organised and connected in large employer organisations, within a sector, on the national level, and often also on a global level.<sup>59</sup> Business corporations in particular are often engaged in lobbying and seem to derive substantial benefits from it.<sup>60</sup> Through these kinds of actions, employers arguably engage in elite capture, using their collective power and material wealth to establish powerful political positions and exercise influence on the political process. This behaviour threatens political rights insofar as it exploits other people's inability to hold politicians accountable and insofar as it violates political equality.

Harming employers who engage in these actions through political strikes is not objectionable, because, as drivers of and profiteers from the democratic deficits, they have engaged in objectionable actions and thereby signed away their rights against harm. Of course, this will not hold true for all employers. Roughly, very large business corporations will probably meet this criterion, as will very wealthy individual employers. In contrast, small companies or individuals with limited wealth will likely not meet it. The first argument for the liability of those harmed by political strikes is thus limited to a subgroup of employers. Additionally, it might be empirically controversial since political influence is hard to measure. Let me then provide two additional arguments for the liability of employers, both of which do not rely on employer culpability. Instead, they articulate duties that override rights against harm.<sup>61</sup>

Second, there are political duties that outweigh employer rights against harm where ordinary citizens' democratic rights are under threat. Citizens in a democratic state with threats to the political rights of some are liable to some costs of resistance.

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<sup>59</sup> See e.g. Heemskerk and Takes 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Lux, Crook, and Woehr 2011; Babic et al. 2022.

<sup>61</sup> These arguments to some extent mirror Candice Delmas's (2018, chs. 4, 5) arguments about duties that outweigh the duty to follow the law.

That is because all citizens have a duty of fairness to aid in remedying injustices, like threats to political rights.<sup>62</sup> This duty stems from a general principle of fair play.<sup>63</sup> If one participates in a social scheme of cooperation that imposes costs and produces benefits, one is required to do one's fair share within this scheme. In the context of injustices, such as threats to political rights, that duty requires citizens to cease benefiting from injustice and it requires citizens to do their part in efforts to remedy injustice. Since employers are also citizens, they too have duties to cease benefiting from injustice and to do their part in remedying injustice. Because they have such duties, they are liable to be made to bear some of the costs of remedying injustices. But how much harm can employers be made to bear? Clearly, citizens in a democratic state can be made to bear relatively minimal harm, such as the inconvenience of a political protest in their neighbourhood. However, the question at issue here is whether employers can be made to bear the more substantial costs of their employees refusing to work, possibly for multiple days.

Employers can be made to bear that kind of harm for two reasons. First, employers are a relatively resourceful group. Although group members range from a small corner store to large multinationals, many employers will be in strong socio-economic positions. To assume the role of employer, one needs capital and knowledge, both markers for a strong socio-economic position. Profitable businesses yield significant returns for their owners and the people who invested in them. That means that employers are able to bear considerable costs in resistance—like the costs of the withdrawal of labour for a couple of days or even weeks—without endangering any more important moral goods. Employers are unlikely to starve because of a strike, for instance. And one thing that should play into the determination of one's fair share is one's ability to bear costs. Other things being equal, the higher one's ability to bear costs, the higher one's fair share in remedying injustice.

Second, the employers' strong social position is to a large extent the result of social institutions. Successful businesses benefit immensely from stable liberal-democratic institutions like the rule of law, regulation, and public education. They also often assume the form of a business corporation, an institution specifically designed by the state to provide economic privileges.<sup>64</sup> The success of these businesses is to a considerable extent not simply the result of entrepreneurial ingenuity, but social provision. Since employers have thus benefited immensely from social cooperation, a fair sharing

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<sup>62</sup> Finlay 2015, sec. 2.6; Delmas 2018, ch. 4; Laurence 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Simmons 1979.

<sup>64</sup> Ciepley 2013.

of burdens can also demand them giving back within this scheme when it comes to securing the justice of this scheme overall through resistance. Otherwise, employers would be free-riding, accepting the benefits of social cooperation without contributing to society, even though they could.

Overall then, considering general duties of fairness, employers' ability to bear costs without putting at risk more weighty moral goods, and the degree to which employers have benefitted from social provision, it is plausible to think that employers' fair share of the burdens of combating injustice includes bearing the harms of political strikes.

Finally, a third reason to think that employers are liable to the harms of political strikes are their duties of aid. More specifically, it is the employers' duty to help their needy co-citizens by bearing the costs of the political strike.<sup>65</sup> Generally, citizens have a so-called Samaritan duty to help fellow citizens in need when the costs are not unreasonably high. This duty stems from citizens' general duty to help others in need, familiar from standard rescue cases like Singer's child in the pond.<sup>66</sup> Now, how does that duty apply to the case of the political strike?

For the Samaritan duty to apply to the case of political strikes, it has to be the case that, first, strikers are in fact in need of help and that, second, the costs of the aid, i. e. the costs of the political strike for employers, are not unreasonably high. I have already shown earlier that a successful political strike is an effective means of defending political strikes. Thus, the employers' enabling the political strike is an effective means of aid. Strikers are in need of aid because they face a threat to their political rights, as elaborated in Section I. Although that is not as concrete a threat as, for instance, the immediate threat of drowning, it can be described as a kind of 'persistent Samaritan peril.'<sup>67</sup> Through a political system that disproportionately empowers the wealthy and well-organised, all other citizens face a persistent threat to their political rights. These citizens then are in need of help to alleviate that threat. Bearing the costs of political strikes is not unreasonable for employers. That is for reasons similar to those mentioned earlier. Employers are a relatively well-off group. Most of them are able to bear the costs of strikes without putting goods of high moral value at stake. Like the bystander who only sacrifices their clothes to save the child from drowning, most employers can help their co-citizens defend their political rights at merely some financial costs.

The previous two arguments might seem to leave a justificatory gap. Both stipulate that employers are in relatively comfortable social positions where bearing the costs of

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<sup>65</sup> Delmas 2018, chap. 5; Valentini 2015.

<sup>66</sup> Singer 1972.

<sup>67</sup> Delmas 2018, p. 143.

strikes has no significant consequences for them. However, there surely are employers who are not in that kind of position, for example because their business is not profitable or because it is particularly small and vulnerable. Can they also be permissibly made to bear the costs of political strikes? Note that the number of these cases is probably fairly low. The harm of the political strike for the individual employer would have to be unreasonably high in order not to fall under their duties of fairness and aid and thus remove liability. What counts as unreasonable in this sense depends on one's exact interpretation of what duties of fairness and aid require. For the sake of the argument, let us just assume that there are some cases in which this holds. One example could be the employer that has to declare bankruptcy if their employees go on strike.

One might have similar intuitions for bystanders. Political strikes will also impose costs on regular citizens since they are often generally disruptive. These regular citizens do not seem to have done anything to justify the imposition of costs on them and thus lack liability. However, bystanders too have general duties of fairness and aid towards their co-citizens. In particular, some bystanders will have fairly stringent duties of fairness because political strikes might help to defend their political rights as well. In these cases, they are liable to bear some costs because they would otherwise free-ride on the activism of others. But, as in the case of the vulnerable employers, let us suppose that there are some citizens for whom the costs of political strikes exceed what they are liable to bear. An example here could be the citizen that gets fired because a political strike makes them come to work late.

Even though they are not liable to be harmed, these groups can permissibly be harmed in political strikes for reasons of lesser evil.<sup>68</sup> That is, although their rights against harm remain untouched, we are justified in harming them, because that leads to a better achievement of moral goods overall. Instances like the employer who has to declare bankruptcy or the citizen who gets fired from their job are justified because of the widespread gains in political rights across the population that the political strike brings about. This argument can also make sense of the intuition that political rights are so fundamental to a democracy that hardly any financial harm could ever outweigh them, independent of considerations of liability.<sup>69</sup> The moral importance of political rights grounds a powerful lesser-evil justification that, all things considered, makes the infringement of employer interests permissible.

Importantly, however, in contrast to harms justified from liability, harms justified from lesser evil generate duties of compensation. Compensation for these instances of

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<sup>68</sup> See for lesser evil vs. liability arguments generally Rodin (2011).

<sup>69</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

harm could readily be dealt with via regulation. For example, there could be a scheme for vulnerable employers to apply for compensation for the costs of political strikes. And there could be a similar scheme for compensating citizens if they get harmed by political strikes. There are also additional reasons for regulation that further limits the harms from political strikes even beyond what vulnerable parties have a moral claim to. Further schemes of regulation and compensation might create a more equitable distribution of the costs of political strikes. This can plausibly be the case where such regulation only limits the effectiveness of political strikes marginally and helps prevent severe setbacks to employer interests, even though the employers might be liable to these setbacks. One way to regulate this effectively could be to compensate small sole proprietorships and partnerships for the costs of political strikes, only letting large business corporations and private limited companies bear the full costs. The legal status of a company could serve both as a proxy for the ability to bear costs and would ensure that the imposed costs do not affect too deeply the individual lives of employers.

Finally, note here that even though political strikes that impose costs on non-liable parties will often be justified, there are reasons to prefer political strikes that impose costs on liable employers and in particular employers who are culpable for threats to political rights.<sup>70</sup> If one had to choose between defending political rights via a political strike that inconveniences all citizens and a political strike that targets culpable employers in particular, the latter is to be preferred since it imposes costs in a more targeted manner. This argument also extends to political strikes as compared to other forms of activism. A political strike that targets culpable employers is to be preferred over a protest march that imposes costs mostly on regular citizens.

## **VI. WIDE PROPORTIONALITY: AN ANTAGONISTIC VISION OF DEMOCRATIC POLITICS**

In the previous section, I have shown that the costs that political strikes impose on employers meet the conditions of narrow proportionality. But for any instance of self-defence to be morally permissible, all things considered, it also has to be widely proportional.<sup>71</sup> An instance of self-defence is widely proportional if the harms it involves beyond what people are liable to are justified as the lesser evil. I have discussed wide proportionality to some extent in the previous section. There, I considered whether the harms involved in political strikes go beyond what citizens are liable to bear as

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<sup>70</sup> Cf. Lai and Lim 2023, sec. 2.2.

<sup>71</sup> Frowe and Parry 2022; Rodin 2011, sec. 3.1.



bystanders in strikes and as vulnerable employers. I argued that on the rare occasions where they do exceed liability, they likely meet the conditions of lesser evil. Let me now consider a different objection from wide proportionality, namely one that considers the overall consequences of political strikes for a democratic society.

The objection stipulates that frequent engagement in political strikes will likely increase the intensity of political struggles and thus their costs. Citizens will strike frequently and over ever more minor issues. Politicians and social elites will in turn increase their efforts in defending their policies and preventing strikes. This kind of continuous political conflict would inhibit cooperation and make society overall less productive, imposing costs on all members of society by reducing overall welfare. This would violate wide proportionality where these costs exceed what citizens are liable to bear and where they do not constitute a lesser evil as compared to an alternative democratic system without political strikes. The latter seems likely insofar as political strikes are specifically designed to disrupt overall productivity and the success of social cooperation in order to force politicians to change course.

For the sake of argument, let me follow this objection regarding two assumptions. First, let us assume that the introduction of more contestatory political devices will lead to more time and effort going into antagonistic political action. It is hard to determine in the abstract how much these devices will actually be used and how effective they are purely as threats. The ability to go on political strike alone might be enough to keep politicians from engaging in anti-democratic behaviour. In that case, citizens' efforts could remain limited to monitoring. But if politicians are not receptive to the mere threat of strikes, citizens might have to actually engage in them. Considerable time and effort might then in fact go into these political battles on both sides, leading to a decrease in productivity and less welfare overall. Second, let us assume that the costs that arise from this antagonism do in fact exceed what citizens are liable to bear. This is not self-evident since duties of fairness and duties of aid can be substantial. But I want to suggest that political strikes can be permissible even if we accept this point.

Where this objection from wide proportionality falls short is in its portrayal of the non-antagonistic alternative. Contemporary liberal democracies have very few antagonistic institutions. And, as is evident from the empirical results I discussed in the first section, in the absence of these antagonistic institutions, contemporary democratic systems are not best characterised by harmonious cooperation for the public good. Instead, they are characterised by unaccountable politicians and disproportional influence for elites. This state of affairs is what we should compare the antagonistic alternative to, not a hypothetical state of peaceful cooperation. Having highlighted this, it becomes clear that political strikes do not meaningfully escalate the political

situation. A political system that fails to create effective accountability and elites that engage in capture already put at stake basic norms of democratic cooperation since these developments eventually lead to effectively autocratic rule. Under a number of normative political theories—take Rawlsianism and the priority of the first over the second principle of justice for example—it is permissible to trade off welfare against the effective enforcement of these basic democratic norms. Political strikes then are proportional responses that are justified as the lesser evil, because we do not have decisive reasons to value successful, productive cooperation and overall welfare more highly than the effective enforcement of basic democratic norms. The same holds for the violation of contractual duties that takes place in political strikes. I see no reason why we should hold those contractual duties as more morally significant than basic democratic norms.

An example of a scenario where political strikes violate wide proportionality illustrates my point. Imagine political strikes did not only lead to a decrease in productivity but to the breakdown of social norms overall and rampant violence in the streets. In this case, political strikes would put at risk not only the welfare, but the life-and-limb rights of citizens. Life-and-limb rights are widely considered more morally significant than political rights.<sup>72</sup> Infringements of our life-and-limb rights have a much deeper impact than infringements of political rights. Threats and attacks involving grave bodily harm go to the very core of our physical existence. In the extreme, they can end life itself. In contrast, even where we are lacking some political rights in the way I have described, people can still go about their lives fairly unperturbed. The absence of these rights rarely influences one's life as drastically as an attack on life-and-limb rights would. The same argument cannot be made for political rights compared to the value of welfare or contractual duties.

Again, these potential risks of political strikes also have implications for how to think about their regulation. One could argue that there should be procedural hurdles to engaging in political strikes in order to limit their effects on productivity and welfare and the threat of escalating political struggle. Regulation could, for example, prescribe a pre-strike vote in a firm that has to reach a certain quorum. Or one could mandate the organisation of political strikes through unions. Numerous measures for this purpose already exist in the regulatory frameworks for labour strikes.<sup>73</sup> The danger with this kind of regulation is, however, its impact on the accessibility of political strikes. To effectively empower ordinary citizens, political strikes need to be easily accessible.

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<sup>72</sup> See for the full discussion Finlay 2015, ch. 3.

<sup>73</sup> See Waas 2014a.

Since one important disadvantage for ordinary citizens as compared to elites is their lack of organisation and material means, we should be very careful to mandate things that require organisation and material means. That would risk defeating the main purpose of the political strike.

## VII. CONCLUSION

In this article I have presented the function of and a moral justification for political strikes in contemporary democratic societies. These societies are demonstrably characterised by two democratic deficits. Regular citizens are unable to hold elected officials accountable and they are unable to exercise their democratic rights on equal footing with social elites. One tool that could contribute to remedying these problems is the political strike. A political strike is the collective withholding of labour in order to bring about some political result. Because of their economic and political costs, they are, demonstrably, efficacious tools for exerting political pressure. Political strikes are thus justified as a democratic tool that serves to defend the basic democratic right to have a roughly equal say in political decision-making. Like other rights, democratic rights also justify taking actions to protect them since the rights would otherwise vanish under threat.

By way of conclusion, let me briefly consider a way in which my argument could be extended.<sup>74</sup> Could this argument for political strikes by employees also be extended to capital owners?<sup>75</sup> Would it be justified for them to withhold capital investments where their political rights are threatened? Generally, an analogous argument could be made here. But, looking at the specific empirical insights that I am building on, the current political situation is far removed from one where capital investors' political rights are threatened. Rather, there is good evidence that the wealthy enjoy disproportionately high political influence. And there is good reason to think that this is a typical rather than extraordinary state of affairs. After all, in democracies, money can often be used as a means to influence politics, giving capital owners more political power than others. An occasion for a capital strike would only arise if they lost this specific ability to influence politics and if they were additionally disenfranchised, threatening their basic political rights.

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<sup>74</sup> I thank Bob Goodin for raising this issue.

<sup>75</sup> See for the classic discussion *Finer (1955)* and more recently *Cordelli and Levy (2022)*.

Another rationale for capital strikes would be a threat not to political rights, but to property rights, for example through expropriation.<sup>76</sup> As in the case of political rights, one could argue here that capital strikes could be justified in defence of property rights. Again, I do not doubt that this argument might generally work where property rights are in fact violated by state action. But for the concrete case of owners of considerable amounts of capital, it does not hold up since one would have to show that property rights in large amounts of productive capital are a basic moral right. More plausibly, a basic moral right only extends to personal property since that kind of property is intimately bound up with important interests in security and stability. Property in large amounts of productive capital is not bound up with basic interests in this way and its regulation is instead an instance of regulation for economic purposes.<sup>77</sup> Regulation, for instance through expropriation, here is not limited by basic moral rights but by political standards of democracy and the rule of law. Where the regulation of property rights in productive capital adheres to these standards and does not cross the boundary into interference with basic moral rights, there is no occasion for self-defence.

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### COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares that he has no competing interests.

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<sup>76</sup> See for recent discussions of expropriation in political philosophy: Blumenfeld 2023; Stehr 2025; Chan 2025.

<sup>77</sup> See for an instructive comparison of US and German constitutional law, see Alexander (2002/2003).

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