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LSE GROUPS takes place during the final fortnight of the LSE summer term. Undergraduate students are placed in small groups; these are cross-year, interdisciplinary, and group members do not know one another in advance. Each group must then devise its own research question, and carry out every stage of a small-scale research project in less than two weeks.

LSE GROUPS is part of the LSE commitment to students learning through enquiry, and developing the skills for knowledge creation.

The overall theme of LSE GROUPS 2022 was *Resilience and the 'New Normal'*.

This paper was submitted on the final Thursday afternoon of the project. Students then presented their work at a conference, on the closing Friday.

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To Strike or Not to Strike?

Industrial Action and Workplace Resilience: Evidence from the LSE

Group 10, LSE GROUPS 2022

Abstract

From BLM to Extinction Rebellion, mass protest has risen in the aftermath of COVID-19. The precise impacts of the rebounding collective action efforts in specific industries, however, remain unclear. This study seeks to investigate the impact of post-COVID industrial action on workplace resilience, primarily of individual employees. Researching the UCU strikes at the LSE as a case study, with a focus on the experiences of the staff, we assess whether taking part in industrial action significantly impacts the workplace resilience of those who choose to strike. A mixed methodology is employed in both data collection and analysis. The data, collected over the course of four days, consists of a staff survey with a small sample size of 40 people and three complimentary longer-form semi-structured interviews. Quantitative OLS regression analysis of survey responses in STATA and qualitative thematic analysis of the interviews provide scant evidence that strikes lead to diminishing workplace resilience. A weak correlation is observable but is not significant when controlling for confounding variables and is not supported by interview insights. Ultimately, it is difficult to argue that industrial action seriously impacts resilience in the workplace post-COVID.

Key Words: workplace resilience, workplace conflict, strikes, UCU, protest, LSE

Introduction

Collective industrial action has played a significant role in resolving opposing interests in the workplace since the beginning of the industrial revolution (ONS, 2015). Workers across all industries have used strike actions involving the withholding of labour, use of picket lines, and campaigning for change to fight against injustice or unfair practices in their places of work. Although the primary purpose of strike action is to resolve conflicts between employers and workers, they could also have important implications for the working environment and employee performance. However, there is limited literature exploring these spill over effects of striking. We are particularly interested in studying the impact of industrial action on workplace resilience. Three interviews were conducted alongside the dispensing of a survey to collect demographic and qualitative data. We conclude that on an individual level, the issue of supporting the strike causes division between the staff.

Literature Review

Comparative historical studies reveal cyclical and sharply declining pattern of strike activity in the UK since 1980s as union density gradually dwindles (Kelly 2015, Screpanti 1987, Lyddon 2015). Two countervailing theories account

for this trend. The optimistic stance argues that the development of a more comprehensive employment law in the UK (e.g., National Minimum Wage Act 1998) effectively mediates the working conditions and makes protests unnecessary.

The pessimistic stance, however, points out that strike frequency is observed to be inversely correlated with strike costs, which increases as competition intensifies, productivity improves (resulting in a more dispersed and specialized workforce) and more restrictive trade union legislations are in place (Nicolitsas, 2003). As the COVID-19 pandemic presents additional health risks and legal implications to strikes, it is anticipated that these costs may inflict a long-term dampening effect on strike activities. Therefore, the resurgence of collective action in 2022 demands explanations – why do strikes revive after the global crisis? How do strikes contribute to workplace resilience?

Robustly grounded in clinical psychology, resilience is generally defined as the “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543). Resilience within the workplace specifically can be broadly categorized into individual and social resilience. The existing literature on workplace resilience focuses on individual resilience, objectively measuring employees’ physical and mental capabilities to persevere in difficult circumstances. Indicators such as stress, health, and sleeping patterns are the primary criteria. On the other hand, most collective bargaining that occurs in the workplace, which targets promoting job security, flexibility of contracts and venues of negotiation, aims to obtain long-lasting impacts on social resilience (Kelly, 2015). Both scales of resilience are endogenous and thus are not entirely divorced from one another. This is interesting because it highlights extensive dimensions of resilience and how it is impacted by collective industrial action. Thus, when examining how post-COVID industrial action shaped workplace resilience, it is important to analyse the impacts on an individual and on a social scale. This research paper is primarily concerned with post-COVID industrial action and its implications regarding resilience in the workplace.

The UCU strikes are an ongoing agenda; however, this year stands out because it is the first time the LSE UCU voted in favour of strikes and further industrial action. These actions are contingent upon recent government action making it harder for academics to secure a “relaxed” standard of living and inequities and inequalities in financial and intangible compensation and benefits (Mercer, 2022). Moreover, unions claim that when strikes are conducted continuously, they are undermined and overlooked (Independent, 2018). This contrasts with the government only measuring strikes as a form of industrial action. It means that strikes are legitimized by the government and therefore are “validated” in comparison to other forms of collective industrial action (Kelly, 2015). The contestation between the two claims emphasizes the subjectivity of the matter which proves the need to evaluate both individual and workplace resilience.

Existing literature on both industrial action and the themes centred around resilience is limited. However, there are varying perspectives that can be drawn upon. For instance, some argue that workplace resilience is merely an extension of individual empowerment (Cotton, 2011). Furthermore, this empowerment would justify industrial

action since the four fights were centred around wage equality, pensions, alongside benefits. Additionally, resilience extends to trade-unionism which emphasizes the need for organized collective action. Resilience also embodies workplace solidarity which reaffirms the social relations within a workplace. In the case of the UCU strikes, we investigate the future of workplace relations and resilience following exogenous shocks in an academic setting. Collective action can be viewed as a catalyst for increased solidarity through striking to support lecturers and teachers receiving inequitable compensation. However, we can also interpret the strikes as a disturbance to consensus and further dividing those who strike from those who do not. Existing literature does not provide sufficient explanation on the strike at a collective level.

Methodology

We employ a mixed method design to test the hypothesis that participation in strike action is associated with a fall in workplace resilience. The aim is to capture both empirical evidence as well as subjective first-hand insights into the impacts of participating in industrial action.

Quantitative Methods

The data used in our empirical analysis comes from a survey of staff in various positions across a range of departments at LSE (see appendix). The survey was designed to collect demographic data, information about participation in the UCU strikes, and gauge the level of workplace resilience for each member of the staff.

Our chosen indicator of workplace resilience is a resilience score computed using the Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) (Smith et al. 2008). The BRS is a 6-item scale that was developed in 2008 by a group of psychologists at the University of New Mexico. It was tested on four samples and found to be a reliable measure of individual resilience. The questions on the BRS that were included in our survey are presented in Table 1. The instruction to each survey respondent was to choose the extent to which they agree with each of the six statements using the following scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree. The scores on items 2, 4 and 6 were reversed and a resilience score was computed using the mean of the 6 items.

We use an OLS regression of resilience score on participation in the UCU strikes to predict the impact of striking on resilience in the workplace, controlling for demographic variables including age, gender, ethnicity, departmental affiliation, and previous strike participation to address selection bias in our sample. The regression includes an interaction between participation in the recent UCU strikes and previous participation in any form of industrial action to disentangle the effects of striking on workplace resilience for those who have experienced striking previously.

Table 1. The Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) (Smith et al. 2008)

Question	Sample Average Score
1. I tend to bounce back quickly after hard times.	3.7
2. I have a hard time making it through stressful events.	3.225
3. It does not take me long to recover from a stressful event.	3.325
4. It is hard for me to snap back when something wrong happens.	3.275
5. I usually come through difficult times with little trouble.	3.1
6. I tend to take a long time to get over setbacks in my life.	3.625

Qualitative methods

To supplement the insights provided the survey and subsequent regression analysis with more nuanced perspectives, interviews were conducted with members of staff who did and did not take part in the UCU strikes in the Michaelmas and Lent terms at the LSE in the 2021-22 academic year.

Staff members who we were aware did and did not take part in the strike were contacted by email, requesting 15-20 minutes of their time to interview them regarding their personal experience of strike periods. Due to time constraints, it was only possible to interview those who were available on a particular day. Although this restricts the sample, the insights obtained from the three members of staff (two who did not take part in the strike and one who did) is nonetheless suitable for a project of this scale. Ideally, a sample of interviewees would have followed on from the survey, with the last question of the survey inviting staff to take part in a short interview. The approach entails that the survey and interviews were sequential. Due to time constants, we

were forced to collect data through the survey and interviews simultaneously, producing the more opportunistic sample of interview participants.

The interviews were semi-structured, leaning towards unstructured, in order to gather as much information as possible given the small sample. The relaxed conversation, with the staff only being prompted with two to three questions across a 15-20-minute discussion, allowed for the information gathered to add to the responses academics provided in the survey. Communication with the staff who were happy to be interviewed brought out concerns regarding anonymity and data protection. It was a part of the ethical considerations at research planning stage to ensure that both the survey and the interview are anonymous, and all data was destroyed at the end of the project. The participants were informed of this and as an additional confidentiality measure it was agreed that none of the interviews would be recorded, with only notes taken throughout each conversation. Inevitably, notes cannot capture a conversation in as much detail and accuracy as a transcript would; the challenge for subsequent analysis was amplified by the practical constraints which meant that one researcher was conducting the interview and taking notes simultaneously, omitting occasional detail. To minimize the loss of detail, the content of each interview was analysed by the respective researcher on the day the interview took place.

Empirical Model

We estimate the following model:

$$resilience_i = \alpha_i + \beta strpart_i + controls_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Where:

i = survey respondent ($i = 1$ to 40)

$resilience_i$ = dependent variable, i.e., 1) Resilience score and 2) Job satisfaction score

α_i = intercept, i.e. the expected value for the resilience score without participation in the strike

$strpart_i$ = dummy variable for participation in the UCU strike

β = main coefficient of interest, i.e. the relationship between strike participation and resilience, holding all control variables constant

$controls_i$ = control variables (see table 2)

ε_i = error term

Table 2: Control Variables

Label	Description
Age21_30	Respondents who are of age 21-30
Age31_40	Respondents who are of age 31-40
Age41_50	Respondents who are of age 41-50
Age51_60	Respondents who are of age 51-60
Male	Respondents who are male
Asian	Respondents who are Asian
Black	Respondents who are Black
Mix	Respondents who are of mixed race
White	Respondents who are white
Eden Centre	Respondents who are affiliated with the LSE Eden Centre
Geography	Respondents who are affiliated with the department of Geography
Other	Respondents who are affiliated with other departments

Empirical Results

Table 3 displays the regression output. Our empirical findings suggest a negative correlation between participation in the UCU strikes and workplace resilience. On average, participation in the UCU strike is associated with a .461-point lower resilience on the BRS compared to non-participation. This result, however, is not statistically significant at the 10%, 5% or 1% level. This could be due to several limitations in our study.

- (i) Small sample size – our sample consisted of 40 observations. Given the practical and time constraints and the scale of our study, while we acknowledge that it is difficult to draw robust conclusions from our empirical analysis, it is sufficient to provide a preliminary result.
- (ii) Self-reported measure of resilience- the measure is
- (iii) Selection bias – While we have tried to control for demographic variables that could bias our results,

Table 3: Regression Table

	Resilience
<i>strpart</i>	-0.461 (0.375)
<i>prevpart</i>	-0.136 (0.366)
<i>Age21_30</i>	-0.610 (0.598)
<i>Age31_40</i>	-0.690 (0.555)
<i>Age41_50</i>	-1.004 (0.592)
<i>Age51_60</i>	-0.774 (0.847)
<i>Male</i>	-0.239 (0.267)
<i>Asian</i>	-0.095 (0.477)
<i>Black</i>	-0.497 (0.659)
<i>Mix</i>	1.032 (0.564)
<i>White</i>	-0.313 (0.321)
<i>Eden Centre</i>	-0.513 (0.522)
<i>Geography</i>	0.087 (0.622)
<i>Other</i>	-0.300 (0.502)
<i>_cons</i>	4.837 (0.787)

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses

Analysis of Interviews

The following commentary on the content of the interviews with staff who did not take part in the UCU strikes is done by themes emergent throughout the two conversations, which were to a large extent guided by the questions. Overall, the topics of decision that can be isolated and run through both the discussions are the following:

1. interviewees perspectives on specifically the UCU strikes,
2. workplace resilience at the LSE in the context of the 2021-22 strikes,
3. collective protest action more generally, and, finally
4. international academic environments.

On the UCU Strikes

Both staff members interviewed were acquainted with the context of the study, clearly aware that many of their colleagues withdrew labour for parts of the Michaelmas and Lent terms to support the UCU agenda. The degree of familiarity with the issues at stake varied between the two interview participants, with one mentioning a lack of understanding as to what exactly the UCU constitutes, how its LSE branch operates and whether and how membership can be obtained.

Neither of the staff members officially went on strike; officially, because while for one person contact time with students was not affected at all, for another staff member, who was teaching multiple courses, a colleague's withdrawal of labour meant that some contact hours could not go ahead as planned. This demonstrates the interdependence of labour units in attaining productivity in the workplace and suggests that it is not simple for staff members to avoid withdrawing labour when such action is being taken en masse because they cannot complete some of their tasks without some colleagues' input. The reliance of effective task completion (delivering all the planned content to students) on multiple streams of labour, highlighted by the interviewees' circumstances, presents a point of weakness in the workplace. It appears that in this case, individual agency has little positive contribution to individual resilience because a staff member's ability to cope with their work can be defined by colleagues' decisions whether to strike or not.

On UCU strikes and workplace resilience

The controversy of the strikes was really brought forward by a staff member who pointed out that more casual contract can provide incentives for junior researchers and, in general, improve job satisfaction. With shorter term

contracts and more of them a researcher can teach on multiple courses at once, potentially across multiple departments, which offers them a greater diversity of experience and the ability to moderate their own working hours (depending on how many contracts they choose to hold at the same time). Further, the more casual contracts mean rapid turnover of staff and therefore frequent job openings, which benefits academics at the beginning of their career. The view expressed here suggests that, in a way, strikes may be antithetical to enhancing workplace resilience, especially for junior researchers. The current state of contracts seems to not be too detrimental to some employees and, according to personal experiences of the strike, attempting to collectively change the culture surrounding contracts (among other issues) can give some people additional work while others withdraw labour, which inevitably challenges job satisfaction.

In general, both interviews make it difficult to say that the strikes have any impact on workplace resilience, especially any positive impact on being able to cope with the tasks of one's job. At no point did either staff member assert that they see major benefits to introducing additional conflict between different levels of decision-makers in their workplace. Both did note that in some cases, conflict in the workplace can lead to a positive outcome, howe

On collective industrial action and protests more generally

Notably, both interviewees expressed support for mass protest, including the withdrawal of labour, in certain circumstances. Being "not a big fan of strike", one member of staff endorsed instances of industrial action and other demonstrations in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Their elaboration highlighted that key to them being able to see an act of protest as an act of resilience is whether they understand the movement as one that fights for the most fundamental rights. In the case of the strikes that took place at the LSE, the union's demands were not viewed as relating to fundamental rights. The staff member felt that their basic rights as an employee were very much intact before the strikes took place, and, if anything, were only under pressure as the chaos of strikes ensued because having to re-organise the content that is covered during their contact time implied additional stress. The extent to which contracts are casual and how pension pay-outs are derived, according to both interviewees, are legitimately contestable matters. Hence, strike action, in the view of both, was an ambiguous way of tackling issues that can be potentially resolved with dialogue. One interviewee recalled positive experiences of themselves and their colleagues bringing employment-related concerns to discussions with decision-makers within the university (primarily in their department), then going on to suggest that they struggle to see a robust reason why the UCU agenda cannot be the subject of discussion. They did, however, note that it is indeed difficult to see what can be done about pensions schemes through dialogue within universities. The other participant also recognised that some issues at stake are better dealt with at a government level, which makes them more sympathetic to the strike action.

International Perspectives

The interviewees distinctly comparative perspectives on the challenges the UCU asserts face British academia offer useful insight into the reasons staff - especially academics with an international background - may not see strike action as a resilient response. Equally, their views can be limiting for understanding motivations of academics with a UK-based career for going on strike. One interviewee's experience of academia in China, where the academic for whom they still work as a Research Assistant since their undergraduate years holds meetings with their office on a Saturday evening, contrasts to the more defined working hours in the UK. Similarly, a staff member's knowledge that in Germany it is rare for researchers to be paid for teaching separately contributes to their appreciation of working conditions in the UK. Ergo, both staff members

It must also be noted that due to practical challenges the interviews with staff who did, and did not strike were conducted by different researchers, which imposes limitations on the comparative analysis. Cross-examination of the interview write-ups as well as the respective analysis by the researchers who conducted the interviews serves to mitigate biases of positionality, which inadvertently arise in interpreting the content of the conversations that took place. Because interviewees were recruited as an opportunity sample (those who responded to an email request to be interviewed *and* were available on a specific day in alignment with the timeline of this project, both the staff emends happened to be junior researchers. Being at the beginning of their career they offered *one kind* of outlook on the utility of strike action in dealing with issues facing academia. It is plausible that the perspectives of more senior staff differ; here, the missed method approach allows for some insight, albeit coarse, into the perspectives of senior research on resilience as well. A question on the academic's position in the department was included in the survey and analysed as a confounding factor in relationship between strike participation and individual resilience.

The following commentary discusses the response of an academic which took part in the strikes at LSE:

Only one member of staff was interviewed, under restricted conditions, and thus no generalizations can be made. However, the following themes emerged within the interview:

1. Individual vs. Collective
2. Solidarity

Individual vs. Collective

The staff member interviewed is a graduate teaching assistant which joined the UCU in 2021. Their responses shed light on the prioritization of collective wellbeing over the individual. For instance, they assert that although they were affected by the reduction in income, they participated in strikes for the four fights. One of which is pensions for senior members of staff, thus even when the member of staff was not directly affected, they participated. Moreover, striking and taking part in industrial action only emphasized workplace resilience. Through the sense of unity created amongst the staff, the interviewee argued that strikes were the best way to spark change and influence the university management. They also highlight that through subordinating one's income to the collective wellbeing of university staff, workplace resilience was strengthened in parallel with the cost-of-living crisis and emerging recession. As a result, through an individual sample of striking staff prioritizing collective wellbeing, workplace resilience is increased, and this should be reflected in future workplace advocacy and industrial action.

Solidarity

The interviewee emphasized the four fights of the UCU including gender and ethnic wage gaps, in addition to the casualization of work contracts and pension plan reform. Not all these fights are of concern to this member of staff, however, they continued to attend protests at the picket line and purchased a full membership at the UCU to stand in solidarity with colleagues. However, this sense of solidarity was not universal. The interviewee highlighted the frustration experienced when members of staff did not strike. They claim that the four fights are an “integral cause” and hence the lack of participation from other members of staff was difficult to watch. Another means through which this cause is advanced is the implications solidarity and strike action have on resilience through awareness. Physical displays of discontent through the protests, teach outs, and physically not showing up to work, according to the interviewee, increase support and resilience by communicating the issue to faculty and students. However, the graduate teaching assistant also acknowledges the negative impacts of not participating in the strike not only on achieving their goals but on overall morale. However, a limitation of this interview is the lack of defining solidarity. We can investigate the same problem through the lens of students, and this is further explored in the issue of to strike or not to strike. Nonetheless, participating in the strike according to this interview strengthened workplace resilience through increasing solidarity amongst striking staff.

Discussion and Conclusion

So, to strike or not to strike? The importance of the question is underscored by the approximately 50% split between those who participated in the strikes and those who did not. Not only does this statistic shed light on the divided nature of the subject, but it emphasizes the fact that not everyone took part in the strikes and figures suggesting all staff and students generally supported strikes are not entirely accurate. The contagious nature of the

issue at hand makes investigation into the impacts of engaging with it imperative. Although the sample size of 40 somewhat limits our ability to draw unambiguous conclusions, the reliability of the quantitative analysis lies in the almost equal split between staff and did not take part even in the opportunity sample. Ultimately, with multiple caveats, the data leads us to argue that an LSE staff member's resilience in the workplace remains relatively unimpacted by them partaking in the UCU strikes, at least in the short to medium-term aftermath of the strike action period, which we are still in given the recency of mass withdrawal of labour. Implications for longer-term potential of collective action in enhancing individual resilience remain ambiguous, however, were the sample skewed, the results would be more tentative still.

Ultimately, quantitative analysis reveals a negative correlation between staff participation in the strikes and personal perception of their resilience in the workplace. However, closer examination of the figures renders this observance statistically insignificant. This largely aligns with the explicit and implicit content of all the interviews as regardless of whether they took part in the strikes or not, all three members of staff expressed notable frustration at the entire period of strikes. For those who did not strike, this seemed to stem from a lack of understanding as to why British academia is failing to resolve its issues through dialogues, as well as a change in workflow. The academic who did take part, and seemed to derive some satisfaction from it, overall frustration can likely be attributed at the lack of understanding as to why not everyone is striking given the importance of the UCU agenda and the fact that the current UCU strike term (2018-2022) is largely unsuccessful as none of their demands have been met in higher education. The findings carry implications for the 'workplace resilience industry' - emergent after 2008 – and future collective action efforts at higher education institutions. Overall, there is no evidence that going on strike is beneficial in the context of workplace resilience and where a potential negative effect is observed, this is not significant enough to discourage such action as experience of it is deeply personal.

Nevertheless, this research does not produce externally valid results, not even within the LSE staff community. This is because LSE had not previously voted for UCU industrial action, specifically strikes, making 2021 the first year for the university faculty to participate in strikes and actions short of strike. Thus, we infer that the results established merely account for initial responses to strike action at LSE. Even then, they are not representative of collective workplace resilience, even on an individual level. Another overlooked factor is the lack of demands being met by LSE, and this caused additional frustration if not further exacerbating differences between the two core groups. Hence, there is a negative, yet insignificant, relationship between strike participation and individual perception of resilience, and this is a by-product of staff input and compound factor.

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