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Counting strike threats

To the editor:

Contrary to Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reports on tracking strike activity, more workers are involved in strike activity in the United States than is publicly reported. According to our survey of published news and government reports on strike-related activity conducted during the winter and spring of 2017, the number of workers threatening to strike between 2012 and 2016 was 199 percent higher than the number who actually did strike according to BLS.

Threatening to strike can be measured along a continuum of willingness and capacity to strike that is more or less credible. However, without any official estimate of the number of strike threats, we are unable to accurately measure the credibility of strike threats. For this reason, BLS should count strike threats. Although not the focus of this survey, by estimating the number of strike threats, BLS would provide the necessary information to allow an assessment of their credibility, which would be useful to employers, industry groups, investors, unions, and various state and federal agencies.

What makes a strike threat?

Significant differences exist between a strike threat and a strike. First, strike threats can take several forms. A threat may be made as an official declaration by workers or their union that they intend to strike. Threats may also be informal, such as when workers engage in organizing actions such as collecting pledges to strike, informational picketing, or engaging in a sickout preceding and during collective bargaining. Official declarations often follow intangible strike threats but need not if the employer and union compromise following actions that are considered a strike threat.

Workers in a recognized union that has engaged in collective bargaining with the employer may only threaten to strike after a long process governed by state or federal labor law is exhausted. Workers in some industries, such as transport, are covered under different labor laws. State and local public workers are covered by state laws, which also impose limits on striking or ban strikes entirely. In contrast, workers who do not have a recognized union may strike at any time. Some workers who issue a strike threat will announce the day the strike will begin and frequently how long it will last and when it will end.

Our findings

From the literature, we found 134 reported strike threats between 2012 and 2016. Of these, 97 strike threats were settled without a strike in firms of any size workforce involving 701,700 workers. Of the 134 strike threats, 73 occurred in workplaces with fewer than 1,000 workers, strikes not counted by BLS. Of these 73 strike threats, 20 resulted in strikes involving 8,573 workers, 6 strike threats had an unknown outcome at the time of the study, and the remainder resulted in no strike. In contrast, BLS reported 72 strikes in firms with 1,000 or more employees involving 352,000 workers. In addition to the number of workers threatening to strike being nearly twice the number that actually did strike, the number of threats was 134.7 percent higher than the number of strikes during this time. It is possible to conclude from our findings that BLS is significantly underreporting strike activity in the United States by failing to count workers who are actually threatening to strike.

Recommendations

Measuring the number of strike threats would be of interest to employers, unions, and the public. For this reason, we make the following recommendations:

1. BLS should include strike threats in its strike reports.
2. BLS should count strike threats and strikes in all workplaces, regardless of the number of employees.
3. BLS should survey employers and unions to record the number of strike threats.
4. Employers and unions should be required to report strike threats, lockouts, and other strike-related activities.
5. Employers and unions should be required to report exact numbers of workers and other data related to strike threats, lockouts, and other strike-related activities.
6. The Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service should report details of the outcome of settlements resulting from its intervention in strike threats and strikes.

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