

Labor Unrest, Global Military Supply Chains, and the Chokepoints of Just-In-Time War

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Abstract – The COVID-19 pandemic revealed significant vulnerabilities in global supply chains. While disruptions to consumer industries have received considerable attention, the US military’s just-in-time networks face similar challenges. An analysis of labor relations can help us better understand these supply chain vulnerabilities. Using new data on work stoppages in the armaments and military logistics industries, this paper examines twenty-first century labor unrest in historical perspective. It argues that recent labor disruptions in the US military’s global supply chains stem directly from the decades-long embrace of neoliberal restructuring: Since the 1970s, the US military and its industrial base reorganized armaments production, privatized logistics services, embraced flexibilization and just-in-time networks, and racialized its workforce. On the one hand, this restructuring successfully reduced the power and cost of US-based logistics workers—who had demonstrated their disruptive capacity during World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. On the other hand, the transformation of the US military’s global supply chains has yielded a new class of local and migrant (i.e., non-US citizen) workers at the chokepoints of military operations. These workers often face poor working conditions. The data shows that they are both able and willing to stop work in struggles to improve their conditions. While the official response to twenty-first century disruption has thus far been to double-down on cost-cutting flexibilization, this has only yielded more conflict. The enhanced structural power yielded to workers by just-in-time war-making arrangements thus provides an opening for those interested in organizing for workers’ livelihoods and against endless war.

I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed significant vulnerabilities in global supply chains. Public health shutdowns, a tight labor market, and volatile economic conditions led to significant disruptions to the flow of global trade. While disruptions to consumer industries have received considerable attention, the US military's networks have also faced similar challenges: supply chain woes have "dealt a significant blow" to military industries, having "upended the plans of defense firms of all sizes" (Losey 2021). Pentagon officials noted that the pandemic heightened awareness of "vulnerability within the supply chain" that had existed before 2020 (Mayfield 2020). Indeed, long before the pandemic, some were sounding the alarm about supply chain vulnerabilities stemming from the "just-in-time" organization of the US military's global supply chains (e.g. Adams 2013). The US response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine has only compounded these challenges (Bender and Seligman 2022; Rathbone, Pfeifer, and Chavez 2022).

An analysis of labor relations can help us better understand these supply chain vulnerabilities. In the world economy writ large, labor unrest was a key component of supply chain disruption during the initial years of the COVID-19 pandemic, as workers struggled against dangerous working conditions and mounting deprivation in the face of an economic downturn (e.g. Covert 2020). The same held true in military supply chains: In 2020, for example, workers at Lockheed Martin and Boeing protested their being forced to work in dangerous conditions, while workers at GE's Lynn, Massachusetts, plant organized a one-day strike—not just over their own safety concerns, but to pressure GE to swap production of armaments for the production of "life-saving ventilators the whole country so desperately needs" (Lacy 2020). Combined with a series of strikes over pandemic health and safety conditions in Mexican *maquiladoras*, many military officials and observers saw a coming crisis due to workplace disruptions (Sieff 2020).

While the pandemic brought the disruptive power of workers and the vulnerabilities of military supply chains into stark relief, their origins lie far earlier. Using new data on labor unrest in the US military's global supply chains, this paper examines twenty-first century work stoppages in historical perspective. It argues that twenty-first century labor disruptions in the US military's global supply chains directly stem from the decades-long embrace of neoliberal restructuring.

In the mid-twentieth century, wartime challenges stemming from disruptive labor unrest and inefficiencies in mass mobilization led many officials and managers to seek a change in the way war was supplied (Payne 2023). While initial attempts at transformation emerged in the wake of World War II and the Korean War, restructuring took off after Vietnam—intertwined with the neoliberal changes in the world economy more broadly (Cowen 2014).¹ The US military and its industrial base reorganized armaments production, privatized logistics services, embraced flexibilization and just-in-time networks, and racialized the workforce. By the 1980s and 1990s, labor costs were lowered, work stoppages declined, and a new form of "just-in-time warfare"

¹ While such transformations in the world economy coincide with the rise of "neoliberalism" as a dominant ideology (e.g. Harvey 2005), in this paper the adjective "neoliberal" refers to the character of *material* transformations associated with the broader world-economic restructuring of the late twentieth century.

(Hazlett 1995) warfare—exemplified in the technological and logistical prowess on display in the 1990-1 Gulf War—was on the horizon.

In the twenty-first century, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, combined with a global “war on terror,” placed significant strain on the military’s just-in-time supply chains. Careful observers have explored the industrial challenges of these wars (e.g. Hasik 2016), and some work has been done on strikes by industrial armaments workers in the twenty-first century (Payne 2020). Less attention has been paid to the significantly more disruptive labor unrest in global logistics networks. Using a new dataset to explore this unrest, this paper shows how the privatization, racialization, and flexibilization of logistics networks has yielded a new class of workers at the chokepoints of military supply chains. These workers often face poor working conditions, and they are able and willing to stop work in struggles to improve their conditions.

The response to this unrest from firms and military officials has thus far been to double-down on neoliberal restructuring. This only serves to heighten the conditions that place disenchanted and structurally empowered workers at the chokepoints of military supply chains. Instead, this paper argues that military officials should return to some of the lessons of World War II—when labor unrest was pacified through mutually beneficial social compacts with workers—but on a necessarily wider scale today than in the mid-twentieth century.

The next section outlines how neoliberal restructuring transformed US military supply chains through a reorganization of armaments production, the flexibilization and privatization of logistics networks, and the racialization of military service workers. Section III then summarizes how this restructuring successfully reduced the disruptive power of workers in military supply chains, especially in the 1980s and 1990s. Section IV introduces a new dataset on labor unrest in the US military’s global logistics networks to show how restructuring has put strain on supply chains, leaving them ripe for workers’ disruption. The final section explores unrest by workers in the US military’s global logistics networks in the twenty-first century and the military’s responses to it, in an effort to chart a path forward.

II. Neoliberal Restructuring of US Military Supply Chains

During the world wars, unions and governments alike discovered the disruptive power of armaments workers upon whose labor states relied for the war effort. In short, industrial workers—with armaments workers at the vanguard—leveraged their states’ reliance on them into substantive gains through waves of work stoppages (Silver 2003; 2015). Ultimately, workers’ wartime strikes in the early- and mid-twentieth century led to significant gains in unionization, wages, and benefits (Dubofsky and McCartin 2017, 188, 194–95, 295). The arrangements that emerged out of these waves of unrest—in which firms and states agreed to union recognition, full employment, and basic welfare provisioning in exchange for relative labor peace (and recognition of the prerogatives of firms to make changes to the production process)—set the basis for a new social compact and a

nexus between warfare and welfare (Silver 2015; Wehrle 2003).² Yet, after holding sway for a generation, these arrangements began to unravel with the neoliberal project in the late-1960s/early-1970s, as production left its traditional centers for cheaper locales across borders, financialization transformed the organization of capitalist firms, Fordism was replaced with just-in-time production, and austerity wreaked havoc on welfare systems (Arrighi 1994; Gilmore 2007; Krippner 2011).

In this same period, the organization of the US military transformed. The post-Vietnam shift from a conscripted army to an all-volunteer force marked a shift from a “modern military” to a “post-modern military” (Moskos, Williams, and Segal 2000). By the 1990s, technological advances raised the specter of a “revolution in military affairs” (Krepinevich 1992). Many features of military reorganization—such as the outsourcing of military activities to private contractors, the increasing centralization of command (i.e., “jointness”), and the growing importance of networks and logistics—parallel the transformations of the industrial sphere in the same period, yielding discussion of a “post-Fordist” or a “just-in-time” military (Booth, Kestnbaum, and Segal 2001; King 2006).

The transformation of warfare combined with the broader neoliberal project to restructure military supply chains. A key driver of this restructuring, I’ve argued elsewhere (Payne 2023) was the disruptive nature of armaments workers’ unrest in the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, many examples of industrial restructuring broadly, such as outsourcing and capital intensification, were designed with the explicit goals of confronting the power of manufacturing workers, while for others—such as consolidation, subsidiarization, and financialization—workers’ disempowerment was an added benefit (Bluestone and Harrison 1982; Krippner 2011; Prechel 1997; Silver 2003; Stearns and Allan 1996). A similar process was playing out in US military supply chains. In the remainder of this section, I briefly sketch out the contours of this neoliberal restructuring, paying particular attention to the areas that were driven by—or that especially effect—workers.

A. Reorganization of Armaments Production

A key aspect of neoliberal restructuring, both in the world economy writ large and in the military sphere, was the geographical relocation of production. Ann Markusen and her colleagues trace the shift in military production from the industrial heartlands of the Midwest and Northeast towards the South and the Coasts. This shift created a “gunbelt” of defense-rich states around the perimeter of the country, stretching “from the state of Washington through California to the desert states of the Southwest, on through Texas and the Great Plains, across to Florida, and discontinuously up the East Coast to New England” (Markusen et al. 1991, 3). Major (2009, 349–

² Indeed, by leveraging their power in this era, labor unions helped forge the modern military-industrial complex, imbuing it with their own vision of military spending, in which defense monies could be harnessed to promote full employment. Union leaders were granted “substantial, substantive... participation” in war policy deliberations. The successes of labor in promoting both warfare and general welfare in these formative years of the modern military-industrial complex had lasting effects, as workers and their representatives endeavored “to commandeer the growing defense establishment—to make it as responsive to the goals of promoting employment and addressing social needs as to fighting the Cold War” (Wehrle 2003, 525–29).

51) finds a “narrowing of the gunbelt” away from the Northeast and West Coasts towards the South and Southwest in the 1990s in response to post-Cold War disarmament and technological change.

This was combined with a wave of international outsourcing. Despite concerns over security, armaments firms began to move some production out of the United States and into cheaper labor markets in the Global South, most notably in parts of Latin America and Asia—following suit of other manufacturing industries in this period (e.g., Silver 2003). The dramatic rise in international arms sales—as armaments firms searched for revenues beyond the US government in the post-Cold War period—contributed to this phenomenon. Many international arms sales included agreements that the purchasing country would also receive a share of the production work. Following the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, for example, aerospace firms began opening subsidiaries in Mexico to supply major components to US firms. These firms were part of a series of U.S. manufacturing relocations to towns on the Mexican side of the border, establishing *maquiladoras* with low wages and poor working conditions. After the U.S. and Mexico signed the Bilateral Aviation Safety Agreement in 2007, bringing greater regulatory alignment on aerospace production, Mexico saw an even greater boom in arrivals of armaments manufacturing—with aerospace exports growing from \$1.3 billion in 2004 to \$9.6 billion in 2019 (Coffin 2013; Gould 2020).

Alongside relocating production, firms themselves transformed their internal organization. This took the form of subsidiarization, financialization, and consolidation. From the perspective of labor, a merger boom of military firms was especially notable. The mergers were promoted and facilitated by military officials aiming to centralize the defense-industrial base (Hartung, 2011: Chapter 8). As these firms consolidated their operations, many facilities were shuttered or combined. For example, after Lockheed and Martin Marietta merged into Lockheed Martin in 1995, the new company announced the closure of 12 manufacturing facilities and 26 field offices, laying off approximately 12,000 workers (Urry 1995). Similarly, when Raytheon acquired Hughes Aircraft and Texas Instruments in 1997, the company shuttered 20 out of 80 factories, while partially closing 6 more, and cut 9,000 jobs. This merger also sparked a total reorganization of the companies’ production geography—maintaining operations in several plants but bouncing manufacturing around between them. In all, between 1980 and 1997, the armaments industry consolidated from over fifty major prime contractors to just five (Defense Science Board 1997, 10), dramatically transforming the landscape of the military-industrial base.

B. Flexibilization and Privatization

As the organization of production transformed, so too did the organization of circulation. The military embraced the flexibilization of logistics networks and the privatization of services as a means of cutting costs, improving efficiency, and overcoming disruptive workers (especially in the ports). The military’s initial experimentation with flexibilization occurred after World War II with organization changes in occupied Japan, though it was through contracting for the Korean War that these emergent “just-in-time” techniques began to be diffused throughout military supply chains in the Pacific (Cowen 2014, 30–31; Reifer 2004; Chung 2019). Military experimentation

with the shipping container would prove especially critical, leading to its global standardization with the Vietnam War and sparking a dramatic “logistics revolution” (Levinson 2006). Indeed, by the end of the Vietnam War, the military had containerized nearly all of its cargo to and from Southeast Asia, and thus sparked the subsequent adoption of the container throughout its supply chains (Chung 2019, 31).

The standardization of steel boxes that could be used interchangeably and intermodally by ships, trucks, and trains not only reduced labor time—increasing productivity by a factor of at least ten (Bonacich and Wilson 2008, 52)—it also meant that skilled stevedores could be replaced by cheaper and unexperienced labor. Containerization thus “provided an opportunity to undermine the strength of organized labor, and so the conditions of work, and assert greater control over the flow of goods” (Cowen 2014, 41). Struggles over containerization in ports were contentious, as unions fought back over labor-replacing technology and role of workers in controlling the workplace. Indeed, as Levinson (2006) demonstrates, opposition from powerful longshoremen unions were a check on technological innovation and efficiency in the aftermath of World War II. The embrace of flexibilization eroded these unions power, and thus led to even further flexibilization (Bonacich and Wilson 2008).

Other innovations, such as the military’s Traffic Management Agency (TMA), augmented logistical efficiency. The TMA embraced modern traffic management principles and designed a computer system to track and forecast cargo flows between the US and South Vietnam. Until this system was designed, there was no centralized way to track ships or cargo in transit. The TMA’s system gave the military real-time “logistics intelligence” to better ensure that troops received “just the right amount of supplies at” just the right time. These new systems “promised the US military...the possibility of waging war on a just-in-time basis” (Attewell 2020, 914).

Flexibilization went hand-in-hand with privatization. During the Korean war the military increasingly turned to the use of private contractors to oversee the manual laborers involved in the construction of logistics infrastructure. This outsourcing “allowed the US military to wage war with fewer troops on the ground and, more importantly, forgo the responsibility of sustaining the massive labor force its operations required” (Chung 2019, 33). Later, as the war in Vietnam intensified, the US military required a rapid buildup of infrastructure in South Vietnam to facilitate the introduction of personnel and supplies into the theater. To accomplish this task, the Pentagon turned to construction firms that had the know-how to build infrastructure in challenging environments. Some of these firms, like Brown & Root, were oil companies from Texas that had been making the shift from oil to services of this nature for several years, and were eager to demonstrate their usefulness (Beasley 2019). Four large companies—Raymond International, Morrison-Kudsen, Brown & Root, and J.A. Jones—received the windfall of these military contracts, forming a consortium (RMK-BJR) and receiving a nearly \$2 billion contract to build and operate bases and facilities.

Rather than turning to military personnel to spearhead the development of logistics infrastructure, as had been done during World War II, the military thus turned to private firms. As one Army report noted, “Although forty-two construction units of battalion strength were deployed to South Vietnam, the requirements for base development were of such magnitude that the

contractor force supplied a greater construction capability than the entire military force” (Dunn 1972, 133). By the end of the Vietnam War, these developments reached their apex, and a large swath of logistical operations were privatized. Indeed, “what comes into sharper focus during the Vietnam war is a deep hybridization of military and market methods” (Attewell 2020, 911; see also Cowen 2014).

This is a trend that would accelerate after the war, with the introduction of LOGCAP contracts in the 1980s and a boom in private military contractors starting in the 1990s offering services from cargo transport to armed security (Beasley 2019; Singer 2008). The result was that, by the twenty-first century, nearly all of the military’s logistical activities are outsourced to private contractors, rather than performed by military personnel (Moore 2019).

E. Racialization of the Labor Force

Flexibilization led to a reduction in the number and skill of workers handling military logistics. At the same time, privatization incentivized a reduction in labor costs. Both trends weakened US workers in military supply chains, as the military and its contractors increasingly turned to local and migrant labor to work these routes. This amounted to a *racialization* of military logistics, in which US citizen workers (and soldiers) were ‘replaced’ with workers from underdeveloped countries across the global south. The race and citizenship status of these workers made them cheaper, easier to mistreat, and more disposable.

The US military has long relied on racialized labor for work such as infrastructural construction projects (Friedman 2017). However, with the Korean War, the US military formalized the use of local and migrant labor as a complement to its own logistical forces in warzones. During the Korean War the use of local workers to perform military logistics tasks provided the Truman administration with political cover at home while maintaining the war abroad, as such workers “allowed for the withdrawal” of many troops from the peninsula and “cut expenditures by paying Koreans wages far below those of US personnel” (Chung 2019, 35). What’s more, migrant workers from the Philippines were increasingly turned to as another source of cheap labor (Attewell 2020; Woods 2016; Flores 2015).

The racialization of military logistics labor reached new heights during the Vietnam War, as the US military outsourced nearly all of its logistics work to private firms who overwhelmingly hired local Vietnamese workers and migrants from Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan (Dunn 1972, 140).³ While managers turned to local Vietnamese workers for low-skill tasks, firms imported migrant labor for more skilled tasks, as Korean and Filipino workers proved cheaper than skilled US workers. Managers and US officials thus developed a “relational racialization” that determined wages and working conditions, in which white workers ranked above migrant workers from Korea and the Philippines, and in which all ranked about local Vietnamese labor (Attewell 2020, 918; Chung 2019, 43).

³ By 1969, Attewell (2020, 9) notes, there were approximately 12,000 Korean and 8,000 Filipino migrants working in South Vietnam.

Not only were these workers cheap, but they also proved to be easily disposable. Successive administrations were reluctant to commit ever-more troops to the war, restricting the number of soldiers available for “organic” logistics labor and noncombat activities. As troop levels fluctuated due to political concerns back home, local and migrant labor “partially offset the troop losses” and, while “initially the local laborers were used for unskilled or semiskilled duties... by the end of 1970, many [construction and logistics activities were] predominantly staffed with Vietnamese labor” (Dunn 1972, 107). As the war progressed and casualties mounted, the use of non-US workers for often-dangerous logistics activities proved to be politically advantageous: when South Vietnamese workers or Korean migrants died, there were not protests in the US.

The rise of casualty-averse (Lachmann 2013) warfare was thus bound up with the increasing racialization of workers in US military supply chains. Combined with the cost-saving benefits of using subcontracted migrant labor and the apparent successes of flexibilization in overcoming unruly dockworkers in the United States, the new just-in-time networks of war thus proved to be a boon for officials on several fronts.

III. Neoliberal Restructuring Triumphant

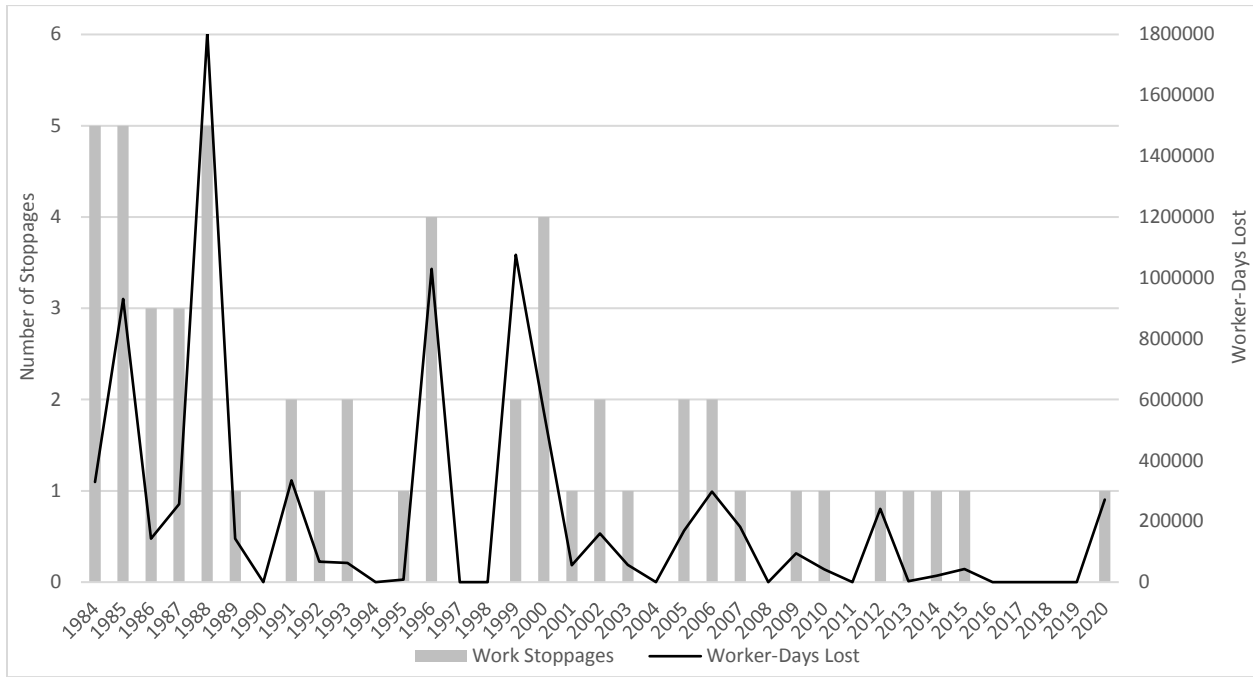
Neoliberal restructuring of military supply chains—through the reorganization of production, the flexibilization and privatization of logistics, and the racialization of the workforce—was “successful” in a number of ways. These transformations augmented revenues in a period of declining profitability for industry broadly. At the same time, they facilitated the shift away from an industrial base oriented towards the mass mobilization wars of the past and towards one that could support the just-in-time wars of the future.

These reorganizations were also successful in reducing the disruptiveness of labor unrest. Newly compiled data shows a reduction in the number and magnitude of work stoppages in the armaments industries. Figure 1 presents data on work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers at armaments production firms from 1984 to 2020, as compiled by the author.⁴ Figure 2 presents a barometer of labor unrest in all logistics industries in the US, as reported by the Global Social Protest Project at the Arrighi Center for Global Studies.⁵

⁴ This data is compiled from the US Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service and the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. From 1984 to 2004 the FMCS compiled a list of all U.S. work stoppages—a dataset of over 12,000 strikes and lockouts. From 1993 to the present, similar data is available from the BLS Monthly Work Stoppage tables, though this data only includes work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers. The BLS and FMCS data are matching sources for the overlapping period of 1993 to 2004 and are presented combined. The measure includes any work stoppage in the production of aircraft, ordnance, ships, missiles, and other major weapons components. Since this data is reported at the plant level, it excludes civilian production. For more, see Payne (2023).

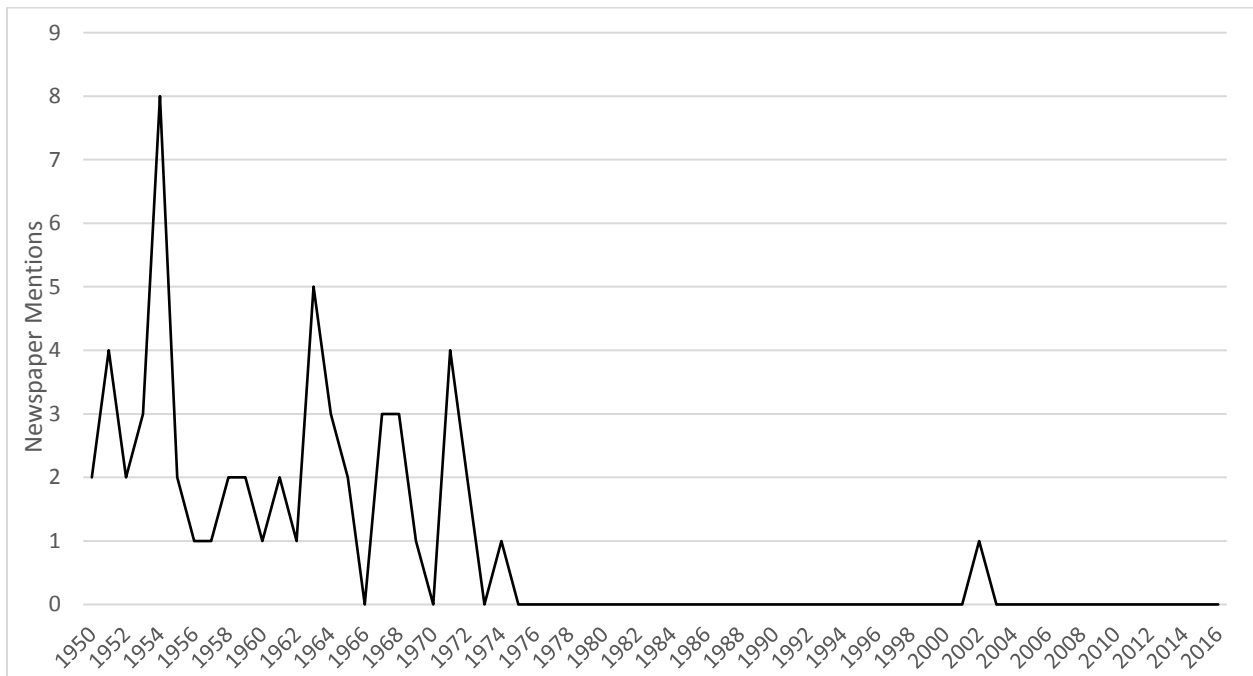
⁵ The GSP data captures all mentions of social protest in the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* from the mid-nineteenth century through the present. The data is not intended to be a census of all protest events, but rather a barometer of social conflict across time and space. The data can be filtered by industry, location, and several other variables. This data is thus useful for gaining a macroscopic perspective on labor unrest in the logistics industries in various locales over long periods. Figure includes only labor unrest that occurred in the United States. Per GSP methodology, only reports in the *Guardian* are included in this figure. Logistics industries is comprised of industry-mentions that contain the characters: ‘logisti’, ‘ship’, ‘dock’, ‘shore’, ‘truck’, or ‘rail’.

Figure 1: Work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers at armaments production firms, 1984 to 2020



Source: Author's compilation from reported FCMS and BLS data (Payne 2023)

Figure 2: Labor Unrest in All Logistics Industries, United States, 1950 to 2016

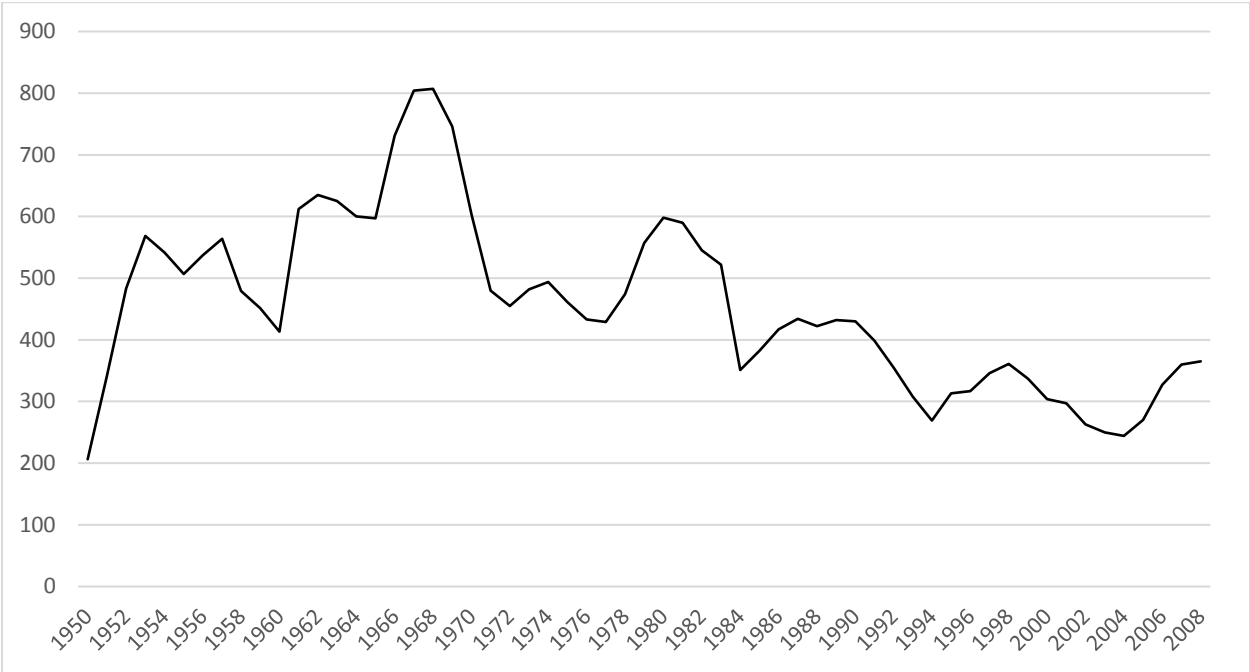


Source: Global Social Protest (GSP) Data, Arrighi Center for Global Studies (Silver, Karatasli, and Kumral 2015)

Reviewed together, Figures 1 and 2 paint a picture of significantly diminished labor unrest in the US armaments and logistics industries over the course of the late twentieth century. Figure 1 shows a cluster of work stoppages in the armaments industry in the 1980s that is followed by a reduction in the 1990s. The turn of the twenty-first century—and the start of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—coincide with another, smaller, cluster of work stoppages. By the 2010s, work stoppages have nearly completely dropped off. Figure 2 shows a wave of labor unrest in the US logistics industries concentrated around the Korean War, as well as intermittent struggles during Vietnam. Perhaps the most striking feature of the data, however, is the near-total absence of any labor unrest in the US logistics industries after 1974 (with the sole exception of a single mention in 2002).

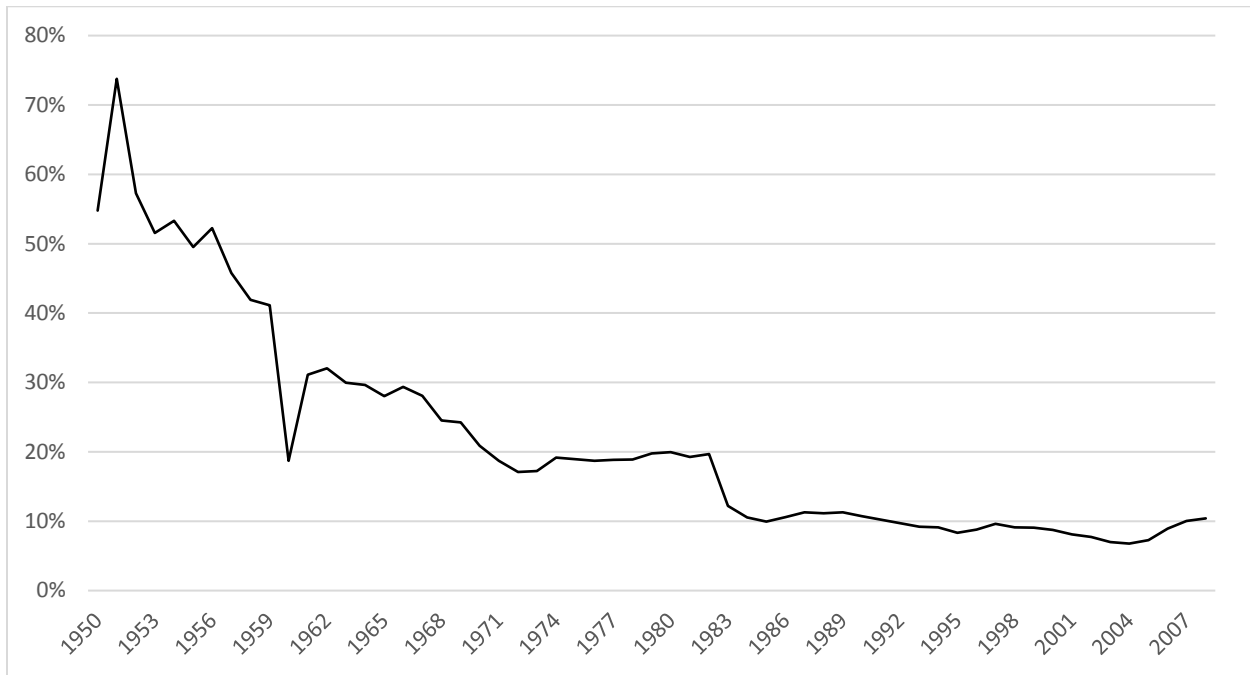
We thus see a pattern of significantly reduced workers’ disruption in US military supply chains—approximated by measures of unrest in the armaments and logistics industries—as neoliberal restructuring progressed. Indeed, in addition to reducing unrest in the military-industrial base, restructuring also reduced the number and cost of workers. For example, in the aerospace industry, the number of production workers declined from over 800,000 in 1968 to under 250,000 in the twenty-first century (Figure 3). Similarly, these workers’ wages as a share of industry profits dropped from over 70% in 1951, to 25% in 1968, to just 7% in 2004 (Figure 4). I have shown elsewhere *how* neoliberal restructuring resulted in these changes (Payne 2023), but here it is sufficient to point out that as the US military embraced transformation in its supply chains, the number of US workers, their costliness, and their disruptive power were significantly reduced.

Figure 3: Aerospace industry production workers in the United States, 1950-2008, thousands



Source: Author’s compilation from Aerospace Industry Association annual reports (Payne 2023)

Figure 4: Production workers' wages as share of revenues, U.S. Aerospace Industry, 1950-2008



Source: Author's compilation from Aerospace Industry Association annual reports (Payne 2023)

These changes were intertwined with transformations in the military itself, as they facilitated a war-making apparatus that was light, nimble, and could overcome the failures of mass mobilization on display in Vietnam. The Gulf War (1990-1991) was the first real opportunity to demonstrate the effectiveness of this restructured war-making. For officials, it was a resounding success. The combination of the technological advances in precision weapons systems and the organizational restructuring of logistics work came together to demonstrate to military officials, the American public, and states around the world that the United States military could fight (and win) wars without mass participation of workers or citizens. Many saw the Gulf War as an unprecedentedly successful logistical operation, in less than a year resulting in 122 million meals served, 1.3 billion gallons of fuel pumped, 12,575 aircraft processed, and the shipment of 7 million tons of supplies (Pagonis 1992). In part as a result of these technological and logistical marvels, US casualties were low, contributing to the sensation that the so-called “Vietnam syndrome” had been overcome.

The popularity, speed, and apparent success of the war led military officials to double down on the same lessons that they had been learning for decades. Going forward, it seemed possible to totally eliminate “the reliance of our forces on the logistics head as Blitzkrieg freed the offense after World War I from its then decades old reliance on the railhead” (Defense Science Board 1996). The future of warfare was thus a “revolution in military affairs” in which technology and logistics meant a significantly diminished role for both the “tooth” and the “tail”: All that was required was additional “streamlining...by eliminating unnecessary organizational levels” and

additional “major organizational changes to the manner in which defense systems are developed and produced” (Krepinevich 1992, 40-46).

Yet problems with the new just-in-time networks were beginning to emerge. Indeed, despite the Gulf War’s apparent logistics miracle, the truth was that the effort was replete with failures. For example, as most significantly, “almost no [required spare parts] reached intended customers during the fighting,” forcing soldiers to “cannibaliz[e] broken down equipment and [tow] what they could not repair” (Martin 2007, 118). Indeed, some observers noted that the entire system was on the path towards collapse. Per the military’s own assessment: “Fortunately, major combat operations ended before the failure [of the logistics networks] affected operations in a major way” (quoted in Martin 2007, 118).

IV. Just-In-Time Networks Under Strain

The story painted thus far is one in which neoliberal restructuring of military networks resulted in a steady reduction in the disruptive power of the workers in those networks. This is certainly the case for workers *in* the United States, as the data above shows. But extending our gaze to the *global* networks of US war-making changes the picture. This section introduces a new dataset on labor unrest in these global networks and demonstrates that, while restructuring reduced the disruptive power of US-based workers, it enhanced the disruptive power of workers in the sinews of the military’s global supply chains.

While measures of work stoppages in individual countries are abundant, and can often be disaggregated by industrial category, data on work stoppages in global networks—in which, for example, a strike at one facility “counts” because of its position in a supply chain but a strike a neighboring facility “doesn’t count” because it is in a different supply chain—are difficult to construct. Although there is excellent work that examines or recounts labor unrest in the US military’s global supply chains (Holmes 2014; Vine 2015; Moore 2019; Chung 2019; Attewell 2020), there is not yet a systematic source of data on these conflicts that extends across space and time.

In an attempt to fill this gap, I employed a version of snowball sampling to create a list of labor conflicts in the US military’s global supply chains from 1950 to the present. I began with the labor conflicts mentioned or recounted in existing literature on basing and military logistics to develop an initial list. I then augmented this list by borrowing methodological strategies from sociologists who have made strides at data collection on global social unrest (Silver 2003; Karatasli et al. 2015): Using Proquest’s online database of newspaper archives, I developed a title search string of key words⁶ to capture articles with mentions of labor unrest and that signaled relevance to military logistics.⁷ This retrieved a total of 577 articles from 1950-2022 in the following

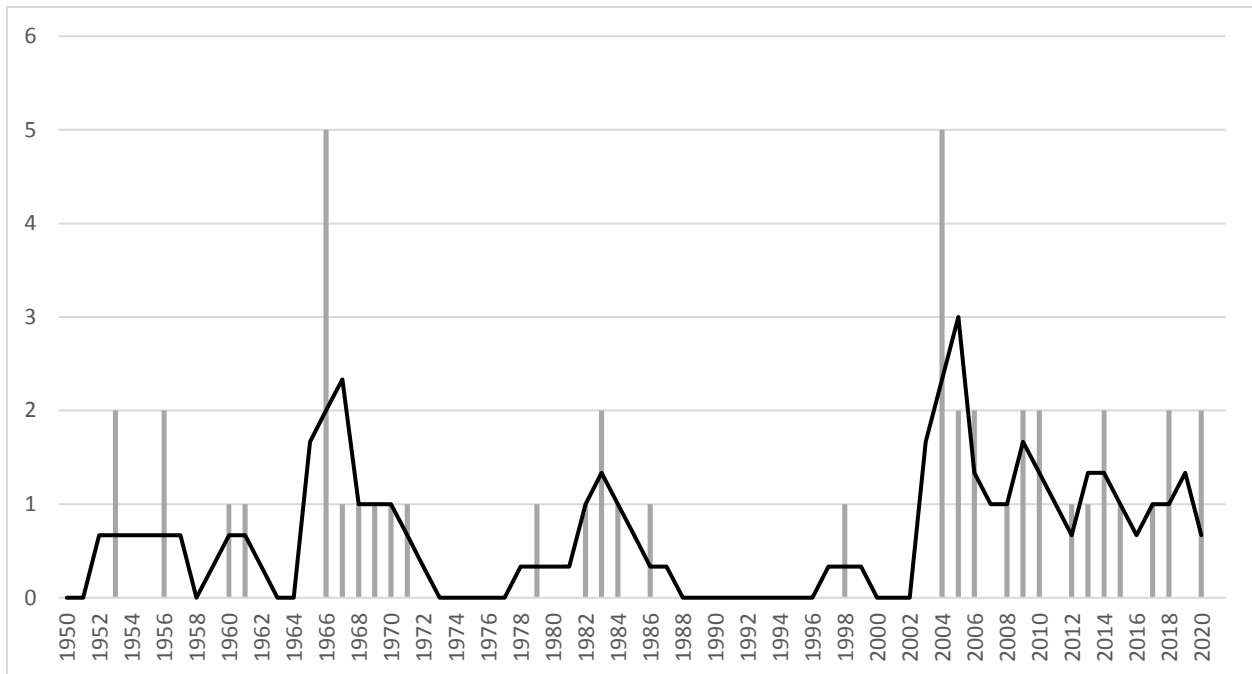
⁶ ti(base* OR militar* OR troop* OR soldier*) AND ti(worker* OR employ* OR contract*) AND ti(strik* OR protest* OR walkout* OR demand*)

⁷ Labor unrest events are included if they are waged by workers directly employed by US military, workers contracted to work in US military facilities, or if US soldiers were forced to step in as scab workers to ensure continuation of

newspapers: *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Stars and Stripes*. I then read all of these newspaper articles and manually coded them for relevance and content. Finally, using similar keyword searches, I reviewed documents in the US Central Intelligence Agency’s (CIA) online archive as well as the Digital National Security Archive. The resulting list of labor unrest in US global military logistics networks is an initial step forward—though, by nature of the data collection method and its limits, there are no doubt omissions.

The resulting data on unrest by military logistics workers globally is presented in a time series in Figure 5. The bars are the number of labor conflicts in a given year and the line is a 3-period moving average. The most striking characteristic of the figure is that, in contrast to the data on armaments production industries, labor unrest in US global military logistics networks saw a wave in the twenty-first century. Indeed, the peak of the series is in 2004, followed by consistently reported conflicts in the mid-2000s and the 2010s. Prior to the twenty-first century, Figure 5 depicts two other major waves of unrest: in the mid- to late-1960s, with a relative peak in 1966, and a smaller one in the early- to mid-1980s.

Figure 5: Labor Unrest in US Global Military Logistics Networks, 1950-2020



Source: New data compiled by the author

A review of the unrest during the 1960s wave during the Vietnam War is an illustrative place to begin. These conflicts were precipitated by the initial restructuring of military supply

military operations. In the interest of focusing on international networks, unrest events were excluded if they occurred within the United States.

chains. Yet, in large part because restructuring had not yet reached full fruition, these instances of labor unrest were not significantly disruptive to military activities in Vietnam.

Early in the war, Korean and Filipino workers arrived at the ports in South Vietnam looking for work, sparking conflict with Vietnamese unions, and resulting in an agreement with the US military that cargo along the Saigon River would be handled only by Vietnamese dockers (Attewell 2020, 918). In some facilities, the US military hired Vietnamese workers on a temporary basis to perform stevedoring services. Gradually, as the war ramped up, these Vietnamese workers were replaced with US troops, sparking backlash from the CVT union and resulting in a strike by dockworkers across Saigon in solidarity. One labor leader noted: “If South Vietnamese sovereignty is still respected, the Government will oblige the American military authorities to rehire the dockers.” Meanwhile, US authorities said it was to be expected that the Vietnamese dockers “would be laid off as soon as a battalion of Transportation Corps troops arrived in South Vietnam” (*The New York Times* 1966). The US military ultimately decided to continue hiring Vietnamese dockers but, in addition to using soldiers as replacement workers, also embraced Korean and Filipino labor at sites like Cam Ranh Bay. This ultimately pitted workers against one another for contracts and kept competition high between Vietnamese and migrant labor. What’s more, significant rivalry existed amongst Vietnamese dockers themselves, as union splits led to competing factions that violently clashed over jobs. The result was a series of strikes by workers of all backgrounds.

Yet the disruptiveness of labor actions by dockworkers in South Vietnam was “blunted by the US military’s decision to maintain a minimum level of ‘essential port operations’ by using soldiers as scabs” and turning to Korean and Filipino stevedores as potential replacements (Attewell 2020, 921). Examples abound – in 1968, a solidarity strike by dockworkers unloading American military shipments did not affect war operations, as (as reported in the *New York Times*) “The military supplies were unloaded by United States troops. There was some disruption in the flow of civilian supplies” (Mohr 1968). Similarly, in 1971, a strike by the CVT over contracts with a competing union led to clashes, gunfire, and consistent picketing, during which the military felt the strain but nevertheless avoided catastrophic delays by using soldiers to unload cargo (Attewell 2020, 921).⁸

Thus, in the wave of unrest the late-1960s, we see that flexibilization, privatization, and racialization sparked labor unrest by both local Vietnamese and migrant workers—but that this unrest was not particularly disruptive, largely as a result of the ability of the military to replace workers with conscripted soldiers as scabs as needed.

The smaller wave of unrest in the 1980s features a different dynamic but with a similar result. All of the strikes in this period occurred at military bases on the territory of US allies, and

⁸ Indeed, the nature of labor arrangements in US military logistics facilities in South Vietnam not only meant that disruption was often blunted, but also that the US military often avoided facing the conflict altogether. For example, Korean workers protested their poor working conditions and repeated violations of their rights by the US military and its contractors—in Korea. In 1971, two hundred former migrant workers set fire to the Hanjin Corporation’s headquarters during a protest in downtown Seoul, demanding (among other things) back wages for over four thousand employees who were contracted by the company to provide logistics services to the US military in South Vietnam (Chung 2019, 43).

all stemmed in part from the changing structure of military contracting and bilateral relations in the Reagan era (cf. Holmes 2014). Alongside strikes in Germany, Turkey, and Greece (*The New York Times* 1982; *The Wall Street Journal* 1983; *The New York Times* 1984), one of the more explosive episodes occurred at the Subic Bay Naval Base in the Philippines, where striking Filipino workers constructed barricades to blockade entrances to the base with logs, rocks, and sheet metal in an effort to keep US personnel from entering or leaving the facility. Ultimately, the military waited them out, and after 12 days the workers capitulated, with the US refusing to engage in talks until workers abandoned the barricades and returned to work (Haberma 1986; *The Washington Post* 1986; Fineman 1986). While the restructuring of military supply chains had progressed significantly in the years since the Vietnam wave, the absence of pressing wartime requirements offered little disruptive power to workers, creating a situation in which base operators could simply wait out the protesting workers.

The embrace of flexibilization, privatization, and racialization—alongside neoliberal austerity and an anti-labor political project—thus produced unrest in the US military’s global supply chains, starting in the Vietnam War and continuing in its aftermath. Yet this unrest was not disruptive to military activities. In Vietnam, significant unrest was blunted by the fact that just-in-time flexibility had not yet come to fruition—the redundancies of mass mobilization allowed for easy replacement of striking workers. In the 1980s, despite just-in-time networks reaching new heights, globe spanning unrest at US military bases was similarly undisruptive—in large part because there was no major war effort for these workers to disrupt. We turn now to the twenty-first century, in which these two shields to military supply chains were removed: restructuring was at its apex and wars were expansive. The result, as we will see, has been workers’ unrest that is far more disruptive.

V. Disrupting Global Supply Chains in the 21st Century

The neoliberal restructuring of the US military’s global supply chains placed disaffected, left behind, and mistreated workers at the chokepoints of just-in-time networks. With the advent of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, these networks came under strain as the Bush administration sought to wage an expansive global war without disrupting everyday life—or reversing the neoliberal project. The result was a military-industrial base ripe for disruption.

Although the wave of stoppages was significantly smaller than in previous periods, we see this in the US armaments industry, in which workers producing urgently-required war-materials gained leverage (Payne 2020). Two examples are illustrative: At a Raytheon facility in Arizona producing Tomahawk and Javelin, workers went on strike in the face of mounting healthcare costs (*Boston Business Journal* 2006). Raytheon initially held firm—but after a 70-day strike that delayed delivery of missiles, the firm capitulated on additional bonuses to offset healthcare costs (*Arizona Daily Sun* 2007; Weisman 2006). Similarly, workers producing Army Black Hawk and Navy Seahawk helicopters bound for Iraq and Afghanistan went on strike in 2006. The delays became so concerning that government officials intervened. The Department of Defense reprimanded the company for the delays and Connecticut’s congressional delegation sent a letter

to union leaders and the company CEO, making it clear to both parties that, if the strike continued, “wartime requirements will render Sikorsky expendable, in favor of contracts with Boeing and Lockheed Martin” (Levine 2006).

Yet the disruptive power of workers in the twenty-first century was even more apparent in global logistics networks, which, as we saw in Figure 5, featured a wave of unrest in the early-2000s that was sustained throughout the 2010s. Flexibilization had increased the number of chokepoints—and placed (often poorly treated) local and migrant workers at them. Indeed, the US military’s global logistics networks became entirely reliant on non-US citizens and non-soldiers to function. The support activities of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were almost entirely privatized: while exact figures are lacking, there are estimates of over 100,000 contractors (not including subcontractors) in Iraq alone as of 2006. In 2008 a census of contractors found that 20% were US citizens, 38% were “third country nationals” (migrant workers), and 42% were “local nationals” (Iraqi labor) (Moore 2019, 31). In getting materials to Afghanistan, as Lt. General James Pillsbury, Deputy Commanding General of the US Army Materiel Command explained: “Once the piece of equipment gets off the boat at Karachi, no American [soldier] touches it—it is all contract [labor]...” (Pillsbury 2010).

As a result of the structure of these supply chains, when workers’ unrest occurred, it was far more disruptive than the analogous work stoppages by labor in the 1960s and 1980s—despite being less organized and often waged by non-union workers. One early example can be found in the 2004 wave of strikes shown in Figure 5, recounted in Adam Moore’s *Empire’s Labor* (Moore 2019, 134–36). In 2004, Filipino workers hired by the firm Serka (a subcontractor of KBR) engaged in strikes at four major US military bases in northern Iraq—Diamondback, Marez, Q-West, and Tal Afar. A variety of issues had been stoking discontent: wage theft, broken contractual promises, and a disparity in wages and conditions between Serka’s Filipino and Turkish employees. Filipino workers at Marez, in Mosul, circulated a petition demanding a wage increase, then did not report to work the following day. Quickly, the military and KBR intervened on behalf of the workers, reportedly telling Serka: “Don’t make this get any worse, fix it” (Moore 2019, 135–36). Salaries were promptly doubled for all Filipino workers at the base. News of the success spread to other bases across northern Iraq, and soon strikes began—all ending with major wage increases. The swiftness of the response by the military and prime contractor stemmed from the ease with which the Filipino Serka workers could disrupt operations. Of particular importance, was that Filipino workers made up a large swath of food service staff. Food service is even more time sensitive than other logistics activities: Delivery of cargo can usually be delayed for days before significant disruption occurs, “but if troops miss a meal because [of a strike] all hell breaks loose” (Moore 2019, 136). And unlike in earlier conflicts, replacing workers with scabs was not an option: sanitation rules meant that only properly trained workers could perform these tasks, and there were no redundancies built into the base’s operations.

In Moore’s interviews with migrant logistics workers, they recount a series of strikes in Iraq and Afghanistan that resulted in a range of successful outcomes. A 2005 strike by Filipino workers at Victory Base Complex in Baghdad that resulted in improvements in food provisioning and a 2006 strike by a majority of workers at Camp Bucca that resulted in a salary increase were

both the result of interventions by military officials to prevent disruption (Moore 2019, 138–39). One particularly notable example occurs at Kandahar Airfield (KAF) in Afghanistan, one of the two major logistics hubs in the country. The base outsourced nearly all of its logistics and support activities, including fire, crash, and rescue. In 2009, KAF’s contingent of 18 firefighters—skilled Filipino migrants employed by the firm ATCO—threatened to “go home” if wages were not increased. Confronting the 18 workers, who had their bags packed, the manager reportedly asked “What do you want?” exasperatedly. The workers demanded wages be doubled, and the manager immediately agreed. Like the food service workers in 2004, the firefighters were in a particularly strong position: without an appropriate firefighting staff, the airbase would have been downgraded in standards, and prevented a number of military aircraft from landing. It would have resulted in massive fines and a breach of contract with the US military (Moore 2019, 140–41).

Perhaps the most explosive conflict comes in May 2010 at Victory Base Complex in Baghdad, recounted by Sarah Stillman’s *New Yorker* article “The Invisible Army.” A labor camp run by Prime Projects International (PPI) faced a riot by over a thousand Indian and Nepalese subcontractors, rampaging the facilities using fists, stones, and wooden bats. At issue, as had been the case in the 2005 conflict at the same base, was a lack of food:

Around seven o’clock on the evening of the riot, [workers] returned to the P.P.I. compound and lined up for dinner with several thousand other workers. But the cooks ran out of food, with at least five hundred left to feed. This wasn’t the first time; empty plates had become common in the camp during the past year. Several of the men stormed over to the management’s office, demanding more rice. When management refused... dozens more entered the fray, then hundreds, and ultimately more than a thousand. Employees started to throw gravel at the managers. Four-foot pieces of plywood crashed through glass windows. Workers broke down the door to the food cellar and made off with as much as they could carry (Stillman 2011).

The conflict spread through the camp, with as many as 1400 workers rioting. Eventually the riot was broken up by US military police and Ugandan security guards. Weeks later, more riots broke out at other camps at Victory Base Complex—with workers of Gulf Catering Company pelting managers with stones, and others setting fire to their barracks. In response, the military police began to patrol the labor camps twice a day. The subcontracting arrangements ultimately allowed for KBR, the prime contractor, to push blame and embarrassment onto PPI, the subcontractor: “K.B.R. notified P.P.I. management of the need for changes to prevent any recurrence” (Stillman 2011).

While these strikes during the peak of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan offer the best glimpse into the relationships between workers, contractors, and the military, labor unrest continued throughout the following decade: A 2013 strike by contract workers at Camp Lemmonier in Djibouti forced military personnel to “man the chow lines” in order to meet regulations (Vandiver 2013). Strikes by local workers at bases in Korea, Germany, and Italy forced concessions by base managers (Rabiroff and Chang 2012; Darnell 2015; Wyland 2018). In 2020, migrant workers at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan protested racial discrimination by their employer, Flour Corporation, over which workers were given raises and promotions in the face of

a shrinking workforce, as workers left the base during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their actions ultimately disrupted “base services like catering, waste management, laundry, water supply and transportation” (Wellman 2020).

Thus, in contrast to the waves of unrest in the US military’s global supply chains in the 1960s and 1980s, the wave of unrest in the twenty-first century is far more disruptive to military operations. This is because (1) the just-in-time organization of logistics networks has reduced logistics space and created more chokepoints, (2) the rise of privatization and racialization resulted in mistreated workers located at these chokepoints, and (3) the expansion of wars has put great strain on supply chains. Without a course correction, as war continues to expand—with an escalating conflict with Russia and simmering tensions with China—the future of the military-industrial base is likely to be one of disruption.

VI. Conclusion

Although workers’ struggles won key concessions, the overall response from firms and officials to supply chain disruptions has not been one of compromise. Instead, the US military has doubled down on flexibilization, privatization, and racialization in response to unrest. In response to the 2004 wave of strikes, for example, contractors responded by diversifying their employees in an attempt to prevent cross-ethnic solidarities from forming, turning to Indian and Nepalese workers to break the unity of the Filipino workers (Moore 2019, 137). In response to the 2013 strike at Camp Lemmonier, military officials leaned on subcontracting as a way of shifting responsibility: “We don’t tell [KBR] how many people to employ or how to employ them,” officials noted, and they turned to other “third country nationals” to replace the striking workers (Vandiver 2013). Indeed, US Central Command notes, when pressed on these issues, that it “does not play a formal role in the monitoring of living conditions on U.S. bases,” as that is the purview of the contractors (Stillman 2011). At the Victory Base Complex, the strike over food and working conditions in 2005 resulted in temporary fixes followed by later cost-cutting measures. Poor working conditions reemerged and ultimately sparked the 2010 riots.

Indeed, we can see that the response of doubling down on flexibilization, privatization, and racialization in the face of unrest has simply yielded more unrest. In recent years, the privatization of ever-more facilities and services sparked unrest at military bases in Italy (Wyland 2018). In Korea, the constant efforts at reducing labor costs through the reorganization of work—as well as wage freezes and furloughs—has yielded a series of conflicts in the past decade (Gamel and Chang 2020). The decision to double down on racialization in the wake of the 2004 wave of unrest led to later disruption in war zones (Wellman 2020).

A course correction is needed. Turning to the cost-cutting methods of “just-in-time” and embracing further neoliberal restructuring of military supply chains—which yielded the conditions for a disruptive wave of work stoppages in the first place—will not offer a lasting solution to supply chain woes. Indeed, the evidence in this paper suggests that doubling-down will ultimately increase labor disruption. Instead, officials should return to some of the lessons of World War II. In the mid-twentieth century, dependence on labor increased workers’ disruptive power, which

they leveraged into strong workplace protections and improvements in their standards of living. In exchange, firms and the military received wartime no-strike pledges and relative labor peace. These arrangements were ultimately abandoned when they cut too deeply into firms' bottom lines—but their existence facilitated the “American Dream,” the golden age of US capitalism, and the apex of US world leadership (Arrighi and Silver 1999).

By definition, an analogous set of arrangements would have to be far broader and more expansive today—incorporating a much larger swath of workers (including non-citizens toiling in the sinews of global logistics networks) and overcoming the many limitations of the mid-twentieth century compact (e.g. Silver and Payne 2020). Such a change would require a significant shift in the US military's orientation towards supply chain management—to say nothing of the broader political hegemony of neoliberalism. Absent such a change, the US military will likely face continued disruptions in its global supply chains.

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