The Large Migrant Workers' Strike at Femern: Class Coherence and Intra-worker Fragility in Collective Action

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Abstract

Migrant strikes are rare occurrences, and even more rarely do they end up with a successful outcome. In this article, we scrutinise one of the largest migrant strikes to date, in which 300 Polish migrant workers successfully claimed a wage increase at a large construction site in Denmark. We delve into the social dynamics of the strike including the endeavour to maintain class-coherence during a strike. We explore the preconditions and sense of injustice that enabled the strike as well as the internal coherence, focussing on intra-worker tensions and the formation and negotiation of interest, preferences and strategies that shaped the course of the strike. The article provides empirical and conceptual knowledge of the social dynamics that unfold during collective action among migrant workers. We conclude that migrant workers can express agency and secure a wage claim when the right preconditions are in place, and when an alignment of interest and strategies are overall maintained. However, intra-worker tensions and management strategies pose threats to the collective action, making the outcome of the strike somewhat ambiguous in the aftermath. We conclude that even in a setting with high wages, strong institutional backing and a rather homogenous workforce it is highly challenging to secure and maintain coherence among the workers.

Keywords

Migrant workers, strikes, Denmark, Femern tunnel, class consciousness

Introduction

In June 2022, around 300 Polish construction workers blocked and closed down the Femern tunnel, one of the largest and ongoing infrastructure construction projects in Europe[1]. The strike and blockade lasted for five days. The migrant workers used their strong structural power resources and managed to win improvements in their wages and working conditions. The strike is thus paramount in being one of the largest industrial actions by migrant workers at least in Europe, illustrating that migrant workers can win industrial disputes despite the poorer odds they typically face. This article delves empirically into the strike dynamics and explores how the strike unfolded and the social dynamics that occurred along the way. We focus particularly on the pre-conditions and injustices enabling the strike, the internal coherence (and lack of same) among the striking migrants, as well as the formation and negotiation of migrants' interests and strategies during and after the strike.

[1] For information about the construction project, see: https://femern.com/the-tunnel/fehmarnbelt-tunnel/

Strikes remain the epitome of working-class action, and thus one of the most concrete and vivid showcases of working-class power and cohesion (Hyman, 1977). Hence, strikes can be seen as the expressions of working-class formation and interests. Nevertheless, the literature shows that strikes are complex phenomena that can occur in spurts and take a large toll on the participants (Batstone et al., 1978; Fantasia, 1988; Hyman, 1977; Knowles, 1952; McBride et al., 2013). The burden on the striking workers often leads to pressure on the internal cohesion, which may in turn result in intra-worker tensions (Thommes et al., 2014). The internal cohesion is particularly relevant for migrant workers, which often form a heterogenous workforce, especially when several ethnicities work in the same site (Haakestad & Friberg, 2020). This diversity may blur interest formation among migrant workers. To further develop the understanding of migrant worker strikes, we draw inspiration from the concepts of interests, preferences and strategies to theorise the process of strike formation (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2024). Furthermore, we analyse the strike illustrating how certain pre-conditions (Refslund & Sippola, 2022), feelings of injustice (Borello, 2025; Kelly, 1998), the institutional setting (Hyman, 1977; Refslund, et al., 2026) as well as social processes shaped both the strike dynamics as well as the outcomes of the strike. To date, the literature has not been exhaustive in elucidating the social complexities of migrant strikes or what precedes strike activity; essentially, what preconditions that enables migrants to go on strike and what strategies allow them to maintain cohesion despite the poorer odds they face. We contribute to fill this gap by building upon existing literature and provide empirical evidence from migrant workers and other key actors involved in the Femern strike.

The strike took place in a large construction site in the south of Denmark characterised by union influence and relatively homogeneous group of workers (mainly Polish male migrant workers). Large scale construction sites have been the centre for much academic scrutiny on migrant workers' protest and resistance (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2019; Berntsen & Lillie, 2016; Lillie & Sippola, 2011; Wagner & Lillie, 2014). The European construction sector relies increasingly on migrant workers, typically working in segmented labour markets, and often posted from one EU member country to another (Arnholtz & Lillie, 2020; Buckley et al., 2016; Frangi et al., 2021; Haakestad & Friberg, 2020; Lillie & Greer, 2007). The construction sector was traditionally fairly well organised, and at least in Denmark construction have above average degrees of both unionisation and collective bargaining. It thus remains more organised than for instance agriculture (which likewise has a large proportion of migrant workers). Moreover, worksites in the construction industry are often large, which provide better conditions for collective action among workers. The large workplaces with a higher concentration of workers make collective interests flourishes more easily, especially when workers experience physical closeness to co-workers (Refslund, 2025, Lysgaard, 1972). This stand in opposition to other sectors such as domestic work or platform services characterised by spatial fragmentation, which makes collective action a rarity (Jiang & Korczynski, 2016). At the same time, the construction sector has experienced an increase in labour market segmentation, by deskilling and a return to a more neo-Tayloristic work organisation and labour processes, where low-skilled tasks are singled out for migrant workers in a second-tier labour market (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2019; Frangi et al., 2021; Haakestad & Friberg, 2020). This raises core concerns around how to maintain class coherence amid a strike in a context of segregation and evolving social dynamics during a strike.

We add novel insights on collective resistance and action among migrant workers in contexts of high union influence and homogeneous ethnicity contributing to the literature on worker resistances in large construction sites. More precisely, this article provides empirical and conceptual knowledge of how social dynamics among migrant workers may unfold amid a strike.

The article is structured as follows: First, we discuss the existing literature on migrant workers and collective action to carve out the conceptual framework we use to analyse the strike. After presenting the methods and research design, the article then moves on to the empirical case of Femern and tackles three selected themes based on the literature review: The preconditions that enabled the strike; the migrants' interests and strategies; and the migrant group's internal coherence including intra-worker tensions. Finally, the analytical and theoretical implications for migrant workers labour struggle is discussed based on our results.

Strikes and collective organisation among migrant workers

Strikes remain the zenith of organised labour and workers' protest in contemporary capitalism (Hyman, 1977; Korpi & Shalev, 1979). While the historical tendency in strikes rate has been downward over several decades in the Western world, there have been somewhat of a re-vitalisation of strikes in recent years (Hodder & Mustchin, 2024; Umney et al., 2024). Starting from a structural power perspective from power resource theory (for instance Greer, 2024 who draws on Perrone's (1983) pioneering work on positional power) we emphasise the disruptive element of the strike. The efficacy of the structural power is contingent on other power resources, in this case in particular the organisational and institutional power resources the workers were able to draw upon. Hence, the outcome of application of power resources depends on the totality of the power resources (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2024; Nowak, 2022).

Migrant workers are less likely to utilise strikes as a weapon to improve their conditions because their totality of power resources is in general constrained (Refslund et al., 2026). They are more vulnerable to losing their job, as the cost of losing the jobs are high as they often come from low-income countries and because of dependency on the employer, complicating their possibilities of finding alternative employment (Anderson, 2010). Furthermore, migrants might have a family in the country of origin that depends on their wages sent from abroad and there may therefore be severe economic and personal costs associated with going home without the expected wages (Borello & Hau, 2026). Accordingly, migrant workers are in parts of the literature typically described as being on the losing site in labour disputes or even as victims of strikes. Migrant workers typically accept inferior wages and working conditions due to different expectations, low knowledge on host country labour markets and low degree of organisation which makes them more vulnerable to employer discretion (Bonacich, 1972; Piore, 1979; Scott & Rye, 2025; Theodoropoulos, 2025). The migrant workers' often weak labour market position further constrains the functioning of traditional inclusive labour market institutions such as collective agreements or legal rights (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2019; Berntsen & Lillie, 2016). This complicates traditional working-class resistance such as strikes, at least in a European context.

Much previous literature on migrant workers' struggles has been concerned with 'when the unorganisable organise' (Jiang & Korczynski, 2016) and treated migrant workers as an unlikely case of collective action. The literature has accordingly been focusing on migrant-union relations and integration (Adler et al., 2014; Marino et al., 2017). Others have looked at broader perspectives like community unionism (Holgate, 2015), organising perspectives (Martínez Lucio et al., 2017; Milkman, 2019) and so called 'indie unions' that are more grassroots-based and driven by activist and the migrant workers themselves (Però, 2020). Finally, scholars have emphasised migrant workers' mobility power as a way of expressing migrant agency and coin perspectives of individual and collective action (Alberti & Sacchetto, 2024). Nonetheless, there are only few studies that

explicitly focuses on strikes among migrant workers (for exceptions, see Berntsen, 2015; Kuge & Schaupp, 2025). Although there are numerous examples of migrant workers resisting the often-inferior working conditions and wages they are offered and taking on collective action, their protest mostly materialises in subtle forms like everyday resistance and disobedience (Birke, 2022). While material conditions are typically the core concern for protesting among migrant workers, these are often interwoven with feelings of injustices, sometimes partly based in the material conditions (Borello, 2025; Kelly, 1998). Consequently, worker organisation and strikes are not only about improving the material conditions but also about securing and restoring human dignity for workers (Flanders, 1970; Hyman, 1977; Knowles, 1952).

While it is not always possible to fully determine why workers strike, it has been argued that certain pre-conditions are important to explain why the migrant workers take on industrial action in the first place. These include workers' closeness, feelings of unity, a shared problem perception and some alignment of reference groups (Refslund & Sippola, 2022). These are not universal conditions automatically leading to collective action, but their presence strongly increases the likelihood. First off, workers need to engage with each other and meet, and while this typically means meeting psychically, online meetings may stipulate some of the same closeness (Hau & Borello, 2024). Next, there must be some feelings of unity, and then, some antagonistic feelings over a shared problem directed at the employers (Lysgaard, 1972; Refslund & Sippola, 2022). Grievances may stem from underpayment and missing wages but also more general feelings of lack of dignity (Borello, 2025). Finally, the migrant workers need to compare wages and working conditions with the same reference group (Merton, 1968; Piore, 1979; Scott & Rye, 2025). If some workers compare with conditions in their home country while others compared with the host country, it may be difficult to get them to join in collective action.

Overall, these complex conditions suggest that overt migrant worker strikes happen rarely, and when they do, they tend to achieve less attention. This may be owing the difficulties with accessing and interviewing migrant workers and because migrant worker strikes often fall outside the traditional strikes statistics as they make take on more informal forms and therefore are less visible (Birke, 2022). We contribute accordingly through the case of the Femern as a showcase of a prominent migrant strike in a union-dense setting.

Unity and collectivism during strikes - interests, preferences and strategies

A core element that has not been developed much in the research literature is the demanding task of creating cohesion among the striking workers, both before and during the strike (Batstone et al., 1978; Karsh, 1958). This is not always straightforward as there can be different positions on numerous dimensions related to the strike, even basically down to whether it is a good idea to strike or not (Hyman, 1977; Waddington et al., 1994). Even if the workers agree on the preference to improve the wages, they do not necessarily agree on a strike as the strategy to achieve this. Different workers may thus have different interests, preferences and strategies and these needs to be balanced during the strikes. We therefore need to pay attention to the social formation of interests, preferences and strategies when analysing class cohesion, worker resistance and collective actions (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2024; Nowak, 2025). So, while workers may have a joint interest in increasing wages, it is far from certain that these interests are transformed into preferences, which again are shared among the workers. Obviously, there is a risk associated with taking industrial action, which may, in turn, affect the preferences as well as the strategy. This risk calculation is particularly important among groups migrant workers given the multiple vulnerabilities they face (Tapia & Alberti, 2019).

The divergence of preferences and strategies may cause a lack of internal cohesion between the workers, which the workers actively need to balance and redress. Employers often try to utilise these intra-worker cleavages to create and amplify divides between workers. This may be a more fruitful strategy among migrant workers as they have more at stake and hence may be more prone to accept offers from the employer to break up the strike (Refslund et al., 2026). The cohesion and collectivism of the strikers are shaped and impact by the social life of strike itself and how it unfolds (Fantasia, 1988; Karsh, 1958). Strikes can thus be seen as specific formation and expression of class formation and class interest. Like collectivism and collective action at a more general level the collectivism of the striking workers is shaped through the daily interaction among workers as highlighted in the classic literature on sociology of work (Brody, 1993; Fantasia, 1988; Katznelson, 1986; Lysgaard, 1972; Thompson, 1968). Here, the norms of solidarity and joining the strikers are often core and diverging from the these norms through not participating or breaking the picket line, can lead to strong repercussions both during and after the strike ranging from verbal abuse to physical intimidation and even violence as seen in historical accounts of strikes (Chinguno, 2015; Darlington, 2022; Thommes et al., 2014; Waddington et al., 1994). These risks may be particularly important in the context of a construction site characterised by 'macho and masculine environments' (Oswald & Dainty, 2020, p. 3; Thiel, 2007). Ideals of masculinity tied into poverty and strong urges to sustain a family in the country of origin has been noted to shape male migrant workers' survivalist mentalities upon migration (Borello & Hau, 2026). These expectations of masculinity, coupled with an already hostile and dangerous working environment at a construction site (Iacuone, 2005) may, in turn, amplify during a strike. This leads us to examine how the social dynamics of collectivism is shaped in such a context as we scrutinise in the analysis.

Methodology and research design

The article's research design draws inspiration from Michael Burawoy's (2009) extended case study, originating in industrial ethnography. Burawoy argues that we must investigate macro-level phenomenon (such as interest formation and workers' cohesion) at the relevant lower analytical levels (which often is the workplace or work site), potentially at multiple sites at the same time. Only then can we extend the observed results to the broader discussion of the phenomenon. The extended case study framework thus helps link the lower-level analyses with the societal and theoretical reflections on the phenomenon under scrutiny. Additionally, we draw inspiration from the 'slow comparative' approach (Almond & Connolly, 2020). Inspired by these approaches, we explore one workplace, the Femern construction site. Besides traditional interviews, we draw on informal conversations and ethnographic presence. We combine this presence with broader interaction in society following advice from Almond and Connolly (2020) for a close field 'immersion' (Almond & Connolly, 2020, p. 69). Our empirical data from the construction site is thus complemented with media coverage and formal and informal interaction with unionists across different union departments. This data is anchored in an overarching research project where we scrutinise migrant workers' collective resistance across three European countries, within and beyond construction sites. From this large dataset, we selected the data for the present article directly concerning the Femern construction site. The data for this article consists of ten individual and group interviews with a total of 27 participants, along with three participant observations. We interviewed a total of 19 migrant workers, most of whom participated in the strike, as well as eight central unionists who were involved in the strike (see Appendix A for details). For the migrant interviews, we either used a Polish translator or interviewed the migrant workers in English depending on their language skills. The three participant observations were carried out in the unions' office adjacent to the construction site, with the first observation

occurring the day after the strike ended and the last a year later. We were unable to visit the construction site itself due to safety restrictions but instead visited the migrants' housing area nearby. The Danish industrial union mainly involved in the conflict was 3F covering many construction workers, in particular construction workers like masons, carpenters and concrete workers. We followed the construction project over one year, from the strike was initiated and until it was clear that another strike would not occur. We further conducted two additional interviews two years later with selected key individuals within the union who played an active role in the strike, to post-reflect on the strike dynamics from a less emotionally involved place.

The Danish context

To familiarise the reader with the context of the strike, we here briefly introduce the Danish industrial relations context. Denmark has enduring strong trade unions and employers' association, with a very high union density around 68% (Arnholtz & Navrbjerg, 2021). Wages and working conditions are regulated by collective agreements covering the vast majority of the economy. The collective agreements are negotiated between the unions and employers' association in a largely voluntaristic system based on a balanced power configuration between the two, with minimal interference of the state. The main collective agreements are multi-employer agreements with the exporting manufacturing sector collective bargaining setting the standards for wage developments in the other sectors (Andersen, 2024). However, some sectors are less covered by collective agreements than others, such as cleaning, agriculture and part of the construction industry. These are mainly the sectors in which migrant workers are employed. Working in these contexts, migrant workers are more often exposed to inferior working conditions compared to nationals, lower wages and general poor levels of health and safety (Hooper Overgård et al., 2023; Spanger & Hvalkof, 2021).

Following this industrial relations model, strikes can only be initiated during times of collective bargaining negotiations if the parties fail to agree on wages and working conditions, or if no collective agreement is in place. Besides these situations there is a 'peace obligation' in the model. Accordingly, if workers decide to strike outside these situations, they breach the 'peace-clause' making it a wildcat strike. Workers (and employers) breaching the peace obligation is penalised in the labour court system, and the financial penalties are substantial. The Femern strike took place against the peace obligation, wherefore the unions could not formally to support the striking migrants. Yet, as we show in what follows, the unionists were unofficially involved in the conflict, which affected the migrants' possibilities, strategies, social relations and the outcome of the strike.

Empirical analysis

Initial enablers for the strike: Preconditions and feelings on injustices

A range of important preconditions combined with feelings of injustice laid the ground for the strike. The majority of migrant workers were from Poland, but there were also other nationalities on the construction site, primarily Eastern European workers for instance Romanians. The migrant workers were quite divided along the job tasks as often seen in construction (Haakestad & Friberg, 2020), with the Polish workers dominating the concrete-works casting most of the core structures of the tunnel, which will connect Denmark and Germany once finalised. The workers were employed by the joint venture Femern Link Contractors, dominated by the French company Vinci. One main source of frustration was unclarity regarding payment in the new local wage agreement, with the

Danish workers receiving a higher salary than the Poles (INT1, INT2, INT3, INT10). This divergence was due to the Danish workers not paying for the company's accommodation where the migrant workforce was accommodated, as they would live at home. The company's accommodation is a barrack housing area called 'the village' next to the construction site (INT10). Furthermore, it was not clear to the migrants how the payment for accommodation was calculated (INT2).

The migrants would work long hours for four weeks followed by two weeks of leave, where they could return to Poland and see their families. While this system worked well for most migrant workers (INT1, INT2, Fieldnotes3), problems occurred in relation to accommodation standards and privacy. Every time the workers returned from Poland they were assigned to new housing units, and they had nowhere to store their personal property, which often caused lost personal belongings. Moreover, they reported that the mattresses were not cleaned or changed (INT1, INT10). The barracks were quite simple and without kitchen facilities, which lead to frustration among the migrants as they did not perceive the canteen food as decent, which was one of their main criticisms (INT1, INT2, INT4, INT5, INT10, Fieldnotes3). Overall, these dimensions tied to housing and food caused a sense of disrespect and indignity (INT1, INT2, Fieldnotes3). This was coupled with a high work pressure and what was felt as differential treatment between the Polish workers and the Danish workers on the site and a general lack of respectful treatment (INT2). All in all, these feelings of injustice contribute to the strike (Kelly, 1998). The Polish workers had formally tried to raise their voice by handing in written complaints to the HR department, with multiple workers signing the letters, but apparently the complaints were somehow 'lost' (INT2). The migrants summed up their experience in a group interview conducted with the help of a Polish translator:

> *It was something that grew. And then there came a day. It took a long time; it took several months. It was not a decision they made from day to day (...) The worst thing was the sense of injustice, because they were not paid more (...) They were disappointed – why was it this way? They perceived it as a huge injustice. And they tried to talk to the company, and they were just not heard (...) And a strike is the last word, or the last tool, one can activate. So, (...) they started talking informally different places. In the changing rooms, the canteen. And they agreed to meet in front of the main office and show that: 'We are serious about this! We are serious about what we are saying!'. And then the strike came, eventually. But the way they were treated, the lack of basic respect fuelled the conflict (INT2).*

Clearly, the migrants frame of reference was aligned with the 'native workers' (Piore, 1979), as they compared their wages with the wage in Denmark rather than wages in Poland. They further experienced a shared problem perception regarding their accommodation, food and a general antagonism against the site management. Moreover, they were working and living closely together at the site which facilitate the closeness needed for collectivism to develop. Finally, (at least at first sight) there was a shared feeling of unity among the Polish workers partly based on nationality. Combined, these dimensions coupled with the profound sense of injustice led to favourable preconditions for the strike to take off (Refslund & Sippola, 2022). However, as we will discuss below, there were some severe limitations to the unity, which challenged the general cohesion of the workers as well their unity during the strike.

The strike and its dynamics: Interests, preferences and strategies

The strike began on June 23rd after a spokesperson for the Polish workers had cautioned management in several meetings to take the migrants' demands seriously, otherwise they would go on strike

(INT1). A group of Polish workers walked to the managements' office. Then a manager came with a megaphone telling the workers to return to work, some of them took it and put on Polish music (INT1). The migrants (mainly Polish workers but including some Danes as well) walked to the entrance of the construction site in a long line and ended up blocking the site for five days (INT1, Fieldnotes1). One of the Polish leaders explained the process and unity among the workers at the site:

> *They* [the migrant workers] *say: 'okay, guys, fuck the rules. We must do something. We must take this in our hands'. The simple voice from the people. (...) This is not just somebody's idea. This is* [the] *voice of every guys (...) And when the Danish guy do that, everyone say, 'oh, if they stop with us, we are strong because they, they, they know what to do. Yes. And then we must help these guys' (...) And then we have a big, you know, something like a collective. Big support together (INT1)*

The blockade of the access to the entire construction site provided the migrant workers with strong structural power. Besides bringing the production to a halt, the workers also stopped the trucks that supplied fuel for a big underground water pump from accessing the site. The pump secured the tunnel from flooding, and if flooded, it would damage the construction site for billions of DKK (INT1, INT2, INT8, INT9, INT10). At a group interview conducted with a Polish translator, the migrants explained:

> *The first few days the company seems uninterested in talking to them and solving the conflict. Such things may disappear by itself. And they* [the migrants] *showed good will so the diesel pumps, they wouldn't – so, if they did not let in a truck with fuel on the construction site, everything would be flooded. So,* [polish shop steward] *is saying that they showed good will. And they feel ticked because that truck was only meant to provide fuel to the pump, but they also filled up other machines. Crane and excavators. So, they believe this is another sign of disrespect (INT2).*

The strategy of blocking the construction site was clearly militant, and management accordingly contacted the police to ask them to intervene, which the police rejected as it was a labour conflict. This rejection is normal for labour dispute, but the severity of the industrial action and the potential consequences should the tunnels be flooded made the decision whether or not to intervene more ambiguous here (Fieldnotes1; Fieldnotes2; Fieldnotes2a). While it was a wildcat strike that breached the peace obligation, there is no (judicial) term of an 'illegal strike' in Danish law. Rather such an act is termed 'opposing the collective agreement' strikes (overenskomst-stridig). The fact that the police did not intervene, despite the quite obviously disproportionality between the means (potentially destroying critical infrastructure for billions) and the goal (a two-euro hourly wage increase), demonstrate the labour-friendly institutional setting, which is a power resource for the workers (Arnholtz & Refslund, 2024). Thus, the migrants' interests in the wage increase remained strong throughout the strike, and they appeared to share a strong preference in using militant strategy to achieve this – at least on the surface. The intense setting following the migrants' strategy led to unofficial negotiations between management and union representatives (Fieldnotes1, INT10, INT11). Although the unions are in general penalized for intervening in strikes due to the peace clause in the Danish industrial relations system, the union regardless supported the migrant's interest by entering into dialogue with the management advocating for collaboration (at least unofficially). The migrants received strong support not only from the local trade unionists, but also from an anonymous solidarity

fund with international contributions set up to pay the penalty for breaching the peace obligation[2] (INT10). A former unionist involved in the strike fund explained:

> *They* [the migrants] *get a fine because they have breached the collective agreement, and their union cannot cover that* [or they will be penalized for that]. *So, this means that if you want to support them, you will have to do it yourself – just from ordinary workers to workers. And so, so we were some who did that, tried to show our solidarity from worker to worker (INT8)*

Although the penalty could pose a problem for the migrants, the migrants did not seem to care much about the money. As one of the leaders of the strike said: 'we just pay, we don't care' (Fieldnotes_2a). With the tense mood and faced by an aggressive employer, several radical union members from other fractions of the same union drew from Copenhagen to the local area at Femern ready to support the migrant workers if the conflict should escalate (Fieldnotes2, INT9). Here, the environment was described as intense and virile, and with a potential violent outcome (Fieldnotes2). However, as management decided to enter into dialogue with the workers shortly after, these tensions did not upsurge into open conflict.

Put succinctly, the migrants' interests and strategies appeared overall aligned in the initial phase of the conflict, and their structural power greatly affected the dynamics of the strike.

Towards the end of the strike: Internal coherence and intra-worker tensions

While the strike at Femern at first glance showcase coherence and unity among the workers, it was less present among the striking workers behind the scenes. Towards the end of the five-day strike, the apparent unity among the migrants started to fade, as some of the migrants began worrying about losing their jobs. Simultaneously, the company was trying to convince some of the workers to leave the strike by sending an e-mail offering full pay while away and guaranteeing them there would be no retaliation from the employers' side after the strike. Management deliberately only sent the e-mail to selected individuals to split up the striking migrant group (Fieldnotes2; Fieldnotes2a). This management strategy intensified the intra-worker tensions that was already lurking as not all migrant workers were supportive of the strike, as they risked potentially losing their well-paid job. Ultimately there were reports that some of the migrant workers who have not supported and participated in the strike were beaten so badly by other migrants in the aftermath of the strike that they ended up in the emergency room because they did not support the strike (Fieldnotes1). One of the strikers later said: '*Now we know who are good colleagues we can trust next time*' (Fieldnotes2a). This intra-worker tension along with the general tough work of being on strike meant that the striking workers were starting to get worn down. They were not used to striking, they were increasingly fewer in the picket line, and the remainders of the strikers ultimately also wanted to end the strike. Being on a strike requires a lot of the workers (McBride et al., 2013). This includes organising, planning and carrying out the strike activities, but also, and not least, securing the internal coherence among the strikers. At the end (and despite internal disputes and a very reluctant French main constructor) the migrant workers were successful in at least partly securing their demands. The hourly wage was increased in a new local agreement that was negotiated afterwards (INT10). This wage claim is interesting since the wage was already comparatively very high for low-skill migrant work. This shows how the migrants' reference group mattered as a precondition for the strike since they compared their wage with their Danish co-workers rather than the wages in Poland or elsewhere in Europe (INT10). While

[2] https://www.firefund.net/strikefundfemern

the initial reception of new local agreement was positive, it also caused frustration (INT10, Fieldnotes2). In particular because the net wage raise turned out to be quite small. The new agreement meant that the workers would have to pay for the accommodation partly with the wage increase (earlier they were staying for "free" but with a lower wage). But the wage increase was taxable, which meant that the overall hourly net wage increases (after paying for the housing and after taxes) was rather low (around 0,5 euro according to the interviewees), which frustrated the migrant workers (INT10).

Nevertheless, the migrants we talked with just after the strike had ended perceived the strike as 'a moral victory' and took pride in the strike stating: *'We have changed the world' (INT1)* and *'Denmark is not the same*' (INT2). As one Polish foreman reflected:

> *I think this is not our - this is not only our war, I can say. Or fight - now it's for everyone (...) this is an international problem (...) This is the first time in all Denmark's history* [that there has been such a large migrant strike], *I think. And that is something big! That's why we say we change our history. Maybe not change the history, but we create a new history*. (INT1)

When asked whether the strike was a success, the migrants likewise said: '*yes, because we spoke!'* (INT2). This suggests that the strike was not only about the wage, but also about being heard and recognised. This relates to equal treatment and dignity, as they voiced their dissatisfaction with the unequal treatment they faced. However, over time, this narrative was challenged and even turned around as some migrants said the strike was 'stupid' and 'that no gains were achieved' (INT5, Fieldnotes3). Determining the outcome of the strike as either successful or unsuccessful is hence an ambiguous endeavour. The migrants came to perceive the gains achieved in the strike as rather minimal, again since paying the housing only after taxes greatly reduced the gains of the new agreement (INT10). In the aftermath of the strike, mistrust prevailed both towards other migrants as well as the trade union who the migrants felt were (partly) responsible for the less victorious outcome of the strike (INT10, INT11). Furthermore, threats were even exercised to at least one migrant shop steward:

> [Name of migrant shop steward] *has been exposed to both threats and vandalism of his car and so on in relation to that* [the strike]. *And rumour has it that he also paid some money to those who did not receive money from the strike found. Because those money do not cover* [the penalty] *(INT11).*

This suggest that the migrants had a difficult time understanding the role of the union and the shop stewards and felt disappointed with the gains from the strike. Many of the migrants who participated in the strike had left the construction site within a year, and when we conducted a follow-up interview three years later, there were only a few of them left (INT10). This suggest that although the migrants' formal demands were met, it was not possible to rebuild a sense of community and coherence after the intra-worker tensions they had experienced during the strike (INT10, INT11). This somewhat waters down the gains achieved in the strike and make the strike outcome ambiguous.

Concluding discussion

The strike at Femern is in many ways a hallmark case of a strike among a group of workers in a more vulnerable position in contemporary capitalism. The strike illustrates how the migrant workers managed to achieve a successful outcome in securing their wage claim despite the intense setting and

ongoing intra-worker tensions challenging the unity among the migrants. It further highlights how migrant workers can successfully claim their rights and secure their demands trough strike activity when the right preconditions are in place, despite their vulnerable labour market position. Yet, it is important to note here that the Polish migrant workers were not in as a precarious situation as most low-paid migrant workers often finds themselves in (Scott & Rye, 2025; Theodoropoulos, 2025). Rather, they had higher wages and a safer material setting, including the ability to find alternative employment elsewhere. Reflecting on the selected analytical anchor points, we have shown that certain preconditions (Refslund & Sippola, 2022) along with feelings of injustice tied to practices of indignity and disrespect (Borello, 2025) increases the likelihood of strikes. Particularly, the reference group appeared important here, as the migrants did not have a dual frame of reference of Polish wages but was well-aware of the wage level in Denmark and claimed to be paid accordingly. This challenges the core assumption that migrants tend to accept inferior wages because their reference group remain in the home country (Piore, 1979) and illustrate that the frame of reference is dynamic (Clibborn, 2021; Refslund & Sippola, 2022; Scott & Rye, 2025). We stress how the perception of unfair and unequal treatment served as a trigger for the collective action, along with other organisational and associational factors impacting the outbreak of the strike. However, while the strike was successful at the first glance it also clearly illustrates the challenges of forming class-coherence in an industrial conflict, particularly among migrant workers with more at stake. An important related point is that the intra-worker tensions and general tension on the site during the strike led to increased mistrust and workers leaving the site. This suggests that a strike that secures a wage claim may not lead to more unity among workers in the long run. Rather, social relations may need to be rebuilt, suggesting that a successful strike is not necessarily perceived as a success, nor does it cause increased union membership rates and prevent turnover among the workers. This suggests that we cannot determine the success of a strike by looking merely at the material gains achieved or claims secured. Rather, we need a more nuanced understanding of whether a strike is (un)successful that takes into consideration the longer-term social dynamics and sense of justice and dignity in its aftermath.

That being said, our empirical material shows how alignment of interest, strategies and preferences is important in planning, organising and carrying out strike activities, including how militant approaches the striking workers may choose. By blocking the pump and not deviating from their claims even when the construction site could potentially be shattered, the migrants won the strike. Yet, this militant stance definitely also challenged worker cohesion. Moreover, intra-worker tensions and employer strategies aimed at splitting up the migrant group challenged the cohesion to an extent where some migrants were beaten up by others. In a strike, a macho environment like a construction site marked by hazardous work environment may be inherently exposed to amplifying such tensions (Iacuone, 2005; Oswald & Dainty, 2020). This intense setting may partly explain why most of the striking migrants had abandoned the construction site a few years after the strike.

Importantly, the case of Femern may in many ways be exceptional. The Danish industrial relations system is internationally somewhat unique along with industrial relations systems in the other Nordic countries with the enduring strong unions (also in construction) as well as a strong institutional setting with labour-friendly institutions. Despite some declines in the power resources of the workers and unions this setting provided the migrants with a powerful position to claim their rights. The migrants received heavy union support despite the difficulties the union faced with intervening due to the peace clause, and the police decided not to intervene in the conflict even though the strike breached the collective agreement. Moreover, the material safety of workers seems to have played a role, where the construction workers were comparatively well-off and could most likely easily find employment elsewhere. Nevertheless, the Femern strike shows the importance of the migrant workers' agency and

suggests that we need to understand migrant workers' resistance as a dynamic concept that is interwoven with the national industrial relations system, the actors engaging in the conflict, and the internal social dynamics within the migrant group.

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Appendix A: Overview of interviews and participant observations

Migrant workers:

Interview number	Date of interview	Age	Gender	Country	Sector	Interview Type	Translator used	Interview length
INT1	04-07-2022	40-45	Male	Poland	Construction	Physical	No	60 min
INT2	14-11-2022	Mixed (group interview with 7 participants)	Male	Poland	Construction	Physical	Yes	80 min.
INT3	13-05-2023	50-50+	Male	Romania	Construction	Physical	No	30 min.
INT4	13-05-2023	40-45	Male	Poland	Construction	Physical	No	43 min.
INT5	13-05-2023	Mixed (group interview with 7 participants)	Male	Poland	Construction	Physical	No	38 min.
INT6	13-05-2023	Two participants 25-30	Male	Poland	Construction	Physical	No	34 min.

Other actors:

Number interview	Date	Age	Gender	Country	Sector	Interview type	Organisation	
INT7	26-01-2022	55-60	Male	Denmark	Construction	Physical	National union, construction	90 min.
INT8	07-11-2022	35-45	Male	Denmark	Construction	Physical	National Union, construction	39 min.
INT9	14-11-2022	35-45	Two Female	Denmark and Poland	Construction	Physical	National Union, construction	90 min.
INT10	01-10-2025	Mixed	Three male and one Female	Denmark	Construction	Online	National Union, construction	90 min
INT11	29-10-2025	40-45	Male	Denmark	Construction	Online	National Union, Construction	82 min.

Participant Observations				
Number	**When**	**What**	**Who**	**Where**
Fieldnotes 1	04-07-2022	Field trip and interviews leading the strike the day after the strike ended	Unionists and migrant foreman / migrant leader in the strike	Union office and migrant 'village'
Fieldnotes 2	14-11-2022	Field trip and interviews with migrants and unionists	Interviews with migrants who participated in the strike and unionists	Union office
Fieldnotes 2a	14-11-2022	Field trip and interviews with migrants and unionists	Interviews with migrants who participated in the strike and unionists	Union office
Fieldnotes 3	13-05-2023	Field trip during migrant party	Interviews with migrants and informal conversations with unionists	Union office