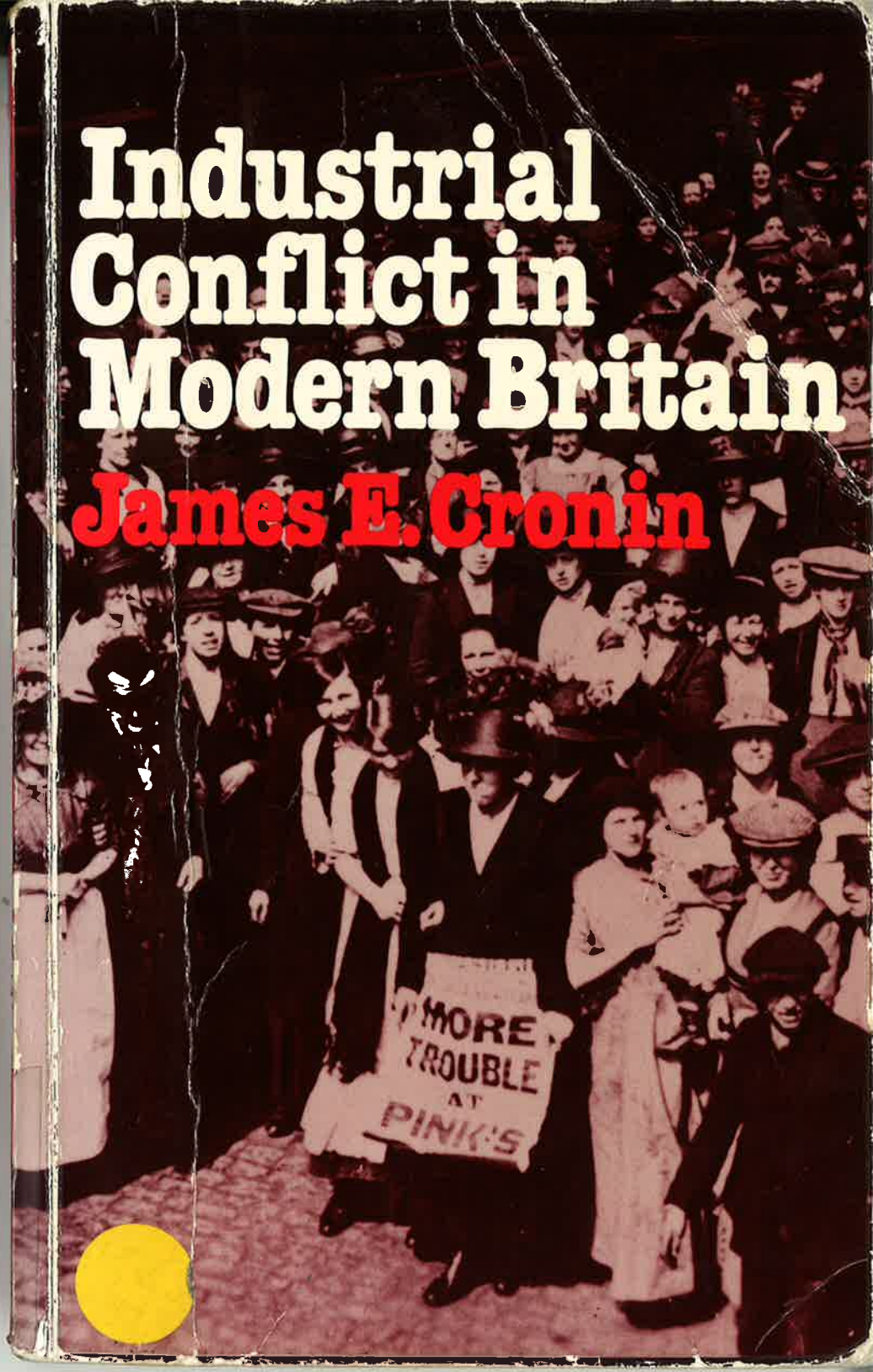
Industrial Conflict in Modern Britain

James E. Cronin



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This historical study examines the unique rhythm of British strikes since the 1880's, and suggests that the explosive pattern of recurring strike waves provides the key to understanding both the evolution of British industrial relations and the major changes that have taken place in working-class culture and behaviour. Two major themes emerge from this analysis: to explain how and why strikes themselves occur, and the association between industrial conflict and social relations.

Initially, the analysis stresses the significance of periodic outbursts of strike activity, arguing that any interpretation of British industrial conflict must take this peculiar historical variation into consideration. Amongst several approaches to strikes, the 'political/organisational' argument of Charles Tilly and his associates is reviewed, offering useful hypotheses for the analysis of British industrial conflict. In contrast to these approaches, strike waves are viewed as being products of economic change occuring on two different levels. Firstly, they come during periods of relative prosperity, e.g. 1889-90 and 1910-13, suggesting that a narrow labour market provides the tactical leverage necessary for workers to launch extensive industrial action. However the major determinant of such periodic outbursts of militancy, is that each economic development period presents workers with a distinct network of problems, each requiring new ideas on strategy and tactics and new organisational forms to solve them. In turn the experience of new problems produces new attitudes amongst working people, thus each strike wave comes to represent both a quantitative increase in the level of industrial strife and qualitative change in the consciousness and organisation of workers.

This thorough critique of prevailing research and concepts within Labour history, provides insight into the cause of strike waves, the varying propensity of workers in different industries to engage in strike action, and into the general history of British trade unionism.

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Edited by Professor J.F.C. Harrison and Stephen Yeo, University of Sussex

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Jacket photograph of the Pink's Jam Factory Strike, Bermondsey, 1911. Courtesy of the Trades Union Congress Library.

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